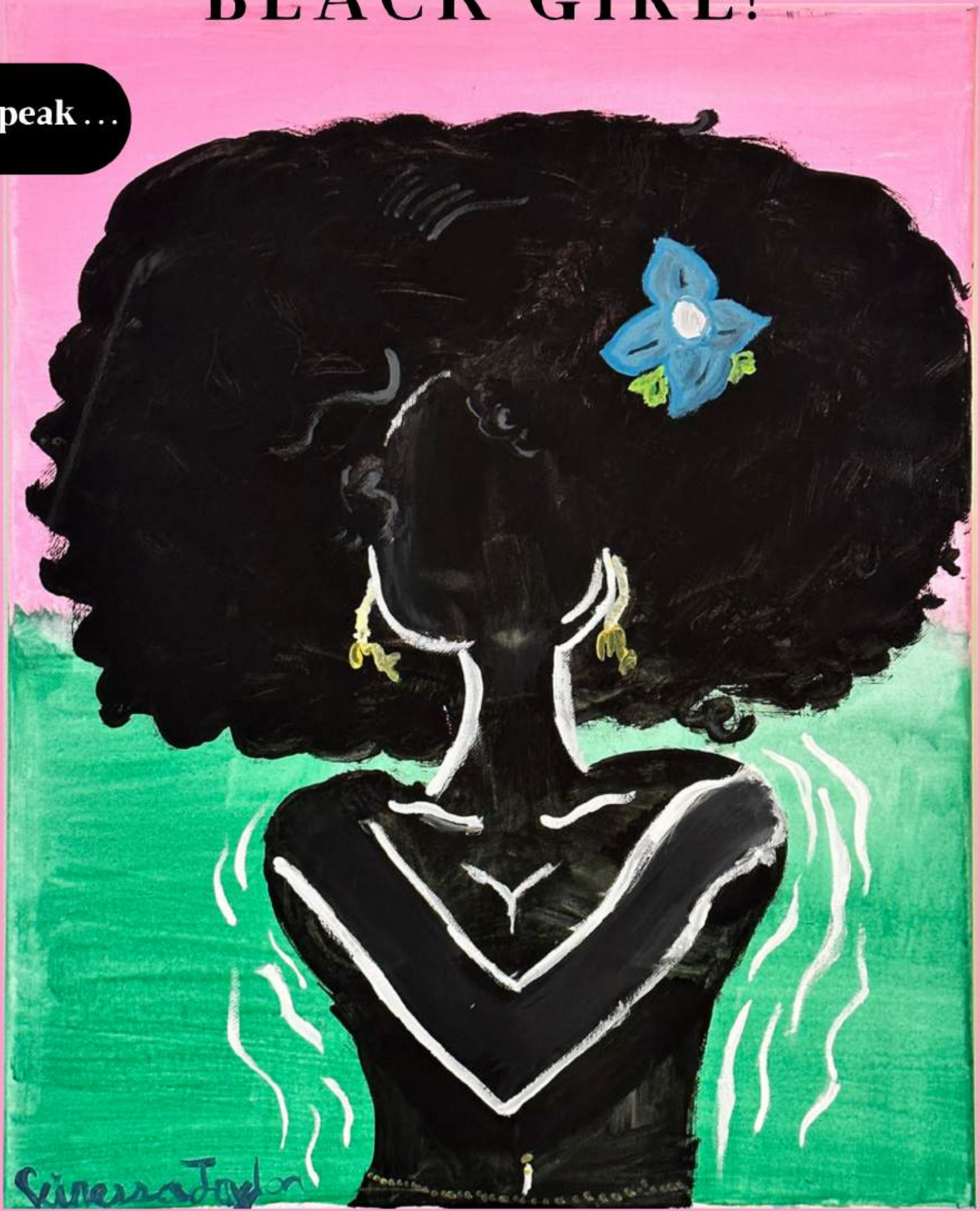


Write On. BLACK GIRL!

ISSUE, 2
SPRING 2023

When I speak...



Write On. BLACK GIRL!

a Connecticut Writing Project

I will lift my pen & my voice
to resist & persist,
& remember their innocence.

~Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz



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The Editors



Kiedra B. Taylor, MA, founder of *Write On, Black Girl!*, is a PhD student at the University of Connecticut. She specializes in African American Literature. Particularly, she focuses on Black girlhood and the ways in which racialized gender expectations affect Black girls and adolescents. Kiedra believes *Write On, Black Girl!* is a creative and safe space for Black girls' voices to shout with confidence, "Black Lives Matter!" Her work has been published in *Challenging Misrepresentations of Black Womanhood* (Anthem Press).



Dancia Brown received their undergraduate degree in English with minors in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies as well as Urban and Community Studies from the University of Connecticut in 2023. The accessibility of writing and showcasing one's talent is incredibly important to them due to their experience as a writing tutor of three years. As an academic, they understand the invisibility black girls feel in interacting with literature. *Write On, Black Girl* is one of the first platforms to combat this absence of representation that is widely accessible to the public, and this is only the beginning of the journey to literary expression by young black girls. They plan on carrying out the magazine's mission in Germany, where they will be an English Teaching Assistant through the Fulbright Student program.



Kayla Azinge

Kayla Azinge a senior majoring in political science with a minor in Africana studies at the University of Connecticut, carries her childlike curiosity into academia. She wonders why some students grasp theories better than others and why the collective Black experience at UCONN garners stares from their white peers. Subconsciously labeled as intimidating, she was wary of being herself. Barbara Christian, in 'But Who Do You Belong To,' calls Black women the 'bridge' between Black and women's studies, acknowledging a bridge isn't a home. 'Write on Black Girl' emphasizes that Black women find a home through writing, welcoming emotions and ideas, revealing vulnerability. Kayla is grateful for the guidance and experience from 'Write on Black Girl.'"



Mikaya Robinson

Mikaya Robinson is a proud Black woman and future educator. Mikaya is a senior at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, majoring in Secondary English Education. Inspired by a Black woman educator, Mikaya dreamed of becoming a teacher since she was the age of six, playing school with her two younger sisters. She was born a reader, her mother reading her stories in the womb and taking her on many trips to the library. As she was immersed in literature from a young age, Mikaya has embraced reading and writing as spiritual practice. Mikaya is passionate about the power of literacy as a meaning making process for young Black girls, as writing has been one of our strongest tools against oppression in the fight for freedom. Mikaya is on the path to becoming a revolutionary educator that is a light to those around her. She would like to show gratitude to those who have come before her, who have allowed her to be part of such a movement. Mikaya Robinson is honored to work as an intern for the Write on! Black Girl literary magazine.

HISTORY OF INTERNS

2022



Christina Young

Pascale Joachim

2023



Dancia Brown

2024



Kayla Azinge



Mikaya Robinson

2025



Name?



Name?

Letter of Encouragement

Dear Black Girl: A Brief Letter on Love & Light

by Dr. Yolanda Sealy-Ruiz and Autumn Griffin

“Don’t try to lessen yourself for the world; let the world catch up to you.” —Beyoncé

Dear Black Girl,

We write to you in the present with our minds on the future – you are the future and all that is good and bright in it. We are grateful for your existence and for the inspiration you continue to give the present and future generations. In this letter of encouragement, we want to honor your light, the way you love, and how you represent the best of what lives in us.

Black Girl, you are light!

You bring light to all the things you do – in the way you speak, dress, move, think and create. Time and again, you have shown by your example that you are the bright light of this world – in your humanity toward others and in your love for yourself. Yes, indeed,” You are the light. Ancestor, novelist, and poet Dr. Maya Angelou reminded us that light and shadow are on opposite sides of each other, inextricably linked. But which side you join is your choice. In moments of fear and self-doubt – which quite naturally happen to all of us – we encourage you to the light cresting on the horizon to guide your own path and the path of others.

Black Girl, let your light shine!

We want to remind you of the light that Amanda Gorman writes about when she says “There is always light if only we are brave enough to see it if only we are brave enough to be it.” This should be your mantra for living, for you are the light of the world. You bring light to your families, your schools, and your communities; your very essence is the beacon of hope for our present and future.

Black Girl, your light is a gift.

It is a gift you should not take for granted, and so you must choose to let it emanate from each part of you. You have many lights within you: the light of knowledge that helps you see truth from lies, the light of freedom to uphold human rights wherever you are, the light of surviving which is the first step to thriving, the light of strength that will make you unbreakable and unshakable, the light of compassion – for yourself and for each other. Your lights will allow you to embrace the fear you may feel as you move through dark moments in your life. Your lights within you will remind you of your courage.

Black Girl, the light of love is always in you.

Ancestor bell hooks reminds us, “The light of love is always in us, no matter how cold the **flame**. It is always present, waiting for the spark to ignite, waiting for the heart to awaken

and call us back to the first memory of being the life force inside a dark place waiting to be born—waiting to see the light” (hooks, 2018, p. 67). Sometimes, that lack of love can cause our light to dim. Whether we’ve dimmed it ourselves or allowed someone else to, there are always ways to return and let our light shine. Let your light shine. Let it be the life force this dark world needs.

Black Girl, we love you.

Black girl, you not only give love, you deserve love. You are love embodied. Every rocking embrace, every warm smile, every boisterous outburst of laughter or joyful expression of dance or creation of artwork, every fly hairstyle or gold hoop, and every kitchen table talk is an outward expression of our love for ourselves and for the folks with whom we choose to commune—those who truly see us. At your best and at your worst, you deserve to be seen and treated as fully human and worthy of love, care, and dignity.

Black Girl, you are powerful.

As motivational speaker Marianne Williamson reminded all of us:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness

That most frightens us.

And as we let our own light shine,

We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we're liberated from our own fear,

Our presence automatically liberates others.

Black Girl, always (re)member.

We were once Black girls, too. We leave you with these words that we received from other Black women who were once Black girls. We are all connected. It is our prayer that you etch these words of encouragement into your hearts. Carry them with you always. Let them be the salve your soul needs. Let them heal you. And most importantly, let them always remind you of who and whose you are. Always.

Black Girl, be encouraged!

Be the beacon of hope that your ancestors were for you. Do not sit in discouragement and wait to be overtaken by self-doubt. There will always be light if we are brave enough to see it and hold it close to our hearts. It is, in fact, the darkness that makes the light so much brighter and sweeter and vital to who we are as humans. Be bold. Be courageous. Live your light!

With Great Affection,

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz & Autumn Adia Griffin

April, 2024

Reference

hooks, b. (2018). All about love. New Visions. Harper Collins.



Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz is an award-winning Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research focuses on racial literacy, Black girl literacies, and Black and Latinæ male high school students. She is co-editor of four books and is co-author of the multiple award-winning book *Advancing Racial Literacies in Teacher Education: Activism for Equity in Digital Spaces* (2021) where she examines her concept of Archeology of Self™ in education. Dr. Sealey-Ruiz is sought-after speaker on issues of race, culturally responsive pedagogy, and diversity. Yolanda's first full-length collection of poetry, *Love from the Vortex & Other Poems*, was published in March 2020. Her sophomore book of poetry, *The Peace Chronicles* was published in July 2021. Yolanda's TEDx Talk, "Truth, Love & Racial Literacy" can be viewed [here](#) on YouTube. Follow her on social media: @RuizSealey (X) | @yolie_sealeyruiz (IG) | yolandasealeyruiz.com(WWW).

Dr. Autumn A. Griffin is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Georgia State's College of Education & Human Development. Having previously taught secondary ELA in Atlanta, Georgia, her research explores how Black youth use literacies as a means to heal from pedagogical and curricular violence, largely focusing on Black girlhoods, multimodal and digital literacies, and children's and young adult literature. Autumn's work has been published in the *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Urban Education*, *Equity and Excellence in Education* and she is currently awaiting the release of her book with colleagues Joshua Coleman and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, entitled *Restoring Young Adult Literature: Expanding Students' Perspectives with Digital Texts*. Autumn is also the co-founder of the digital network Blackademia, a platform built to explore the historical and contemporary experiences of Black women in the academy and to support Black doctoral students on their journeys by offering community through its podcast, blog, and virtual book chats. In her spare time, Autumn teaches and practices yoga, loves to cook, and can be found anywhere there is live music.



Graduating Editor's Note



Working with Write On, Black Girl! has been a fantastic opportunity for me to connect with a community that looks like me. Being able to serve a community of budding black female writers has been incredibly fulfilling for me. I never had this opportunity when I was younger and it overall deterred me from sharing my work with anyone or pursuing it seriously. I kept my work to myself. This only hurt me as I struggled to open up in my writing classes in college. The platform that Write On, Black Girl! provides students the opportunity to share their work with little pressure. I wish I had a platform like this growing up, but I am ecstatic to help the future of black female writers get their work out in the open.

Working in publishing before this internship highlighted the opaque whitewash of the industry. As a black queer person, my opinion and values were not really taken into consideration. During my last internship with a company in New York, I was asked to read a novel that the owner was considering buying the rights to. He hired me with the intention of listening to what a young person had to say, as he admitted that he was “out of touch” with a lot of things. The novel centered around a Korean mom whose lesbian daughter moves back home, alongside her longtime girlfriend. The mother has a difficult time accepting her daughter’s sexuality and although she tries to understand it, her attachment to her culture ultimately keeps her from embracing her daughter’s identity. I thought this book was incredibly valuable to understanding the differences between shame based and guilt based cultures, and it could help to bridge the gap in emotional knowledge of how some families treat their queer children. When I explained why I thought it would be a great choice to buy the rights to the book, my boss replied with “Well, we already have a gay book coming out in January so I don’t think we need another one. I’m gonna pass on it, but thank you for giving me your opinion”.

One gay book is definitely enough to show the diversity of a catalog, right? We have the token gay novel, so obviously we don’t need any more. The gays have been represented. They’re of Spanish descent

as well, which checks off the race box. So, now we can focus on the normal people without having to deal with claims of the company being homophobic. We've hit all our bases.

Deep disappointment set in my chest when I heard my boss' response. I thought he would be receptive to my thoughts, considering that he hired me because I was young and in touch with people my age. I'm also a lesbian and can absolutely advocate for more diverse representation in literature, something that my boss could help with through his work. His choice not to saddened me intensely. The quick dismissiveness of his response is what bothered me the most. He had the power and opportunity to help the industry grow in a positive direction, but he saw no value in a story about queer Koreans. He was an older white man, of course, and I believed that since he had built the press from the ground up, he would be able to see the worth in publishing a story like this. My trust in him and the publishing industry to do the right thing for the future of literature left me that day.

It took about a year for my interest in publishing to move to the forefront of my mind. The experience I had with independent press was discouraging, as well as the countless replyless emails and applications I had sent to every company I could think of. That is another reason why I felt ignored. It felt that no one would give me the time of day, much less listen to my ideas or values that I find important. The job market is tough, and this is a common occurrence, but when it involves something you truly care about, it can be more than heartbreaking.

I heard about Write On, Black Girl! through a friend of mine. They told me that the creator of the magazine, another black woman, needed a new intern for the next semester and I could possibly be a good fit with my past experience. My interview was quick and much less painful than I thought it would be. Within a day, I got the offer in my email. I was ecstatic. I was finally going to be working with someone who wanted to make a difference in black female literature and the publishing industry as a whole. We were on the same page about the mission of the magazine, and this gave me back the hope that I had lost in New York. It truly was an exciting time.

Learning from a PhD candidate and working side by side with her on a project of passion was one of the best experiences I had during my undergrad. It was challenging at times, and I had to figure out a lot on my own to get the job done. But once it was done, a feeling of relief and gratitude washed over me. I will always be thankful for the lessons I learned and work that I had the opportunity to do. During our annual retreat, the girls that came from all over the state were smiling from ear to ear. We provided them a safe space to express themselves and learn from each other. All of them thanked me deeply when they left.

A lot of energy went into the organization of the event, and it absolutely did not go to waste. Being able to interact with and help improve the girls' writing skills through peer feedback and workshops was fulfilling to say the least. It was better than I could have possibly imagined.

Write On, Black Girl! is a perfect steppingstone to changing the publishing industry into a platform for the representation of everyone. It gives the chance to grow to writers and artists who would not have had the opportunity in the competitive, white dominated industry. It is slowly but surely influencing our values in literature and art for the better. I believe that it can, and will, change the future of publishing forever. And I am so happy that I can be a part of it.

~Dancia Brown
Editorial Assistant



Graduating Editor: Salutations



Looking back on my time as a UConn student, I consider my junior year to be the most pivotal. I took Literature and the Environment and African American Literature, and I regard both courses as the strike box to my match. These classes exposed me to texts, authors, thinkers, and creatives across space and time singularly committed to one thing: the betterment of humankind. I absorbed everything put before me, grappling with feelings of inspiration and anger. These words and these people were so obviously good, and yet there were consistent efforts to hide, hinder, or outright destroy them. What I learned left me with an itch I couldn't quite reach. I needed to be part of something bigger, to contribute positively to the world I was being prepped to enter in whatever capacity I could while still being a college student.

I heard of a project called Write On, Black Girl! this same year. As an aspiring writer, my kneejerk idea was to submit a piece or two for consideration in the inaugural edition of this literary magazine, but I was moved to participate in a more substantial way. I wanted to share this opportunity with young creative Black girls everywhere. I needed to shout our mission statement from the mountaintops. I was an intern for the Connecticut Writing Project, the organization through which Write On, Black Girl! operates, and dedicated most of my time with them to working with founder Kiedra Taylor and my co-intern Christina Young to do just that.

The work we did was not only gratifying, but deeply validating. I saw remnants of myself in

nearly everything I read. The art was fresh and beautiful, but there was something in each piece that I recognized. I was impressed by the creative and emotional range while sorting through submissions, and remembered how important what we were attempting to do for the first time was whenever I'd feel worried or doubtful. There was a deeper orientation at play. Black girls from all over Connecticut trusted us to handle their works, fragments of themselves, with utmost care. I'm proud to say we did just that, and am even more proud to be included in the introduction of this newest edition.

I read an interview recently and in it, the interviewee (who happened to be a Black female creative) said something that I don't think I'll ever forget. "The writing and the thoughts that propel it is the desire for a radically different order than the one in which we're living." I like to believe this magazine is just that, a testament that there are voices here and everywhere still committed to imagining a world that meets all of our standards. This magazine is something good. It matters and it's yours. It has been an honor to be part of a project that supports the creativity, humanity, and beauty of Black girls. I look forward to seeing how this project will continue to evolve and change lives.

And with that, please, write on, Black girl.

~Pascale Joachim

Outgoing Editor



Poetry



Amanda Gorman: the youngest inaugural poet in
U.S. history theamandagorman.com

When I Talk

by Kyra Timberlake, Undergraduate

How come you don't like it when I talk?
Does my tone upset you?
Does it bug you that I speak with confidence,
with the authority you want to have over me?

How come you don't like it when I talk?
Does my pitch upset you?
would you prefer a feminine voice like mine
say sweet, gentle things - a script you preapproved?

How come you don't like it when I talk?
Does my complexion upset you?
Because my complexion comes with complications,
And you're convinced nothing I say will sound like you?

How come you don't like it when I talk?
Does my voice upset you?
Do I sound too Black to be respectable?
Do I sound too respectable to be Black?

How come you don't like it when I talk?
Does the truth upset you?
Would you rather ignore the history?
Do you take comfort in your lies?

How come you don't like it when I talk?
Does my voice I upset you?
Because it's a voice that no matter what you do, you can never truly silence?
It doesn't matter. I'll keep talking. I will speak.

Kalo for the Soul

by Asianut Odong, 11th Grade

The wash basin ran full again
And the evening was over.
Stories had been told,
Hands that cooked, blessed.
Hands. Not people.
Favorite nights.

My mother yelled
To get the mingled kalo ready for her husband.
Husband. Not father.

Why wasn't the rice softer?
And wasn't the bean soup red by now?
Where, stupid girl, was the steamed matooke?
And why didn't he come home the night before?
Nights like these made me a philosopher.

When my father wasn't there,
Every day except the eighth night of each month,
We morphed into modern peasants:
Breakfast at leisure.
Lunch on lucky days.
Dinner, if anything at all.

On the "eighth nights"
Divorce china graced the linen,
And we ate in wealth and luxury
As if trauma were currency.
As though we hadn't,
He hadn't
Lost everything.
As if the familial eighth night obligations
Were not a sorry investment.

The milk in my smile spilled out
Throughout the night in conscious pretense.

He was the only reason
Nights like these existed.
And three quarters of me wished he would stay.

Stupid girl, stop poking at your greens.
Eat your kalo.
Eat your now-red-bleeding beans.
Stupid girl,
Stop wishing he would stay
Stupid girl,
Stop wishing
Girl stop wishing,
Stupid
Stop being
Stupid, girl.

I hate routines:
Monotony is a sing-song felony,
But nights like those –
Until water hit lead basin again –
Were different.



Boiling Over

by Cianna Tangishaka, Undergraduate

When I speak it is in run-on sentences,
the air bubbles over and releases like a tea kettle's scream.
I have wondered why I spoke in paragraphs, and could paint pages
that would have John Green begging on his knees.
Maybe it was the books that I lived lifetimes in, or my presidential dreams.
But the truth is my proclamations are the only way I can ensure I am seen.

I have practiced syntax and vocab so I am clear and precise,
because no one likes "the angry Black girl" I am agreeable and "nice."
My tongue has silenced classrooms and drawn-out fake tears.
To be misunderstood and unheard is my greatest fear.

I told the boy I loved that I had "a million words to say but I'll save us both the speech,"
but in 800 more, I said, "Thank you for listening while I filled the gaps in between."
I know when the pressure is too much, and I consider knocking down death's door,
I want my words to be heard for many years more.

860

by Savannah Burney, 12th Grade

I called him last week.
He picked up.
But he didn't answer.



chocolate woes

by Savannah Burney, 12th Grade

don't let a black girl cry.
who's going to help?
every nose scrunches
and eyes dart away.
those that loom over us
watch
as water spills from our eyes
and they think to themselves
"seeing a brown thing cry,
looks like dirt turning to mud.
ugly turns uglier."
but, do you dare?
to reach out your hand
and help her?
dry the droplets
that fall from her
tired eyes.
so she can lift her head up
and know
that her skin illuminates through all the cruel
hatred in the world.
Help Her?
Help Her.
cause chocolate melts too easily
to be left alone.

Lord of the Flies

by McKenna Clemons, 11th Grade

Girls never needed a book
to know what makes a boy vicious.

Will They Notice Me

by Gianna Peña, 5th Grade

Waking up with everything wrong or so my thoughts tell me
Minutes led to hours of faking it through.

Will they notice me?

School bus rides seem way too long,
going home with confidence gone.

Then homework, sports, and bedtime soon
Early mornings and late nights, the same routine.

Will they notice me?

What would they do if I share my true thoughts?

That bugs crawl on my skin when I shower.

It's jeans, dresses, leggings, and head wraps too.

Loud chewing, lip-smacking, and swallows send chills to my brain.

No hives, no rashes, no visible signs for them to see
when I cover my ears and say, "PLEASE!"

They think I'm rude or sassy,
but I'm just seeking comfort to be happy.

When will they know my thoughts *are not* right?

When and how will it end, I often write.

Wars, stress, and busy lives, or so they say,
will anyone see the kids who will soon change the world?

Then will you notice me?



A Label

by Nakii McCray, 8th Grade

Growing up I thought people didn't like me because of the way I looked. **Every** day people looked at me differently, like I was an exotic animal or something. Mostly every **day**

I felt voiceless and unimportant, like I was an imposter in the wrong place at all the wrong times. All I wanted to do was live my life and feel like any other happy kid, but I was always the kid who was different. The kid who **is** known for causing trouble, the kid who has problems at home. The kid who lies too much. But I was never just known as just a kid, because who cares about what a child has to say. **A**

Label... A label is what they put on that little girl and it hurt her, it hurt her and they didn't even notice. As I got older people, including my mother, started to tell me how I changed, a lot changed me as I became a **new** person. I recognized that I was my own adult growing up and the people that were telling me I changed were the people that were causing it. **Day** in and day out I thought to myself, what did I do to deserve these cruel things? Is it my fault?

I thought about those things a lot **and** as I grew and matured I realized that it's not always my fault and sometimes all people wanted was a reaction out of me and the more I gave it to them the harder it was to move on and overcome those challenges. Growing up the way I did, **you'll** choose to be independent, you'll learn the harder way, you'll want to leave and **never** be able to come back. What happened to me caused pain, memories and maybe even a scar. It caused trauma and chaos, but through all of it, it brought joy, happiness, love and comfort. It gave me a family who helps me through my issues when I feel alone. It brought forgiveness, even patience. It taught me to **be** aware of not only the lows but more importantly the highs, what I can do instead of what I can't. After realizing that I can't change or fix the past I was **able** to focus more on the future and what I can do **to** make it the best I can, to push myself to do great, to be my greatest self. I had to learn to love myself and **find** the **happiness**

I didn't have before the joy, the healthy relationships between my peers and me. At a very young age I learned forgiveness and **if** you never give forgiveness **you** will never be able to find the great people in your life or the opportunities life has to give, **if** you **don't** let go of the grudges and **move**

Negative Nostalgia

by McKena Clemons, 11th Grade

Nights never end when you're 12.

Nights never end when you're 12 and it's summer.

Nights never end when you're 12 and it's summer and you find Black friends in a white neighborhood.

Nights never when you're 12 and it's summer and you find Black friends in a white neighborhood and the wind is in your face from biking.

Nights never when you're 12 and it's summer and you find Black friends in a white neighborhood and the wind is in your face from biking and the basement has a TV and Xbox.

Nights never when you're 12 and it's summer and you find Black friends in a white neighborhood and the wind is in your face from biking and the basement has a TV and Xbox and the moon is the only light for outside play.

Nights never when you're 12 and it's summer and you find Black friends in a white neighborhood and the wind is in your face from biking and the basement has a TV and Xbox and the moon is the only light for outside play and the fridge is stocked with ice pops.

Nights never when you're 12 and it's summer and you find Black friends in a white neighborhood and the wind is in your face from biking and the basement has a TV and Xbox and the moon is the only light for outside play and the fridge is stocked with ice pops.

Those nights didn't end when I turned thirteen and it was September and my Black friends left school and my bike rusted and the basement door was locked and the sun came up and there were no ice pops in the fridge.

Those nights ended

when she died--

Words

by McKena Clamons, 11th Grade

There are territories where words don't reach. Areas too far gone to even be described.
These territories are where I reside to love the unlovable. To love all of your morally gray areas.
These territories where words don't reach, only my love for can survive those territories spaces.

The Last to Fall

by McKenna Clemons, 11th Grade

Everyone else has changed colors.
Shades of red and orange, even yellow.
As days go further into October, their stems loosen.
Are they forgetting their safety?
The only home they have ever known?
One strong gust is all it takes for them to fall,
filing the sky below the limbs.
But I stayed green, never falling from my roots.



Curly Hair

by Mayaelysek Brooks, 6th Grade

My curly hair has many hard manages,
But I'm learning about the advantages.
I can wear it in the rain
When I'm about to get drained.
I love it when it blows on my face
As it just does not stay in place.
My curly hair is cool,
And I love showing it off at school.
Although I have to keep it in a braid when playing sports,
I never ever retort.
I really love my curly hair.
And not one person should compare.

Na Gane.

by Amber Charles, Undergraduate

Age 14.

She asked for a DNA test for Christmas to find her country of origin.

Age 17.

She does the same, but this time in hopes of finding her grandfather.

Age 19.

She went searching through some records in an old box of her grandmothers;
records of existing,
records of her past.

Age 20.

She is surrounded by rich African culture.

She is finding to whom she concerns.

There is profound power in knowing your origins.

I was graced with the presence of a sweet soul for a short time.

They, ready to teach.

I, ready to learn.

I was taught a multitude of things that guided me into the doorway of my past.

To whom do I concern?

Na gane my origins.



Charles's
May 18th, 2023

Love is Love



Friz of Fury

by Amelia Mercy, 8th Grade

I looked into her eyes.
They were full of fury.

Not at herself but at her friends--
they couldn't and wouldn't understand
the reason she fails and continues to struggle,
the reason her cupboards are full of hair
products,
the reason why her hair is so poofy.

All they do is stare and ask,
"Can I touch it?"

In fact, it's not a problem,
but it becomes uneventful.
They do it over and over again.

Now, not as common as before;
but it still happens--

another Black female is forgotten.
She tried and tried, then she was mentioned.

Just for a ruckus to appear then what was her
invention
was now another man's pretension.

She wakes up and straightens her hair
for another day that's not fair.

She walks home in her gloom
where the rain pours in looms.

Her hair coils back up in a frizz
as they stare and do it all again.

They say, "Can I touch your hair?"
Her eyes full of fury once again

She ran home seeking her so-called friends.



All Feminists Drink Water

by Asianut Odong, 11th Grade

Allow yourself to focus,
Resting your hands gently
On the surface that lies beneath you.
Taking a long breath in
Sink.
Deeper.

To the night when you first knew
All the town gossip, whispers, rumors
Were true.

You'd have to wash your feet
With lime when you got home,
You were thinking.

You were thinking
they were cracked.
And you were thinking
how cold the wind felt
against your bones,
When a noise broke the silence.

Sink deeper.

You heard a piercing cry
Leaking out of your neighbors' grass-thatched house.
And you didn't need to be a midwife
To know the sound of a newborn baby,
Screaming into the dead of night.
The taxi driver was right,
Your neighbor's daughter was pregnant.
Your neighbor's daughter's newborn baby's father was also
unknown.
Known only to her.
But how do you hide a newborn from a village?

And the headline that morning read
Flight MH370 missing: 239 people gone



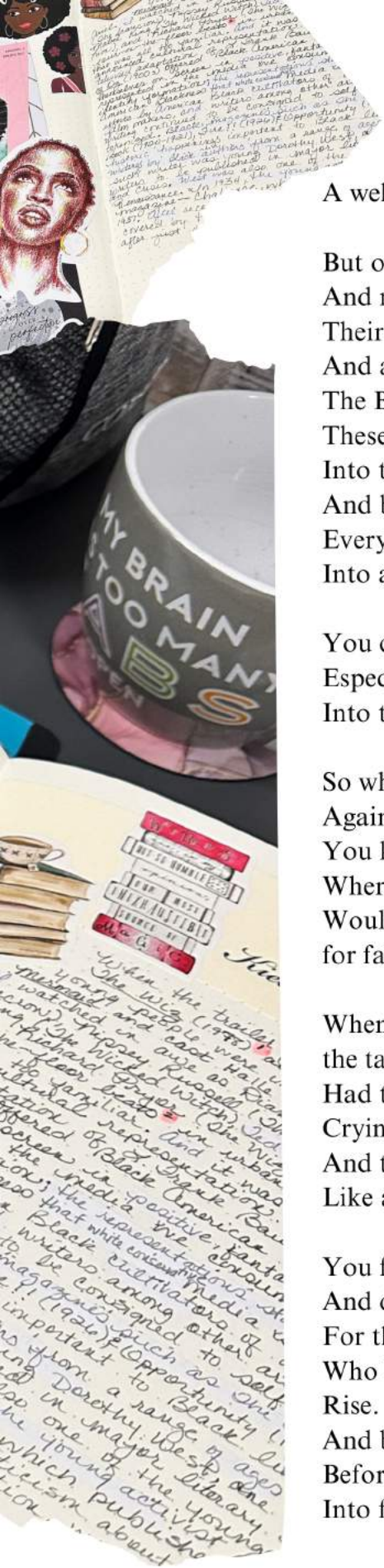


That was nine years ago.
No one talks about MH370 anymore.
But you know what happened to the plane;
You know that it sank into deep water
On its way out of Kuala Lumpur.

The news outlets cry out,
"Mystery never uncovered!"
Conspiracy theories develop.
The plane's exact location is unknown,
Known only to you.

You also know that
With everything else the ocean floor has seen,
Like the bodies of fishermen that lost bets,
And guns that held bloody secrets,
And Atlantis,
The ocean floor must have seen MH370.
But since oceans,
With all their vast knowledge
Cannot speak,
They will never speak.
Forever silenced,
That plane will sink
Deeper.

The headlines today read:
"Femicides in Mexico"
"Taliban bans all education for girls"
"As many as 200 girls abducted by Boko Haram"
With all these reports,
It is clear that when a woman says she is a feminist
That should hold a certain power to it.
But women have become oceans.
At the depth of their experience ...
In the wreckage of those planes,
Maybe, just maybe,
We could find the recipe for what
Could ultimately be



A well-bred nation.

But oceans don't speak.
And neither do women.
Their thoughts will only continue to sink,
And as flaming ships follow
The Big Dipper in search of answers,
These women will pour their laughter
Into the kitchen-sink-
And boil down
Every piece of their bing
Into a thick creamy consistency.

You can't hide a newborn baby from a village
Especially if that baby screams
Into the two a.m. wind.

So when you never saw your neighbor's daughter
Again
You knew that shame had driven her to a place
Where her mother
Wouldn't call her a waste of oxygen
for falling victim to rape.

When in the nine months that followed,
the taxi driver told you that nine more girls
Had their newborn babies
Crying into the nigh wind,
And then just ... disappeared ...
Like aircrafts.

You fell onto your knees
And drafted a prayer of your own.
For the girls everywhere
Who like the tide,
Rise. Rose.
And blossomed into mothers
Before falling
Into forgottenness.

White On, Black Girl! White On, Black Girl!
Girl! White On, Black Girl! White On, Black Girl!

White On, Black Girl! White On, Black Girl!
Girl! White On, Black Girl! White On, Black Girl!

Girl! White On, Black
White On, Black Girl! White On, Black Girl!
Girl! White On, Black

Girl! White On, Black
White On, Black Girl! White On, Black Girl!
Girl! White On, Black

Girl! White On, Black
White On, Black Girl! White On, Black Girl!
Girl! White On, Black

It Could Happen to Anyone

by Anaya Tolton, 12th Grade

Today is horrible day to own a uterus & here's why

My cutest pair of underwear soaked & stained red,
gone beyond repair, I cried over it for half an hour.
Then I realized I wasted half an hour crying,
& scrambled to make it on time to school & failed.
& when my friends asked why I was late & I told them
they said:

"Girls are so overdramatic".

& then they blamed it on my hormones & PMS,

"You should eat some chocolate".

& on top of an already horrible morning, anger can be added to the mix.
If I stay quiet about my anger, I'm submissive & accept their words,
but if I put them in their place & justify myself

I'm a femi-nazi shoving female rights down everyone's throat.

I wonder if this is how we were treated in 1920

when we asked for rights to vote or to pass the equal rights amendment
or when we tried to break the bounds of a good 1950's housewife.

Because today we are femi-nazis for protesting our rights a century later, like

Roe V Wade being overturned.

& I'm told I shouldn't care since I live in a blue state,
but how can I not when my sisters in the south don't,
when we are taking more steps back than we are forward.

& I am sick and tired of reminders that owning a uterus is life's greatest disadvantage.

In this world, an unborn fetus has more rights than women,
women who have worked relentlessly to hold a sliver of power
only to be paid a sliver of a man's paycheck.

Perhaps that's why we're so angry, and why we protest and shout
but when we do we get called nasty. She's a nasty woman.

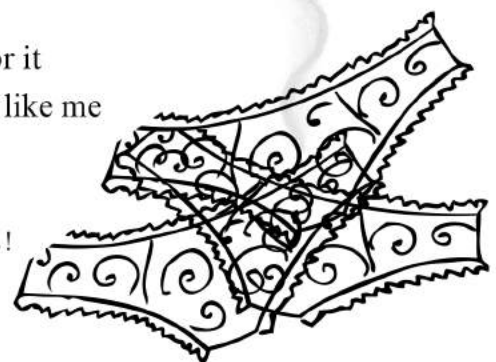
Nasty is losing 110 ounces of blood in our lifetime and being taxed for it
simply for having two X chromosomes by chance leaving young girls like me
trashing panties and chasing change.

be bold

be you

be bold

be you



Fauck These 20-somethings

by Amber Charles, Undergraduate

What is my identity?

Who am I?

I was sure I knew.

Was sure I was creating it.

Finding it.

I became so engulfed in the notion that things have to be created

only to find elsewhere would lead nowhere but to a full 360 in the mirror.

Might as well create it.

Who am I?

Am I supposed to know?

Do I change that frequently?

I want to track every memory,

it's part of the reason I film everything.

Am I inspired?

Or am I a copycat?

Do I get coddled?

Am I chameleon?

Where is the accountability?

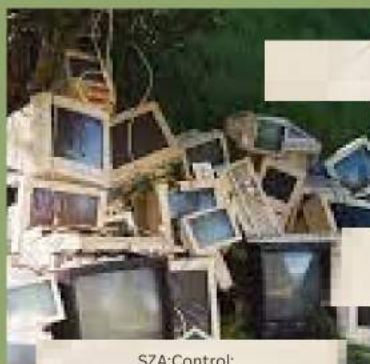
Therapy is tuff.

Makes me question many things.

I have some tough decisions to make.

For real.

But first, who am I?



Exit Wounds

by McKena Clemons, 11th Grade

Exit wounds, the holes left in the body by a foreign object. The object, whether it be a bullet or love, passes right through the body, without caring to stay.

So coward like, it will cause pain and not stay around after.

Exit wounds, the holes left in the body from a foreign object. The object being a bullet with your name on it passes right through my heart.

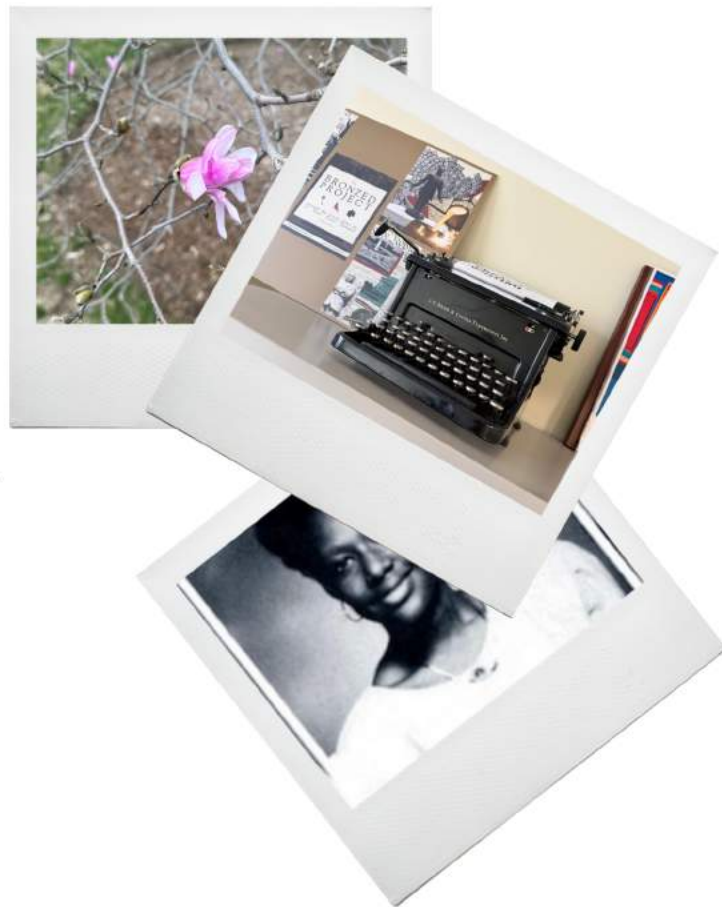
You are the coward that could not stay.

The Walls and Our Brawls

by Kadin Seward, 8th Grade

My mom said that geniuses talk to themselves.
However, I am no genius.
I am just a teenaged idiot
who cries over not understanding myself and others.

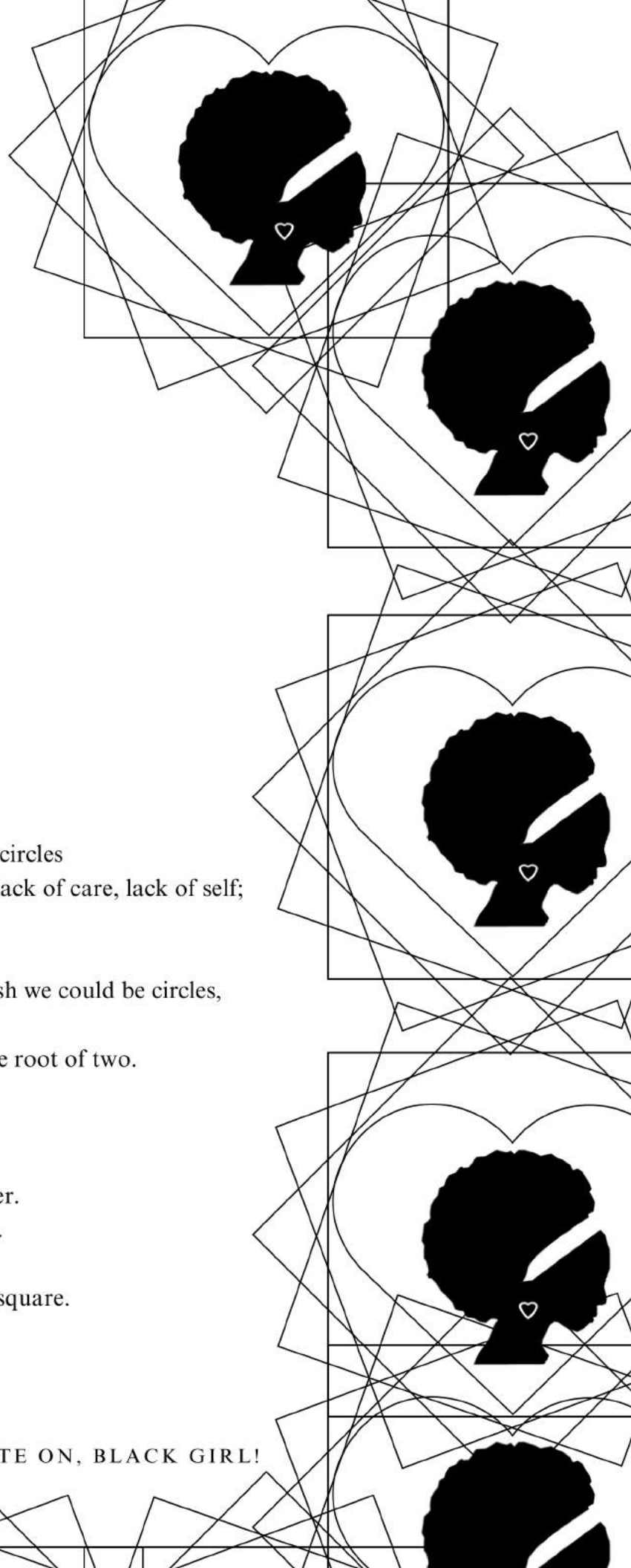
I communicate with myself so I don't go crazy.
The walls know all of my moods.
The walls know all of my mistakes and fears,
all of my hopes and dreams.
I know that someday I'll go crazy.
I'll wonder if the walls I talked to remember
if they remember the reason I love for.
I fear that someday I will forget again.



Square Roots

by Amber Charles, Undergraduate

A circle.
No restrictions.
Never ending.
A circle.
I wish our love was like a circle.
Never ending. Instead, it was like a square.
It was boxy and rocky.
It had a beautiful definitive space.
Space for love,
anger,
forgiveness,
care,
and lust.
At least for me,
our love had an ending point.
We were not infinite.
We were not a circle,
yet we were:
we circled in circles oh god the never ending circles
of denial, neglect, lack of lust, lack of trust, lack of care, lack of self;
a square.
We could never be a circle but were square.
I wrote this piece to describe how I feel. I wish we could be circles,
Loving circles.
We were square representations of the square root of two.
We were two.
And like a square root, there is an end.
64 becomes eight and 100 becomes ten.
The square root of 93 is an imaginary number.
I like to imagine us. Where we could've been.
Where we should've been.
I like imaginary numbers. The ones with no square.
But like the root that didn't grow, we ended.
Fair and square.



To My Dear Black Girl

by Aliyah Locke, 6th Grade

My sweet Black girl, I know you're hurting and feel like you're not enough.
I know you have to straighten your hair or change your clothes to fit in.
Embrace your curls show off your style because you are enough.
In fact, you're more than enough. From the pattern of your curls to your beautiful melanin skin,
you are perfect.
My sweet Black girl, don't stand in fright when you see **them**.
You know, the white girls who call you ghetto and the white boys who say you're too dark for
their taste.
My sweet Black girl, you come from kings and queens.
You are powerful in the way you talk, the way you walk, heck even the way you breathe is
powerful.
I love everything about you, even if no one else in the world does.
You are joyful, happy, sad, and pain.
You have the power to do anything.
You are perfect, my sweet Black girl.

45 Alice Drive

by McKena Clemons, 11th Grade

Discolored wallpaper from decades of nicotine,
green retro cabinets with glass doors.
Glass doors begin to shatter from the yelling of grandma and grandpa.
Grandma and Grandpa never opened the glass doors, there was nothing
but more fragile items inside.
Inside the drawers held forks, spoons, and bottles of vodka.
Bottles of vodka flooded every cabinet,
but had enough grace to leave room for the expired food.
Food in the refrigerator was rare,
the common tenants of the white box are pizza box pizza and Blue Powerade
Powerade, vodka, and cigarettes,
the holy trinity of a loveless kitchen.

Peace, Not Pain

by Maqueda Green, 7th Grade

To be able to walk outside
without the worry of being alone and afraid,
To know that everyone will be safe, and
To have respect for each other and be happy.
These are the rules of the perfect world
Where dreams and hopes are fulfilled.
Life should not be about surviving, but living.
Why are we the problem, I wonder.
Why is it that we cannot be equal to our peers?
Why are we judged before even meeting?
Both Black and white should live in harmony
like a tree with its roots and leaves.
Each has a purpose; each depends on the other.
The world has been in the dark for so long,
it grew blind from its blights.
Many poison the minds of others with lies
and remain blinded by their foolishness.
The world molds them into people of darkness,
not people of light.
Their judgments are clouded, and their acts selfish.
Inequality is an embarrassing disgrace.

This cruelty affects everyone, every day.
It constantly pains us, eventually weakening us.
Children become afraid of their world.
Who will wipe their teary eyes?
Why is it easy to be kind to oneself
and not to someone else?
Why does this go on?
When can it end?
To be able to live happily
should be a right, not a wish.
To cause change, there must be action.
People must unite as one, despite their differences.

Their love would make the world free,
their bond strong, and their hearts warm.
The world would no longer be scary,
where people have to hide.
The weight of their burdens would be broken.
The future is uncertain, but one thing is guaranteed.
It is now or never.
The time for separation is over,
as new beginnings draw near.
There is hope for humanity,
for peace, not pain.



To Whom Do I Concern?

by Amber Charles, Undergraduate

To whom shall I give gratitude?
To whom it may concern.

From where do I get my eyes?

My lips?
My hair?
My ears?
My brows?
My talents?

Such a gift to know where you come from.
To have records of your past.
Perhaps, I'd like to document each passing moment of my life,
Paint each feeling,
and write out my journey, so that there
are an overwhelming amount of records of my life.
My thoughts.
My presence.
I hope one day,
someday, someone linked to me can explore my mind,
my heart,
my love.

I long so deeply to know to whom it may concern.
So many questions.
Such few answers.

I search,
and I search for something I may never find:
lineage,
ancestry,
culture,
belonging.

Where are my origins?
To whom do I concern?



Endangered Species

by Savannah Burney, 12th Grade

I've learned to understand
The meaning behind numbers
And how few
There are
Of us.

an endangered species

we are, we are

'Cause this skin I wear
Doesn't quite blend in--
It's loud and brown
And only the fourth in the classroom.

an endangered species

we are, we are

I look around my world
While the stares strip my body
Clean of its melanin.
And I'm *trapped*
In flat irons
And too-light foundations,
In bad healthcare
And minimum wages.

trapped

In a system that makes me the predator.

trapped

In a system where a girl has brown skin like me,
And she has to pay
For being used
And abused
And broken.
Because what we are
But not a black thing
To be stolen.



Black Girl Pride

by Sabrina Brown, 7th Grade

When I speak as a Black girl
I don't wanna fall.
I stand tall.
I'm like a wall,
strong and unbreakable
though when I was young, my voice was disabled.
I was teased and pushed around for my skin tone
like I was nothing more than brown.
People spoke horrible words,
"Don't touch her, you'll get burned."
I only wanted to earn their trust,
to become a friend and blow around like dust.
But I learned as a Black girl I'll face other walls
for those will be strong, and want to make you crumble.
When those people spoke, I tumbled
into a hurt that was hard to reverse.
My mother told me,
"They'll break you down because you are strong, Brown."
But why must my color scare others?
Speaking now is easier, as I've learned to find my voice.
I will no longer sit in silence and be hurt for my color.
I am a Black girl who's proud of her color.
Many others will go through this pain.
And for the little brown girls out there,
I praise you highly for your effort.
Make your breakthrough.
Speak proud with your head up high; don't cry;
wipe your tears and stand with pride.
I speak now with my pride to help guide you,
but when I am here, I'll speak out.
I'll scream loud.
When I speak as a Black girl, I am no longer hurt.
I speak with pride.
When I speak as a female,
I say with pride, don't let others control you.
When I speak as a young Afro-Latina,
I speak to you all
guiding you to your glory.
Thank you for listening to my story.



Dear Black Teen

by Marleigh Newell, 6th Grade

I know that you have taught me to walk my walk, talk my talk, and be own girl.
But sometimes it's hard to be my own girl.

It's hard to love my own skin, my melanin. It's hard to love my own style and it can
be hard to love my smile.

But Dear Black Teen, I still want to fly higher than any plane or bird.

Dear Black Teen, I know you have taught me to be my own girl, to embrace my
own curls and to love my own skin, my melanin.

Dear Black Teen, you've also taught me that people can be mean and that not
everyone wants you to dream.

Dear Black Teen, at the end of the day you have taught me to be me. To walk my
own walk, talk my own talk, love my own curls, be my own girl, and to love my
own skin, my melanin.



A Sister's Mind, Our Mother's Heart

by Cianna Tangishaka, Undergraduate

I whisper silent prayers,
For the 1st children I raised, our blood shared
Quick, short retorts hit closing doors
I hope they don't slip thorough.
As much as I am annoyed, my little sister has been hurt by this world too.
She carries it, just like my brother and I.
Below the surface, ready to be released when the timing is right
This girl is my mirror, but hopefully my mistakes can stop her from her stomach knotting tight
I am stared at in horror when I voice my concerns,
No matter what I try, my siblings safety is not something I can earn.
No degrees, license, or rest can prevent what might happen next.
So I listen through walls for paused dribbling, and cars slowing by
This is my job for I am my brother's keeper and sister's protector til I die.



I'm a Black Girl

by Avery Jones, 1st Grade

I'm a Black girl ...
Black girls are brave!
I'm a Black girl ...
Black girls are smart!
I'm a Black girl ...
Black girls are strong!
I am BEAUTIFUL!
I am BLESSED!



Antagonist

by Mckena Clemons, 11th Grade

The main character
always sits on their pedestal
ignorant of their perfection--

How every plot will forever favor them,
how they are guaranteed love,
how unaware
of the others drowning in their positivity,
of the knife aimed at their back.

Fire

by Leila Rackley, 8th Grade

My skin touches the bone
the embers illuminate
night like a black cat

Black Girl

by Faith Aiken, 4th Grade

Come Black girl,
Don't be afraid.
You know, all people can't be perfect.
I can see your tears of fear.
Don't be scared Black girl.
You're in my arms.
You can hear fighting around,
but don't worry
they're not after you.
Cause you're here
with me.
So, don't be afraid Black girl
because this Black girl is me.



Black Women Stand!

by Ny'Aire Hansley, 4th Grade

Black women stand up and stay, they stand up for justice and freedom.

They stand against what's wrong and stand up for what's right, for their people and their country.

They stand up and don't stand down, they stay even when people look away and frown.

Black women need justice and freedom when they stand.

It makes me feel proud, it makes me forget my frown.

Black women are here for a reason, so let's make them proud.

Let's get up and be loud.

They are here for a reason.

Doubt is no longer a reason.

Black women stand hand and hand, they will be proud, they will be loud in a silent crowd.

Black women stand for justice, freedom, and what's right.



♥ BLACK WOMAN ♥

The Story of Us

by Leila Rackley, 8th Grade

One week ago, I heard a whale song.
It was a snow day,
the ocean frozen over
leaving icicles on my bedroom window.
It reminded me of gargoyle teeth,
sharp and piercing.

Two weeks ago, it was dark.
I was on a road trip, the car smelled of pine,
and your old leather boots.

Three weeks ago,
I was in our old tree house at dawn.
The pile of driftwood from the beach sat in the corner.
The first wishbone we found
sat on the table enveloped in dust.

As I stared at the sunrise rippled together
with pinks and blues and yellows
I reflect on you and I,
the story of us.



Lost in the Garden

by Makayla Harper, Undergraduate

I wandered into my backyard, and I saw a path.
I slowly walked towards it leaving everything in the past.
I walked through under bright green trees.
Yet, slowly they began changing colors.
They went from green to red to blue to yellow.
Finally they stopped, and I felt a cool breeze.
I saw a huge garden in front of me.
There were flowers planted miles away.
I ran and jumped into them to play.
I want to lay in them all day.
I breathed them in,
those wonderful scents.
There were so many flowers.
I saw roses, sunflowers, and more.
Being here wasn't a bore.
I ran some more, and I tried reaching the end.
Yet, soon the flowers darkened, and they were dying.
The sky turned black.
I looked back and the garden died.
I woke up in my bed to not see that garden alive.



Their Future

by McKena Clemons, 11th Grade

Despite the cruel hands that weave we sit in classrooms. The same classrooms crafted by those cruel hands. We speak the truth despite cruel hands that weave lies about us. We fight to stop the cruel hands weaving. One day we will cut the hand off. That day our hands will weave, our children will sit in classrooms crafted by our hands. They will speak and we will listen. Our children will not have to fight the battle weaved by cruel hands.

I See You, See Seeds Within Me

by Amber Charles, Undergraduate

Don't buy me flowers.

I don't want them.

They don't impress me.

A murdered flower stem, gifted in an attempt to elicit a simple smile upon my face.

Not impressive

If you must,

Buy me seeds.

Show me you see the value in growth.

Show me you intend to stick around to view the new sprout.

Show me you won't wither away like a rose within a week of our meeting.

If you must,

Buy me seeds.

Show me you put thought into which plant would fit me best.

Show me you noted which seed I need.

Show me you are patient enough to wait.

Show me you possess hope for potential.

Show me less is more.

Don't buy me flowers.

They don't impress me.

Buy me seeds.

Show me more.



Call Me Happy Birthday

by Abigayl Palmer, Undergraduate

When you tell someone happy birthday,
they should hear the smile in your voice
It should be soft and kind, like something to wear.
It should wrap them up and make them glad they're still here.
There's something so cold about a thumbed-out text.
Those are for colleagues, acquaintances at best.
So call me Happy Birthday, show me you care.
Cause only God knows if I'll see another year.



The Second Month

by McKena Clemons, 11th Grade

The air chilled, but days are warm.
The trees are dead, but they dance in the wind more.
The pure white snow is nothing but a muddy slush.
The ground is frozen but grass still grows.
The weatherman promises just rain, but no one is surprised by snow.
The month is second to all and first to some.
The streets are flooded with red hearts, but they didn't leave blood stains.
The shortest month dedicated to love and Black bodies.
February is hypocrisy.

Art



Untitled

by Vinessa Taylor, Undergraduate

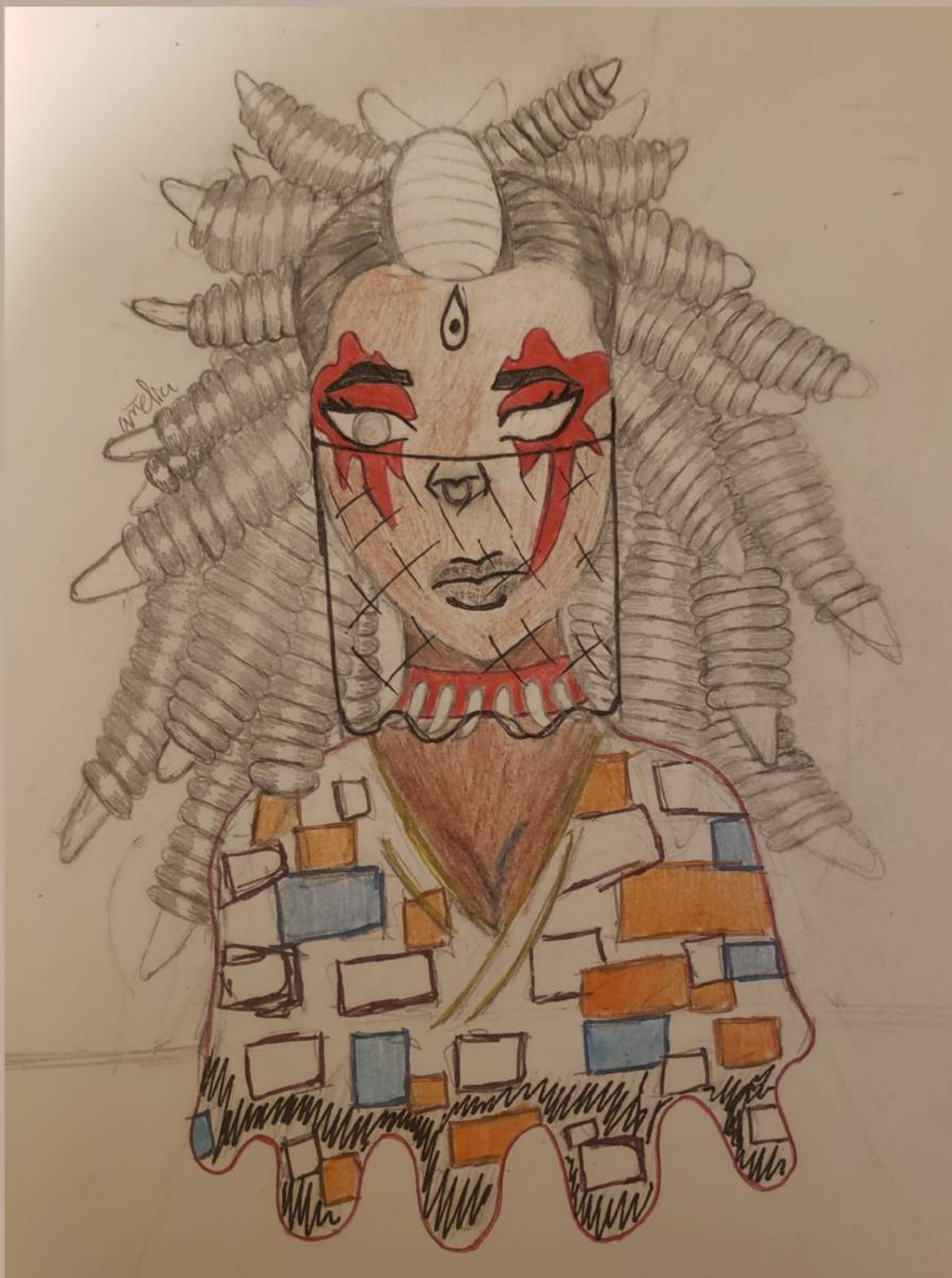


Black Beauty

by Mackenzie Grant, 6th Grade



Black Queen Fanart
by Amelia Mercy, 8th Grade



“Uh huh ...”

by Tageria Davis, Undergraduate



Uplifting Black Stories: Fiction by Black Authors



This is an illustration by Casey Moses (@_thebookcase on instagram). The order of the books listed below is determined by the illustration, top to bottom, left to right.

Short Stories & Essays

Coming Back to My Father

by Tarryn Mims, Undergraduate

They always say children who were raised in the house of the Lord always find their way back if they go astray. I'm not exactly sure where my breaking point was, maybe it was ending up on academic probation after my third semester. Or maybe it was the strain on relationships in my household at the time. Or it could have been the breakup and public humiliation from the one person I thought would never hurt me. I can't put my finger on where I felt I hit rock bottom, but I do remember crying so hard my head spun before sleep enveloped me. It seemed like my understanding of everything and everyone around me was crumbling. So, I fell on my knees and pleaded with God. I asked Him, "WHY ME?"

I wallowed in my misery for about a month, rarely eating or leaving my room. I could barely bring myself to shower. I was desperate for a glimpse, a sparkle, or just a shimmer of hope in any aspect of my life. But nothing seemed to work for me. My therapy sessions seemed to be just a part of a weekly routine, something I was obligated to get through rather than a place where I could be vulnerable and begin to heal. I think I remained in shock for so long that I didn't feel I could ever find my way out of the darkness. Family and loved ones were lucky if I acknowledged their presence because I was so weighed down with my own shit I couldn't register anything but my own misery.

It took a very warm, kind, and patient friend to coax me back into reality. I vaguely remember my neighbor turned friend Myles telling me to man up and bounce back. Literally everyone who was still around me told me the same thing, and I was unmoved. But when Myles said it, I knew I had to dust myself off and find my way out of the slump I was in. It felt like my heart had the biggest hole in it; I had so many broken pieces that it seemed impossible to feel whole anymore.

However, my good friend Myles has a divine presence; not in a sense of cockiness but in a sense of you can feel Jesus' love through him. It's warming, but it's also intimidating because his energy is unexplainable. He radiates an energy that makes me want to do better for myself. And I know I should already want to do better on my own, but his energy adds an extra push that I think everyone needs sometimes, especially when we're scared. Myles can find greatness in everything; he's a very glass half full type of person, and that's encouraging. He finds satisfaction in the blessings that people tend to take for granted. He would remind me that God woke me up this morning, and he didn't have to, so we should always give thanks. He would also remind me that God granted me safety to come back home at night when someone else may not have. Myles always reminds me of that if I start to sound ungrateful. His friendship, his influence in my life has played a big part in me rebuilding myself when I feel like I'm starting from scratch, and he

helps me break down barriers. I'd often gone to Myles for advice because I was scared to do something different or defy expectations and his response was, "Do it. What do you have to lose?" I'd probably have a down payment on my 2023 Jeep Cherokee already if I had taken Myles's advice. His fearlessness is admirable, and I know it's because of his relationship with God.

Myles supports me and motivates me to be the best version of myself while reminding me that God is the center of my life. Whether it's midnight study sessions on Facetime, weekend sleepovers, or a nice workout in the gym, the love and support that flows effortlessly from him energizes me. But I'm not an easy person to guide. Sometimes I'm reluctant. After a lot of bargaining and pleading between the two of us, he has shown me new ways to cope with pain and still show up for myself every day. First, was my turn back to God. I remember feeling so ashamed that I hadn't spoken to God in so long. I felt like I was unworthy in his heart, but if you know anything about God, well my God at least, He is one forgiving and optimistic Lord. Once I got back into reading my bible and praying consistently, I felt this heavy weight lift from my chest. I learned to lay all my problems at God's feet, and the color came back to my eyes; I started seeing life again.

God seized the dull misery that once consumed me and turned it into new opportunities. I used all those broken pieces I'd been left with after my emotional those pieces to build something new. I claimed in Jesus' name that 2023 was going to be my year, and boy has it been. I have shown up for myself everyday even if it's small and I did not want to. I have been gifted with a discipline that led to new routines. These new routines helped me shed my old skin. I pour all my love into myself first. I have found a new wave of self-confidence in myself as I have always been shy and anxious. I now go to the gym every day and eat better. But I don't do all these things because I want to but because I must challenge myself to be better than I was yesterday. The question of whether I can really do this consistently pops into my head as anxiety sometimes leads me to wonder if I can be great. But I remember what Myles's response would be, "Do it. What do you have to lose?"

Every day is not easy, but that's why taking life one day at a time is a lot easier than dwelling on things I have no control over. But without God's glory, I probably wouldn't have the strength to show up for myself at all. Without Myles's guidance, I probably wouldn't have been reminded of God's love. I think being Black in America brings extra problems in our lives, so I do feel like having God, a God, or a religious aspect is important in navigating the everyday struggles that Black people face. Although I also know how the feeling of hopelessness can consume us, so maybe everyone just needs a Myles until they can find their God.

Life-Writing Art Project

by Tierra Brown, Undergraduate

Current Stage

I always tell people about my inability to tell a lie (never mind the fact that was a lie too). Sure, I can keep a little secret here and there. But when it comes to the big stuff, I am squealing like a pig. I'm on the phone with my mom telling her everything I swore I wasn't going to tell. Like how I'm failing a course, been skipping a class for weeks, and even the night I mysteriously blacked out. I blame it on the guilty conscience that's festered under the commands of my immigrant family.

It's a miracle I've kept my sexuality hidden for this long. My biggest and longest lie to date; pretty proud of myself if I'm being honest (I am being honest here lol, scouts honor). Unfortunately, I was not born into one of those open-minded and loving families who would accept having a "fag" for a daughter. I come from a succession of devout Christian, strong-willed, manipulative, judgmental immigrants. And the fact is those "aliens" come from an island where homosexuality is illegal and punishable by death? Yeah, no way in hell I'm telling those folks I mess around with girls on the side. Trust me this shit has not been easy. My secret is always on the tip of my tongue, waiting to be spilled. I yearn for the freedom to express my uncontrollable attraction to a girl. To speak on the stolen glances and secret touches that plague my mind. To explain in detail why I'm so upset over losing a close friend. But I remain silent for now. Not wishing to disrupt the peace.

I think I finally understand Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice) piece from 1991. It's worth keeping in mind the piece was created after Gonzalez-Torres lost his partner to AIDs. Taking inspiration from the Greek myth, Gonzalez-Torres channeled that same love, loss, and identity through "Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice). The piece consisted of two mirrors standing flush against a white wall with a small gap separating them. The presence of a viewer is reflected in one mirror while their reflection is absent in the other. At first, I didn't get the twin mirrors standing alone in that big room. What was the purpose? How could staring at myself be considered art?

People always ask me why I don't just come out. They're so sure my family will love me the same, and the roof over my head will remain. I guess I'm more caught up in the why. It's as if the queer experience can be summed up so simply. Am I to just accept the possible loss of my family in exchange for the love of a girl? Is loneliness not a common feature among the LGBTQ+ community? Won't I have to be conscious of expressing queer love in a

heteronormative society? In accepting my identity, what will I see? What historical reflections will I have to grapple with? How will the confines of my self-speculation expand when race and gender are considered? Perhaps denouncing heteronormativity is the key to that self-love and acceptance. Perhaps the narrative of my queer experience can be described as a gap. That is: the gap between love and hate, joy and pain, gay or straight, me or them.

Painful Beginnings

I was raised in a very large family. My grandparents had ten children--seven girls and three boys. With most of us living under the same roof at one point or another, chaos was always around the corner. There was always an adult around to step into the role of our parent. Of course, they always managed to show up at the most inconvenient times. Like when they'd catch me sneaking into the boys' room to play games and wrestle, or when my younger male cousins would come into the girls' room to play pranks. It's funny how separate they kept us so early on. No room for debate in terms of our roles.

Being a stubborn Taurus at heart, I caused a bit of trouble in my younger years. Making my cousins pee from laughter during nap time, gaslighting my grandparents, educating the young ones of all things unholy, and my absolute favorite: telling the adults no. Now that one always got my ass in trouble. Refusing to apologize for my "smart ass mouth", speaking out when I wasn't spoken to, hiding the ugly dresses and skirts I didn't want to wear, and not paying attention during church.

Church was a big thing in my family. I'm talking about family bible studies in our foyer every Wednesday and long Sunday services every week. I used to get away with sneaking my Gameboy into church to play, but eventually, I had to pay attention to the pastor's sermons. Sometimes I didn't mind it. I enjoyed singing with the choir, passing around the offerings, taking communion, and the usual stuff. Other times I felt absolutely sick.

I started my bi-debut as a homophobe. My favorite phrase was "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." We talked against homosexuality in bible study and read the scriptures that condemned it. I heard my aunts and uncles talk about how disgusted they were about seeing two guys holding hands on the street. I went along with it, "Yeah, fuck the gays." There came some point when I began to feel uncomfortable with the topic. Sometimes, it felt like the pastor was preaching directly to me about that atrocious sin. It's like he picked those teachings just for me. Staring into my soul as if he could see exactly what I was trying to hide. He could really see me. God could see me for exactly who I am. And I hated who I was. For it went against everything I was taught, against my family, against the world. It went against who I was told to be.

And so, I suppressed my sexuality. Kept it a secret for another time.

It doesn't really hurt me, having to hide this part of myself. I figured it'd be safer and easier given the fact the world is already against me for being a Black woman. I didn't think the Black community would be open to protecting sexuality either. Plus, I already have to keep up with the struggles of being in an immigrant family. I must get good grades, be successful, and take care of my family. I was preserving myself. I figure Pamela Thompson would ridicule me, judging by the words from her article *Self-Care According to Audre Lorde*. Might even call me a fraud. Thompson says,

The current and most often heard conversations on self-care seem to settle on girls' trips, spa days, and me time. We need to have some version of those components in our rotation as they, too, have value. But none of those are the focus of the kind of self-care Auntie Audre's principles encourage us to observe for ourselves. Her brand of self-care helps us guarantee that we'll be alive and present to enjoy those practices and, more, that we will create a livable future for the generations of Black and Indigenous generations following us. (Thompson)

Following the words of Lorde, Thompson concludes that self-care is not something that makes us feel good but rather sustains us. Self-care can't be something so simple and frivolous for our experiences are nothing of the sort. As Black women, we are fighting many different oppressions at an intersection. And so, you can't just separate a part of your identity and call it protection. It is understanding/learning ourselves, both against and within an oppressive society, where our power to be free and thus, resist, thrives. Perhaps I cannot stay wrapped up in the safe arms of my suppression forever. Maybe her arms were never safe. Maybe she was a boa wrapping her slithering form around my life. Constricting me until I'm forced to decide.

Rebirth

Now, I'm sure folks are probably wondering when I figured out I was bi. I don't blame you; curiosity did kill the cat. I was in fifth grade when I had my first official crush on a girl. Man, I was scared shitless. At that age, the things I was most afraid of were my family and God. Between getting an ass whooping or being condemned to hell, I wanted to run far away. I had a friend, Ava, who changed the trajectory of my life. I told her of my silly little crush, and she embraced me completely. She spent days tryna convince me to tell her, and I kept telling her how wrong and stupid it was. I'll never forget this one time when she pulled me into the bathroom after recess, and said she had something important to tell me. Ava looked deep into my eyes and said, "I have a crush on you." Shocked and a little confused, I told her it was ok

and I still liked her all the same. She says, "Exactly, that's the point." Ava grabbed me by the shoulders and told me that what I was feeling was perfectly, ok and I didn't have to worry. Overwhelmed with love and pain, I broke down. I knew everything would be all right.

I didn't know a single thing about being queer, but I sure as hell knew about research. I spent my days reading topics on sexuality, gender, flag colors, symbols; literally anything I could get my hands on. Through that process, I was finding myself and rejecting all the hate my family ingrained in me. I became more confident. Loved myself a little bit more. But I still struggled the most with my religion. When you're surrounded by scriptures and preachers rejecting who you are, it's hard to accept yourself. The thing is, I love God. But I also couldn't change who I was (trust me I tried). For a while, I thought the two could never exist together. After years of deep reflection and self-work, I got to a point where I was comfortable with my sexuality and beliefs. Granted, I still have a decision to make about my family and some internalized homophobia to digest. But look, I'm working on healing my past okay. Rome wasn't built in a day.

Alice Walker explores the long history of oppressed African American women and the actions they took to survive. I wish I'd had Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," at my disposal back then. In it she recalls the sad, hardworking past of her mother and the mediocre poetry of Phillis Wheatley. After reading it, I realized that the root of Black women's power is discovered in how they managed to express their creativity. To search for one's garden is to search for one's identity. I think that exploration is one of confrontation and hope. It takes courage to confront the beliefs that go against you. But when you discover your true self and hope for such freedom, your garden flourishes.

Healing Era

All my life I have been told how to act, how to walk, and how to talk. I think in the Black community, folks feel like they need to have a clear distinction between what is good and bad. These simplified boundaries are a set of rules governing what is socially acceptable. And don't you dare get creative, tryna go against the grain and be someone you're not. I've never been one to follow rules anyway.

I have a fantastic gaydar. I'm not tryna brag, but I seem to attract a lot of queer friends. Like we're all just a group of bisexual kids who get each other (most times). My friends are always confused when they learn of my religious background and homophobic family. I don't think they understand how someone can be so open and out, but silent and caged at the same time. I don't really have an answer for them, or rather, I don't care to give them an explanation.

You see, everyone will have some input about what they think is right or what I should do so let me just tell y'all this. Everyone experiences life differently. For me? My life is one of balance. I have an abundance of love and hurt for so many things in my life, you cannot ask me to choose. I have found peace and power existing in the in-between. Audre Lorde says it perfectly in her poem "For Each of You," "Be who you are and will be." Accepting that my place in the world is strengthened through my existence in it, and my resistance to it, it's about using everything that lives within you as a means to ground you while also setting you free. Lorde utters instructions for "protecting the place where your power rises/ running like hot blood/ from the same source/ as your pain." Using your struggles as well as your dreams is the key to how you thrive.

I cannot dismiss the identities and oppressions that shape my life. Realistically, I am a woman who is Black, first gen, Christian, and bisexual. Each of my identities overlaps with the other. How I navigate these spaces while simultaneously rejecting their flaws is how I find liberation and empower my being.

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Murder in Quaker Hill

by Zainab Samed, 12th Grade

REPORTING NEWS - At 8:47 a.m., “Billionaire Clara Hudson was found dead in her Quaker Hill home, by her maid, with several stab wounds. Detectives are working hard to solve the case and bring her killer to justice. Now, we turn to our analyst, who thinks it will take a detective with drive and influence to find the killer.” Jayla, who had watched the news, felt instant dread knowing she would be one of the first people called in for the case. Unfortunately, the buzz of her phone confirms that thought. She answers it, “Hello? Yes, I am on my way over to the station.” As she enters the Waterford Police Station, she is immediately greeted by her supervisor, and later, the Chief of Police. The chief tells her about the assignment. Jayla hesitates at first but agrees. Before she leaves for the crime scene, he adds, “We are in a time crunch. This must be solved within 24-hours; good luck.”

Jayla’s car pulls up and enters Clara Hudson’s driveway. The house is big and resembles classic Victorian mansions. Jayla is immediately greeted by Clara’s maid, Lea. A woman of average height, whose curly black hair laid down on her shoulders.

“Hello Detective, I am grateful to have you here.”

Lea opens the door to the mansion and Jayla follows her in. She is met by the eyes of a man with messy brown hair, tall stature, and a skinny build. Jayla shakes his hand, and he introduces himself as Henry.

“I will lead you to Miss Hudson's room.”

As the door to Clara’s room opens, Jayla immediately catches sight of items that stand out. She sees splattered blood on the white linen bed sheets and footprints scattered on the floor in the corner. She begins taking pictures of the crime scene for better observation by focusing her camera on the footprints on the floor.

Afterwards, she leaves the room and finds Lea and Henry again. She tells them she will meet them both individually in the dining room and asks for their numbers to contact them. She begins with Lea and asks, “How long have you been serving under Mrs. Hudson?”

“Over 10 years,” Lea responds with sadness in her tone.

“Where were you the night of the murder?” Jayla asks.

“I was locking everything up, and preparing to leave for the day,” Lea says.

“Did you by any chance hear another person come inside the house?” Jayla asks.

“Not really, the only other people who came in were Miss. Hudson’s nephew Henry and her boyfriend Jared, but they always enter through the backdoor.” After the questioning, she thanks Lea for the information and moves towards Henry. While approaching, she could hear him faintly talking on the phone.



“Who were you on the phone with?” Jayla asks.

Henry shrugged the question off and states, “Just an old buddy of mine, I am planning to go to Las Vegas in a week.” Henry takes Jayla to the living room area and sits her down on the couch. Jayla pulls out her notepad.

“When was the last time you saw Clara?” Jayla asks.

“I came to this house the day before to discuss an issue but left shortly after.”

“Why did you leave?” Jayla asks.

“Her boyfriend was in the house, so she put our conversation on hold and told me to get back to her later.” As Henry tells her this, Jayla looks around the house and spots a trophy case with awards in it. While looking closely, she sees Henry’s name engraved on one of them.

“May I ask what your profession is?” Henry chuckles. He tells Jayla that he is an amateur athlete who specializes in track and field.

“It doesn’t pay the bills, so my aunt usually helps me out sometimes.” Henry looks straight at Jayla. “You should go question Jared, he cheated on his wife with my aunt and is using her to become rich.”

Jayla nods and says, “I hope you don’t mind, but I have to confiscate your running shoes for observation.”

Later, Jayla met with Jared at his office for questioning. He was a man of short stature with black hair that was slicked back neatly and a trimmed yet full beard. “When was the last time you saw Clara Hudson?” Jayla asks.

Jared responds, “I was with her the day before. We were drinking and talking but were interrupted by her nephew, Henry.” She brings up his affair which he admits to being true. “I have information that can be beneficial to you if you do not air this out to the public,” Jayla listens in carefully. “You should keep an eye on Henry. I overheard him and Clara get into an argument about money,” Jared says. He tells Jayla about Henry’s gambling problem and how Clara was getting tired of giving him money to spend carelessly.

Jayla thanks Jared and leaves. She pulls out her phone and immediately calls Henry: “You omitted the part where you argued with your aunt.”

Henry responds, “It wasn’t necessarily an argument. She had promised me money but didn’t give it. That was all,” Henry replied. Jayla sighs and heads back to the crime scene to get a better look. While examining, she finds an open checkbook with a couple of checks missing. Immediately, she contacts the local banker and asks if any checks have been cashed recently.



The banker replies, “Yes, a check has been deposited in someone’s account today by Henry.” Later in the day, Jayla had gotten confirmation from the forensic laboratory saying that there was blood spotted on the running shoe and that they were testing it for whom it belongs.

When Jayla meets with Henry again, she tells him she traced the check. She tells him it led her to one of his gambling friends whom she spoke to on the phone. She continues by explaining that he was happy to have received the check, which payed all of Henry’s debt to him. She tells Henry, “It’s pretty hard to write a check as a dead woman.” Henry tries to point out that the signature on the bottom of the check was the same one Clara always uses and that she had given the check to him before the murder. Still pondering in her seat, she dismissed Henry. But as she retraces every step, she comes to a conclusion. Pulling out her phone, she calls the banker and rushes to her car to go straight to the station. Having finally figured out who committed the crime, she needed further confirmation with her evidence.

She returns to the victim’s house and sits Lea and Henry down at the dining table to discuss her conclusion. “Henry murdered Clara,” Jayla says. Shock fills the room as she continues to explain, “Your gambling habit quickly became an addiction, and since you don’t make enough money, you needed someone to help you. Your rich Aunt Clara was your last option. She may have given you those checks out of love as her nephew, but soon you realized you were out of luck when she refused to help you anymore. You, being desperate to pay off debt, became furious with her and you argued. Later, after she’d gone to bed, you stabbed her multiple times. Still desperate to pay off your debt, you took some of her checks. You didn’t realize that while sneaking into her room that you’d left footprints all over the floor.” Jayla pulls out the concealed running shoe, two pictures of Henry’s driver’s license, and the copy of the check from her bag. “Surprisingly enough, a bit of blood was found on this shoe and was traced back to Clara’s DNA indicating that you were in the room the night of her murder. Furthermore, the signatures on the recently cashed checks match your handwriting on your driver’s license.” Henry takes a moment, then hangs his head in shame. Immediately two police officers barge in, turn Henry around, and handcuff him.

“Henry, you’re under arrest for the murder of Clara Hudson,” says one of the officers. Just then, the chief of police approaches Jayla and says, “Great job on the case. Without your insight, perception, and enthusiasm we wouldn’t have been able to solve this so quickly. Take a day off, and we will see you in two days.”

Jayla responds, “Thank you, sir. I can’t wait to come back.”

It Was Supposed to Be Different

by Piper Jones, 10th Grade

Adeline had the perfect life. She had loving parents, who loved each other just as much as they loved her. Each morning, she woke up earlier than both of them just to make them breakfast. She always made waffles and bacon-- it was all she knew how to make.

"Mommy, Daddy, I made you breakfast, come try some!" Adeline shouted up the stairs to her sleeping parents. Despite making the same thing each morning, she was always excited to have her parents try her food.

They finally reached the bottom of the stairs and made their way to the table.

"Thank you, darling it looks delicious! Do we have any orange juice by chance?"

"Yes, yes of course Mommy I'll go get some!" She turned and excitedly ran to the fridge. They waited as Adeline poured two glasses of orange juice. When she returned, they hadn't taken a bite. "Don't you like it?" Adeline asked. They both paused and looked up from their food.

"It's amazing love. I don't know how you do it each day," Her father gushed as Adeline squealed from excitement.

"You're such a good cook darling. But what do you say tomorrow, I cook you breakfast instead?" Her mother offered.

"But why? Don't you like my cooking?" Tears welled up in Adeline's eyes.

"Of course, I love it dear, you just do so much for us I want to return the favor," Her mother responded.

"Mommy, I love making you food each day. Why would I stop?" Adeline stared into her mother's eyes.

"Sorry dear, I didn't mean it like that." Her mother turned to her food, before Adeline could ask another question.

Adeline stayed in the kitchen to wash the dishes while her parents got ready for the day upstairs. She always did the dishes. As usual, her parents had not touched any of their food. Then she sat down and ate some of the breakfast she worked so hard to make. She squealed with excitement after taking her first bite.

"Mommy! Daddy! Hurry up, I want to watch a movie," She called to her slow changing parents.

"Just a minute dear." She thought she heard from their bedroom. She sat down on the couch and turned on the TV as she waited. Clicking on Netflix and beginning to scroll. Just as she selected Home Alone 2, her parents appeared and sat on each side of Adeline.

"I know it's not Christmas, but I just love this movie so much! Can we watch it?" Adeline eagerly asked her parents. At first, they didn't respond. "Daddy did you hear me?" She asked again.

"Oh yes, I'm sorry love, of course we can watch the movie, whatever you want," Her father responded then turned towards the TV as Adeline started the movie. Adeline laughed throughout the movie, she found it hilarious. Her parents weren't laughing like she was, but Adeline knew they loved the movie.

Once the movie was finished, Adeline jumped off the couch, filled with energy. "Mommy. Daddy. Wanna come outside with me?" Adeline asked as she grabbed her parents from the couch and brought them outside before they had a chance to answer. "Let's play tag!" Adeline shouted to her parents. They didn't move, they just stared at her. "Come on, I'm it! You gotta run." Her parents smiled and turned to run.

"Well then come and get us!" They called in unison. Adeline ran as fast as she could to catch her mother. Her father was far too fast for Adeline to catch. She had almost caught up to her mother when she tripped and fell on the ground. Adeline started to cry. She called for her parents and they showed up by her side in an instant.

"What's wrong darling?" Her mother asked.

"Are you alright, love?" Her father questioned.

Adeline just sat there and cried waiting for her parents to embrace her in a hug.

"Why don't we go inside and have some lunch?" Her mother gestured towards the house.

"Okay, Mommy, I guess we can," Adeline sadly agreed.

As they walked back inside the house her mother asked, "What would you like for lunch darling?"

"I want pizza!!" Adeline exclaimed, Adeline made her way to the kitchen and pulled out all the ingredients for pizza dough.

The phone ringing breaks the silence.

"I'll get it, Mommy!" Adeline shouted even though her mother was right beside her.

"Alright dear, let me know who it is."

"Hello?"

"Hey Adeline sweetie, it's your Auntie. I'm just checking in. We've all been really worried about you since your parents died."

Running Out of Time

by Piper Jones, 10th Grade

Jasper Reed,

This is a letter from the Federal Government. If you do not comply within twenty-four hours, you will be terminated. As you know an infection has been spreading throughout the country and beyond. It is a deadly virus, a silent killer. We are still unable to determine how this virus is spread. But we are able to determine those at high risk of contracting this disease. You are one of them. Due to this you must go to the nearest hospital and present them with this note. They will then contact us as soon as this happens. As mentioned before if we do not receive a call within twenty-four hours, we will find you. Do not try to run. This is a matter of national safety and security.

Agent Audrey Steele, FBI

12:46AM

It's been a few months since the news reports came out and the world went crazy. I haven't left my house since. I was always paranoid, so my cabinets were stocked with all the resources I needed. But no matter how many times I have read this note it doesn't change. It can't be true I haven't seen another person in months there's no way I could have contracted it or even be at high risk. They're lying to me I won't go, I can't, I've heard what they do to people. So, I started packing, they can't find me if I never stop moving.

1:35AM

I don't know where to go first. I haven't had contact with the outside world since everything shut down. I don't know who is still alive or who's already dead, and if I'm at such high risk of contracting this disease what if I can spread it just as easily too? But I needed help, I couldn't do this by myself. Maybe I can't spread this "deadly virus," to other people by contact, what if it's hereditary? What if mom's still alive and she got the same letter? Or Jessica? I have to stop them before they listen to the demands. All my bags are packed so I filled my car up with as many of them as I could. And mom said the minivan was a dumb idea. But the car wouldn't start no matter how many times I pressed on the pedals. It's been so long since I last used it, it's probably out of gas and rusted. They live about 30 minutes by car, it's too far to walk on foot with all my supplies. But there is a gas station right up the road if I can make it there and back quickly maybe I won't be too late. I have never been much of an athlete, but mom always told me I should be. She wanted me to have a better use to my time. With my long and lanky build,



she said it'd be easy, but I just didn't see it. I ran up the road with a slight hill and it killed me, I was breathing so heavy and aching all over, I thought I was gonna pass out. Maybe this is a side effect of the virus? I thought to myself. But I couldn't stop, it didn't matter that we didn't leave things on the best of terms they were still my family, and I couldn't just sit around knowing they could die. So, I ran, and I ran as fast as I could all the way to the gas station. It was run down and old, covered in cobwebs and vines. The windows were broken as if it was robbed. I almost ran past it. I hesitated before going in. What if someone else is in there? What if they aren't friendly? But it was quiet, no movement, no noise, just silence. So, I opened the door and it fell off its hinges hitting me in the knee, leaving a mark. I don't usually bruise that easily. Another side effect maybe? But I ignored it, I had a job to do. I searched through the vacant station and found one full tank of gas and another one that was half full. It was more than enough. The leaves outside began to rustle it was the only noise I could hear. The silence made me uneasy so I left with just the two tanks and ran as fast as I could back to my car now with a slight limp from the massive bruise.

2:32AM

I was on my way. The car was out of gas but still in great condition in every other way, which was a relief, I was never the mechanic in the family. Most of my old friends told me staying close to home was a dumb idea. Mom could constantly check in and have you drive Jessica all over. But I needed loans for college, I barely passed high school. They hated me, always compared me to Jess my little sister with her perfect grades and perfect life. They thought I was the scum of the earth. So, I don't know if they'll listen to me or think I'm lying or trying to keep them from a better life. I know this is the right thing to do but what if they don't want to see me? What if they are doing fine on their own without me? I would never admit it if they asked but I miss them, more than anything. I turned up the radio so loud I couldn't even hear myself think over it as I drove. 30 minutes passed and I reached the house. The drive felt much longer, but the house looked as if nothing had happened. The blue paint was still shimmering, the lawn was mowed. Do they not know what happened? I stopped on the road, hesitant to pull in. What if they recognize my car? Will they even open the doors? I sat there for a few minutes as I worked up the courage to knock on the door. A voice I didn't recognize answered. When the door opened, she was there. My mom the woman who threw me away as if I was trash. She was confused and shocked to see me. She thought I came for her help. I gave up on that a while ago. I don't mention the note. She seems to not to be worried, or she just doesn't care. It's hard to tell sometimes. But I haven't seen Jess yet, but I swear there is someone upstairs. I tried yelling hoping Jess would hear my voice and recognize it. But she never came.

Mom forces me to leave, angry at the sight of me. But when she tried to shut the door I stopped it, begging her to let me see her. She slammed it harder the second time. This time I let it shut.

3:42AM

I sat there in the driver's seat of my car. The tears welling up in my eyes. All I wanted to do was help them. See my baby sister again. I thought to myself as the tears flew down my face.

4:25AM

I've wasted so much time on them already, it's killing me. I only have about twenty left before they come for me. I know I have to go, but I needed to see Jess, know that she's okay. Jess never judged me or thought the worst, she understood. So, I knocked once more. I shouted her name from outside banging on the door loud and aggressively. There was no response. I heard crashes from inside and a few swears from mom's voice. She told me to leave. But Jess was more important than any insult mom could come up with. My hearts drops. I know she's lying; she must be. I was firm or at least I thought I was. I was so desperate I would have dropped to my knees. Then the words she said sunk in. I didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say. My baby sister was gone, she was dead, and I never even got to say goodbye or see her one last time.

5:37AM

I got into my car, heard the engine grumble and I drove. I had to get as far away as possible. I had wasted so much time on a dead sister and a mom who was never going to want me or see me as more than a screw up. So, I just drove on the empty roads as fast as the car would take me until I ran out of gas.

6:31AM

Luckily, I was able to make it to a gas station before running out. I had made it thirty-one miles. But I had to keep moving, I had to get somewhere untraceable. This gas station was in better condition than the last, so I grabbed some more food just in case. Of course, it was just gas station food, but it was better than nothing. I had no idea where to go next with Jess gone and mom unchanged my options were limited. I could head to the coast, find an island in the middle of nowhere. I had to drive straight through though, no stopping if I want to make before twenty-four hours are up. But I'm tired, half asleep. I'll never make it far like this. I let my eyes close just for few minutes.

8:24AM

Shit! I slept for too long, it was just supposed to be a few minutes, ten tops. Instead its been two hours. I have to go right now, the longer I spend in each place the easier it will be for them to find me. I jammed the keys into the car and pressed the pedal down as far as it would go. I flew out of the parking lot and onto the open road.

9:48AM

This isn't working. I can only make it so far even with a full tank of gas. I need somewhere to go to hide out just for a little while. I won't always be able to restock my supplies, eventually I end up in the middle of nowhere. No food or water, no gas, and no energy to find any. I pull over onto the grassy side of the road to think. Mom was a bust! But maybe Rachel would help me? I thought. Rachel was my ex-girlfriend, I loved her, and she loved me. Sometimes I wonder what happened, one day she just ghosted me, pretended like I didn't exist. Every so often I would catch her smiling in my direction though, maybe it's a sign. She moved away junior year after my mom went crazy. I don't know if that was why. But Jess and her younger sister were friends, she said they didn't move far just switched schools. I sat there, trying to remember where Jess had said they moved to. Then it hit me, it was so obvious now that I remembered. I pull back onto the road and started my drive praying Rachel would help me.

11:21AM

So many wrong turns. I've wasted an hour trying to find a house that was barely thirty minutes away. This time I pulled into the driveway. It's been too long there's no way she'd recognize my car. I closed my car door and barking erupted from inside the house. She didn't have a dog last time I saw her. I knocked. When she answered and I ask her if she remembered me, she sounded scared that I knew her name. But when I told her mine, she yanked the door open, and her jaw dropped. Rachel showered me with compliments and then gave me a hug. She seemed like a different person. Then she invited me in.

12:05PM

When we get inside her house, she acted as if nothing has changed and the world is still intact. She was so oblivious to what had happened. She just looked at me waiting for an answer to each new question. I was so mad at her and myself when she left. I didn't want to forgive her, but she seems so sorry for it now. I wasn't sure if I should tell her or not. That the world shut down. That her parents are family are probably dead and that she could be next. Tears started welling up in my eyes so fast I couldn't control it. She offered to make me tea and muffins. I accepted. What happened to her? She used to be the life of the party, now she's making tea. I

accepted. What happened to her? She used to be the life of the party, now she's making tea. I guess six years does a lot to a person. I thought as I wiped the tears from my face. I knew I had to tell her, but I just wanted to savor this moment. So, I did.

1:45PM

I had hoped that moment would never end. It felt so good to feel normal. Talk to someone who loved me as much as I did them, and someone who didn't know. Someone who thought the world was still normal. But it was too good to be true. I couldn't tell her; she was happy and still full of life it would have killed her. She allowed me to take the gas from her car and fill up my tanks even though my car was only half empty. Rachel gave me the rest of the blueberry muffins. I didn't remember her being such a good cook. She also gave a map, said it could "help me wander," that's what I told her this was. Just as I opened the door to the driver's side of my car, she grabbed my arm.

I turned to look at her and she kissed me on the cheek and went in for the hug. I didn't want to let go. But I had to leave I had been here too long. So, I got into my car and drove.

2:46PM

I'm still so far away from the coast. There's no way I could make it before they find me. I haven't stopped driving since I left Rachels. The map has been so helpful, so many places are marked including her house. I had made it nearly twenty-four miles. The tank was full when I left, and I've only used about half. So, I keep driving, I can't let them catch me.

3:57PM

I'm so tired.

4:49PM

I can barely keep my eyes open. I've driven for another hour and the gas hasn't run out. The car slows, my foot still pressed on the pedal. What the hell? I get out and pop the hood and a puff of smoke blinds me. I back away waiting for the smoke to clear and when it does everything looks normal, at least in my eyes. I'll never be able to fix this, nothing looks broken. Is it tired? Do cars get tired? I laughed at my own joke. I realize where I am. We used to vacation here every summer. I leave my supplies and head to Jessica's favorite place.

5:32PM

I arrived at the park. I never understood why Jess loved this place so much. We had the same thing back home, but she always said it was different. I remember watching her slide down the slide. I missed our competitions on the swings and her trying so hard to swing as high as me. It was so cute when she

was mad. Then it sets in. She's really gone. No more hugs, no more swings, no more slide, no more Jess. I feel the tears well up in my eyes and I try so hard to hold them back but I can't. I let them slide down my face staining my shirt. I should have been there for her, maybe then she wouldn't be sitting in a grave. If mom even had the decency to bury her. I needed to grieve so I could keep going.

6:43PM

I stayed at the park. I swung on the swings and slid down the slide. All the things we used to do. But it wasn't the same anymore. I was on my own. Her smile wasn't there to make my day better. Her cute, annoyed screeches when she couldn't get as high as me were gone. But I had to keep going, for her. Live the life she got taken from her. So I kept heading towards the coast.

7:50PM

I turned down my music. twenty-four hours is almost up, they'll be coming soon. I didn't want to draw attention to myself. The government can probably find me in a matter of minutes and I don't want to make it easier for them. But then I heard sirens. I hadn't heard sirens in nearly two years. I panicked and drove the car off into the woods.

9:34PM

When I woke up everything was fuzzy. I didn't know where I was or what I was doing. I didn't know what time it was. I lay in the driver seat of my car for a few minutes and collect myself. As I tried to climb out of the mangled car a pain shot up through from my leg. I'm able to climb through the window with only a few cuts from the broken glass. I fell to the ground, my leg was gushing blood. I took off my shirt and wrapped it around my leg. I opened the trunk of the car and grabbed whatever supplies I could carry. I had to keep going. They are too close.

10:44PM

Everything hurts. But I can smell the salt water.

11:39PM

The world started spinning and I could feel myself falling. But I heard voices coming towards me, shouting something. I couldn't tell if they were government or someone else. But I had lost too much blood and everything went ...

12:54AM

The Black Experience

by Kimberly Yankson, 11th Grade



Stage One – Birth

Like everyone, life for the Black child starts at birth. They're born to a Black mother, and father. They are born to Black brothers and Black sisters, Black cousins, nieces and nephews. Life is context for the black family in these first moments.

Stage Two – Learning

The Black child grows to be knowledgeable. They learn about slavery for the first time. About Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, how Dr. King was a saint and Malcolm X was deemed a sinner in their eyes, because he wasn't complacent. The Black child learns the n-words and their derogatory origins. The Black child learns they are "different" but can't understand why. The Black child learns of the racism that occurs through their school environment and the excuses that come with it.

Stage Three – Acceptance

While growth still occurs, they learn to love what makes them who they are. They learn to love their hair, and its curls and coils. They learn to love their nose, their lips, their eyes of which they see the world and Black beauty. They don't mind the hateful words, continue to cover their ears and look straight ahead. To the black future.

Stage Four – Cracking

There is only so much you can ignore. Their words start to settle in. They hurt like whips, daggers, and nooses. The cracking stage doesn't last long. As strong as the Black spirit is, they're still vulnerable.

Stage Five – Keening

The Black child sees in the news, brothers, sisters dying at the hands of the police. Protests, riots, mourning, the keening phase lasts for too long. Because this is our reality.

The Unknown Stage — Future

This is our life, our world. We've had far too many chances to get it right. We've cried together, laughed together, healed together, and we make change forever. So, I look to all of you, and I tell you the story of a black child, and although we won't all live the same life, we all share a similar experience. So, I ask all of you in front of me, are you ready to create change?

Something Great

by Aniya Allen, 6th Grade

Hi; I am Iris. It is the year of 1953. You are on a journey with someone who will become someone great!

“Iris!” I jump. I unlock my door and run downstairs and into the kitchen.

“Yes, mother?”

“I need you to run to the laundromat.” She hands me \$5.00. “Go ahead and do this load, dear. Meanwhile, I’ll be cooking dinner. Move on now.”

After she finishes speaking, I run out of the door, hop on my bike, and ride to the laundromat. As I innocently approach the door a man in a security uniform stops me.

“Little girl, you must go to the Blacks only laundromat.”

Becoming upset and annoyed, I push him out of my way and walk in. He grabs my arm. I see him grab something out of his pocket, but I am distracted by others around me standing around and just watching. I feel pain on my arm and faint. All I can hear for those few seconds is people gasping and whispering. I wake up in a dazed state.

“Really Iris? All I asked was for you to get the clothes washed and dried, yet you come back with a bruise?”

“I’m sorry, Mama. I just couldn’t stand being treated this way because of my skin color.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart, just next time listen first and then come home to talk to me about it. I promise at some point in this world somebody will end this violence against our people.”

Eleven years later, it is the year of the Civil Rights Movement, and I am witnessing one of the biggest changes in history. For one, I am working towards becoming the newest graduate from Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in communications from hard work, persistence, and determination. Meanwhile, others have been doing major Civil Rights activism, more specifically the people involved were making change by boycotting and marching.



The Life of Lewa

by Erioluwa Shokunbi, 4th Grade



“Get out!”

“No! Lewa is my child too! This is my house!”

“I’m the one who takes care of our daughter! Pack your things and leave now! Leave Los Angeles!”

I woke up to the sound of arguing. My parents have been doing that lately and mostly during weekdays. The days I am supposed to be resting for school. And guess what? Today is Wednesday, and schools starts in--I look down at my watch--fifteen minutes? I haven’t even eaten breakfast yet! I rush down all thirty stairs. I live in a mansion, so there are many landings. Thirteen minutes! I quickly grab a glass and pour orange juice. I pour cereal in the bowl, grab a spoon, and start eating.

“Blech!” It was disgusting, but I ate dry cereal because I had no time. I threw the golden spoon into the sink and rushed out. Six minutes. School is ten miles away from my house, so I take my private helicopter.

“Lewa,” my mom yells after me.

“Coming!” By the time I’m near school, I only have two minutes left, so I rush to class. At first, it seems like no one notices my tardiness. But then, they get a whiff of my rose perfume, and all heads turn to me. Luckily, Ms. Zinglwinger is talking to Bryce about his “inappropriate behavior--bringing a dead cat to dissect instead of a frog. Ew! Her ten-minute talk gives me just enough time to settle into my seat. Instead of dissecting a frog, I helped a pregnant cat give birth to three kittens with the skills I gained in my special education. As a famous singer at the top of my class, I already know all of the parts of a frog.

While I’m walking in the hallway, everyone is asking me to tell my dad (the governor) to make their parents’ business have so much money that they could buy ten mansions. But I always have to say, “My dad didn’t become governor to make your parents rich.”

I finally reach my class and approach the door slowly. I reach the gym to find Mr. Shrizzi picking up dodgeballs and placing them into a rack. Once the whole class gets to the gym, he announces that we are going to play dodgeball and gives one of my classmates, Charlotte, a ball. Charlottes hates me for some reason, like I did something wrong. Okay, I may have beat





her in best looking teen three times in a row, but who doesn't like me? When she threw the ball at me, I immediately caught it and threw it at Jack. But he missed! Yes! I got one person out. Later, I win when Charlotte catches the ball and throws it towards me! It hit my face, and I bolted to the wall and began to feel dizzy. The room was spins, and I fall to the ground and scream, "Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

When I look at my shoulder, I see blood erupting onto it like a volcano. I look down and see that my foot is swollen and a little blue. Mr. Shrizzi called the nurse when Maddie told him what happened. Then, Maddie helped me walk to the nurse's office while rambling about how she can't believe Charlotte hurt me like this. I began to wonder if Maddie felt the same way I do, like an unfinished masterpiece. Well, that was until I fell on the bed! Even though I was afraid of the answer, I asked Ms. Callin a very important question, "Will I be able to walk again?"

First, she chuckles, then bursts into laughter. What is so funny? I'm seriously hurt here! Then, when she finally stops laughing, she says, "Yes, of course you will! You just can't stand on it for a while. Mostly because you sprained your ankle."

I groaned, "How am I supposed to see my fans, do my magazines, talk to my therapist, and tell my parents?"

"You'll have time for all of that once I wrap your ankle. I promise," she assured me.

"Thanks," I said. Then she gave me crutches and walked me out. Maddie was waiting right outside, and she was giving Charlotte the stink eye. Under different circumstances, maybe I could grow to like Charlotte. But she is so mean and bossy. And she is trying to convince the principal to expel me like I sent her to the nurse's office! My parents would kill me if I were expelled. Suddenly, the school day is over, and I climb into my helicopter to return home after a long day of being a famous kid.

When I arrive, my parents are both there and talking. Not shouting, just talking. Is something wrong with them? When I enter the kitchen, I knew that would have to make a fool of myself then post it on social media to refocus their attention. I wondered if there was another way because being a famous kid makes it hard to recover from such shenanigans. Stay tuned for another day in the life of Lewa.



An Exploration of Identity and Performance

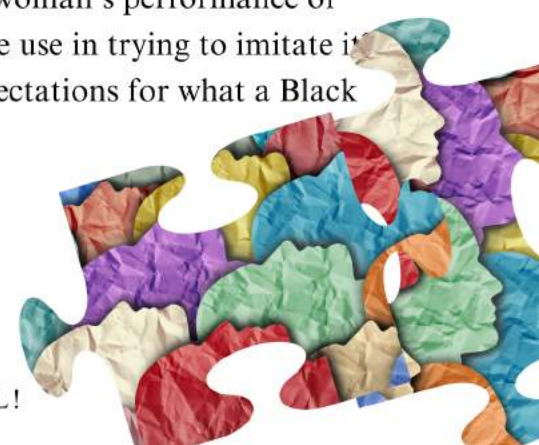
by Alaina Jhane Stevens, Undergraduate



I was always aware of my blackness; it took me getting older to become aware of my womanhood. It took even longer for me to realize my place in the LGBTQ community. When someone is asked to imagine a woman, chances are they won't imagine a Black woman. However, I always have. Women are often seen as a sort of second sex, and Black women are even lower than that.

Coming-of-age as a Black girl is an oxymoron in itself. Being a woman means being told to be feminine, and being a Black woman is often seen as the opposite. It's easier to get whiplash than it is to be Black and woman successfully. How is it possible for me to perform as this ultra-feminine creature when the misogynoir that comes with being dark-skinned is also breathing down my neck? Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* suggests that certain behaviors when performed by certain people are gender normative, but when people are non-conforming, they are socially punished. But what is non-conforming and what is the norm for Black women performing their gender? I can do my hair in all the styles I can, and dress however women are expected to, but when the day is over, and I look into a mirror what stares back will not be what a woman is thought to be. The theories written by white women "are inadequate for understanding the complexities of women's lives" (Namaste, 4, 21), they lack the nuance of having your race noticeably affect your everyday life.

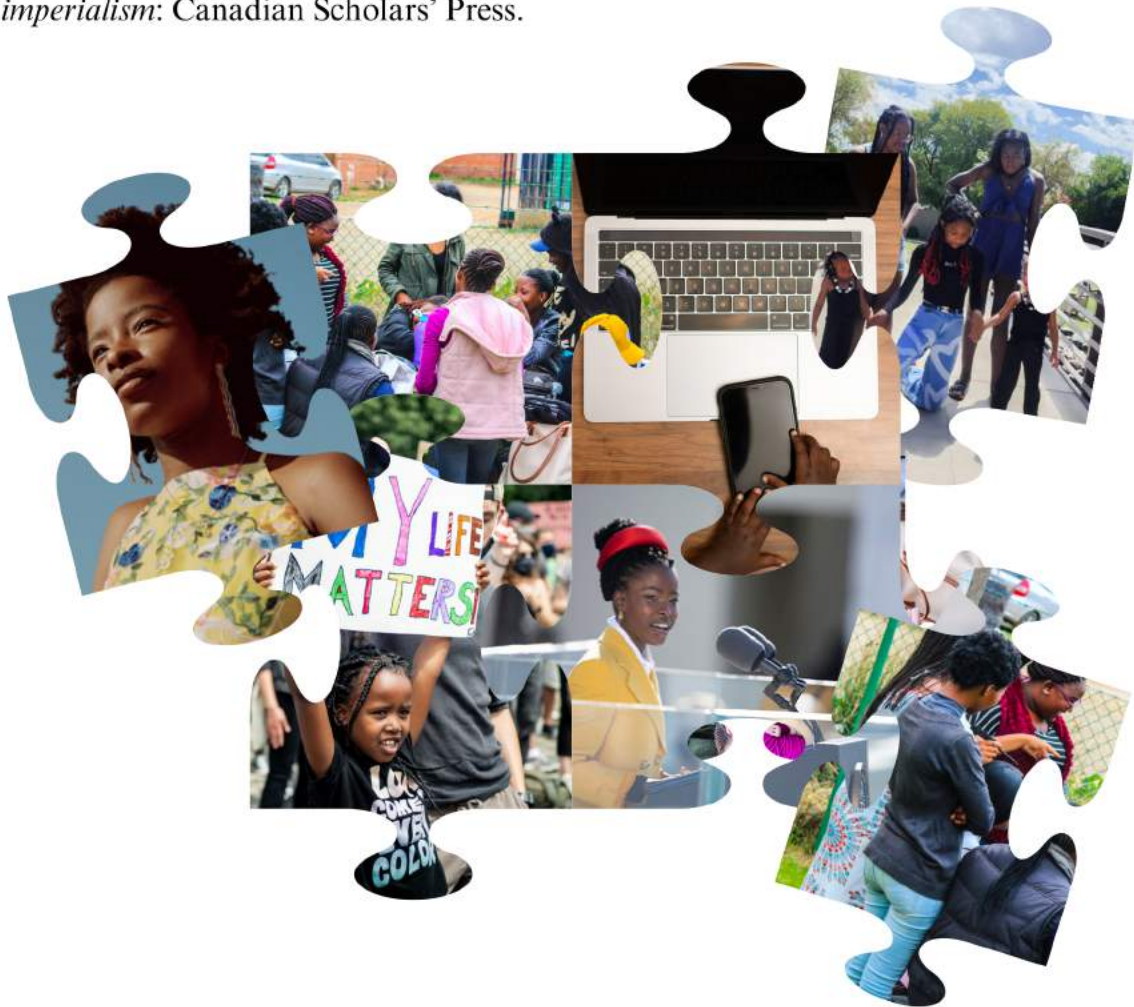
In the awakening of my inner erotic, I have begun to overcome being a woman and being Black at the same time. I instead have taken both of my identities and combined them to create a new one. In *The Uses of the Erotic* Lorde explains how "as women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge" (Lorde 29-38). The author goes on to explain that the erotic is not something of pornographic nature. In fact, porn is a perverted distortion of the erotic's potential. I'd like to think that I've begun to awaken the erotic in me. Through this, I've come to wear my Black womanhood on my sleeve. I perform my womanhood as much as other Black women do, unconcerned with what a woman "should be" according to social expectations. Any other woman's performance of what a woman is will never be seen the same as mine. So, what's the use in trying to imitate it? I've released myself from having to be a copy of other people's expectations for what a Black



woman is. I'd like to think that every time I decide to get another piercing or every time I shop, it's for me. When I move through the world, I don't think about whether or not I am being a woman correctly. In accepting that I am not a woman without being Black, and I'm not Black without being a woman, I've been able to move through the world hyper-aware of how everyone else's identities also intersect. The more aware I have become of myself and how I want to perform my gender, the more I've been able to open myself up to see how and why other people might want to perform their gender in the ways they choose.

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The Journey

by Nia Rackley, 9th Grade

I rip open the letter, anxious to see what is on the tiny piece of paper inside.

“If it’s green, I got in. If it’s not, I didn’t,” I mumble to myself over and over.

I know it’s not the end of the world if I don’t get in, but it almost sort of is. I’ve been eager to leave this town ever since we arrived last year. This is my first real opportunity to leave Bristol.

I want to slowly open the letter to make it more suspenseful, but the wait is killing me. So, I pull out the paper and flip it over.

“It’s green,” I scream so loud that I could shatter all the glass in the house.

“What was that” my mom asks as she runs down the stairs.

“I got into this program at my school called Projects Abroad,” I say excitedly. “I get to go to London for a month!”

“Oh, when do you leave?”

“I leave in two weeks.”

Mom looks concerned. “Who started this program? Who’s going to be there? Who’s chaperoning?”

Of course, she isn’t just going to be happy for me. She has to make this so difficult. “The school is taking care of everything, mom! This is such a great opportunity for me!”

“For you to what,” mom sighs as she puts her hands on her hips. “For you to leave this town and everything in it behind?”

“No, I just want to-,” I stop. I can’t lie to my mom. She knows me too well, and I haven’t exactly kept my hatred for this town a secret. “I just want to see the world a bit more. What if I really end of liking London?”

“Amanda, you and I both know that you’ve been trying to leave this town since we first moved here. Your dad and I have tried our best to make this a good experience for you, but it seems like you just don’t care.”

“Mom, I promise I’m not trying to abandon my family in this trashy town,” I say throwing in a small fib. But what my mom doesn’t know won’t hurt her. I still haven’t forgiven them for taking me away from my old life in Boston.

“I was just about to let you go until I heard the word trashy,” my mom says with a smile.

“Do you need to get your ears checked? I definitely said amazing. I would never call this angelic town trashy,” I say with an even bigger smile. “Don’t you want me to be happy?”

Mom looks skeptical, but I can see that my guilt-trip is beginning to work. “Fine, you can go to London,” mom says with a hopeful grin. “Is there anything I should sign?”

I’ll let you know when I get more information from the program,” I say. Mom looks nervous, but I’m too excited to care.

“Well, I’m proud of you, Amanda. I hope London is all that you expect it to be.”

“I hope so too,” I say with the biggest smile known to mankind.

Later, at dinner, I’m excited about sharing the good news with my dad and little sister. Now that I have mom’s support, I’m basically guaranteed to go. We’re eating my dad’s famous grilled steak with mashed potatoes and asparagus. As everyone is finishing their meal, I decided to tell them what was meant to be exciting news.

“Guys, I have something to tell you!”

“What is it,” asks Amy like she’s surprised that I have something to tell. I never really share much at our family dinners and it shows.

“Yeah, what is it,” Dad asks in the same surprised tone.

“I got accepted into this program called Project Abroad, so I get to go to London for a month. I’m going to see Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, and The British Museum! I’m leaving in two weeks!”

I expected to hear shrieks of excitement, but instead, I hear crickets.

“You what,” Amy and my dad say in astonished unison. You wouldn’t thought I was telling them I was getting married to an alien named Beep.

“What? What’s wrong,” I ask.

“It seems very prestigious,” says mom jumping to my defense.

“Uh-uh,” says my dad as he shakes his head. “You’re not going anywhere. Did you ask for permission to apply?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly, but mom said-”

“Well, I’m your father, and if I say you’re not going, then you’re not going.”

At this point, I wish I could smack his stern face, but instead, I play it cool, and just agree with him.

“Okay, well, I’ll have to let the school know then.” I keep my face neutral.

“Then you do that,” my dad says firmly.

So, I grab my plate, throw the rest of my food in the trash, wash my dish, and head to my room. Not to cry, but to scheme. If there is anything I can do that’s going to get me on this trip, it will be my incredible scheming skills. Because, let me be clear. I’m going on that trip.

Once I get to my room, I’m already in brainstorming mode. I plop down on the chair in front of my desk, open my drawer, and pull out my journal. All my best ideas come from this journal: poetry, drawings, my goals, and my best laid plans.

Usually when I'm scheming, I ponder for a couple of days, and then write a list of my options. From there, I narrow it down based on practicality, and just like that, I have the best plan ever.

Since I'm in a time crunch, I immediately start writing a list of my options. I cross out all of the impractical ones like escaping in the middle of the night and catching an Uber to the airport, or not speaking to them all week hoping that they'll allow me to go. After that, I'm left with only one choice: prove to my parents that I deserve to go on this trip. My sister, Amy, will obviously talk them down, but have to try anyway. Going on this trip is too important for me to simply give up.

I stand from my desk chair and fall back on my bed with the biggest grin on my face. I'm going to London!

Someone knocks on the door, which completely pulls me out of my London trance.

"Come in," I say as I sit up and lay on my pillows.

Amy slips through the door with an irritated look on her face. That look alone is enough for me to know why she's here. When I first found out about the program, Amy told me specifically not to apply. I obviously didn't listen to her advice. Now that I've been accepted, I know she's going to make this difficult for me.

"Do you regret applying to the summer program now?"

"Actually," I say as my big spreads across my face again, "I really don't. I have a very strong feeling that I'm going to London this summer."

"You really don't know when to quit, Amanda."

"You know, for the first time in a while you might actually be right. I don't know how to quit, but I don't think that's a bad thing! I'm finally going to be able to leave this god-awful town, so why can't you just be happy for me?"

"Because running away from your problems doesn't make them go away, Amanda!"

It takes a minute for Amy's words to hit me. I've spent so much time wanting to get away from this town that I didn't even think about the fact that I would have to return eventually.

“You need to learn how to deal with your life here before you leave; if you leave.” Amy says this in a condescending way that makes me want to hate her, but also in a loving way that makes me want to hug her.

Even though she’s right, I can’t let her have the last word. At least not now.

“It’s not even your problem to worry about. Why can’t you just let me live my life?”

If that’s what you want, then fine. But don’t come to me for help when you’ve messed everything up.

Amy storms out of my room, making sure to slam the door shut.

I’m starting to realize that going on this trip won’t solve my problems. It’ll only make them worse.

When I came to this town, I was optimistic for a fresh start. To forget about all of my past and live the life I’ve always dreamed of. I wanted to feel free, but I can’t put the past behind me until I come to terms with why I don’t want to be here.

Black People Matter Because Black Women Matter

by Amelia Mercy, 8th Grade

Everyday some of us have to experience unbearable moments. For some, it's being discriminated against, for others it's losing a mother. And for all, it can be almost preventable. The movie, *Aftershock*, expresses the concern Black people have regarding the rising problem of neglected Black women who aspire to be mothers. It also highlights the dark history that lies in the gloved hands of white midwives in the 80s and today.

Racism was supposed to have ended years ago, yet Black people are still worried about being mistreated or ignored. According to *Aftershock*, Black women were constantly used as guinea pigs to provide better healthcare solutions for white women who would soon give birth. For this reason, Black women would be forcibly put into labor. They would be cut open and examined for solutions to modern-day problems. Many people thought this process was both clean and painless, but they were, in fact, wrong. When white men performed s on Black women, they used little to no anesthesia, and they had little to no concern for what would happen to their bodies. As long as they produced more people to enslave for their profit, the women would be kept alive.

As Black women continued to give birth to dozens of children, they developed ways to help themselves. They created their own community of midwives to support each other through this process. Once they established this community, many African American women could give birth naturally without the extended torture of their bodies, without being torn up by experimental tools. Women like Margaret Charles Smith had helped her community by developing the company so-called "Granny Midwives."

In the year 2023, despite all the past complications of racism and all the previous discussions about complicated healthcare, we still have not created laws to combat these complications. Young African American women like Shamony Gibson and Amber Rose Isaac have suffered the consequences of a healthcare system corrupted by petty racism. These two women had successfully given birth in a hospital but had not survived the days following their birthing because the doctors show the same eagerness to solve their problems that they had shown to their white patients. Millions of children today are in orphanages or are motherless because of someone else's lack of care. Some of them can't even remember their mother's face because they were so young, while others were old enough to mourn the soft touches of her hand. Almost all African Americans across the United States have experienced unfairness in the healthcare system, whether in the emergency room or in the privacy of their



own homes. An example of this is that nurses still allow residents to practice their skills using Black patients. It shouldn't have to happen, but it does, and it's going to keep happening unless there are laws to protect them.

The reason why most African American women are dying after or during childbirth is because of the high maternal mortality rate in America. Additionally, African American women are not being listened to, which results in preventable deaths. According to [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov), "Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than white women." This is a shocking statement that shouldn't be true. What makes this statement astonishing is not that it should be a lie--it's because it could be prevented.

The same events of Black, African American women undergoing forced C-sections are more common today than before. It is barely even a choice in some cases. And black women are supposed to trust the same people who are putting us in unfortunate positions? They are also deceiving us by providing misinformation. Some nurses don't inform us about the pros and cons of C-sections and "natural births." For example, they fail to inform us that a vaginal birth is safer due to less exposure to bacteria in the air. However, they will certainly inform you about the fact that a C-section is cost-beneficial, especially when you have insurance, and they exclude the fact that hospitals get paid more for C-sections. It's the things they hide that kill us Black people, it's the things we need to search for ourselves because not all healthcare professionals are going to do it for us.



Mech-Frame Freedman Spitfire

An Afrofuturistic love letter to Black Power and 80's mecha anime


by Robin Grange, Undergraduate

I argue that for this project to be successful... we must first recognize that the future is black and beautiful." The captain pauses for a moment to look us over her eyebrows knitted together in a stern expression. We're a ragtag group in mismatched patchwork uniforms, a sharp contrast to her nearly pristine outfit. Some of us standing before her are young, while others stand tall and firm with their age, but we all hold the same determination in our eyes. Hers seem to look past us, beyond us, into something right behind the walls of the Lion's hanger bay. "I argue that we belong out there beyond the stars, that we cannot—shall not—be held down by that little thing called gravity."

Her hands stretch out towards the ceiling before letting them fall back to her side and continuing her briefing. "Gravity has been used to keep us down. It has been used to claim that our rightful place is face down in the dirt. While others may face and overcome gravity, or even exploit its force so they can settle among the stars—we are not allowed such a privilege." There's venom in her words, a kind of sharp, stabbing personal pain that I can't hope to understand but am all too familiar with from my own experiences. "I argue that we must escape the bonds of gravity before it snatches our very souls and drags them down to the pits of hell. Gravity haunts us. Chains us... A black hole that will bind us to a subservient role."

"I have no fear of death," It feels like she's looking at me as she pauses before us. "-because gravity has already killed us all. Stripped us of what it means to be human. While we are bound to it, we are open to exploitation, to use and abuse, and to violence..." My fist clenches as my suit feels hot and tight. Deep in my chest something is smoldering, each word from the captain intensifies that low flame until it starts to blaze hotter than my body can handle. "No. More. We must break that chain, but more importantly than that, we must show other how they might break it. We must educate and elevate, lift one another up into the sea of stars where we belong." I can feel a wave of something surging through each and every one of us. The fire inside of us becoming roused to the point where it threatens to engulf the entire vacuum of space with its splendor. Everyone stands a little taller and burns a little brighter, yet we all stay taciturn as we await the rest of our mission's briefing.

"Our mission is simple." She continued while our spirits flared, "Colony 14 is in the midst of total social upheaval. It has been three months since the water system was infected with toxic




chemicals from the Goldwater Energy Plant, and yet the Corporate overlords managing the people there have refused to do anything about it. Three months of suffering, three months of protest. And it seems like they've finally had enough. We've received word that the Taurine Conglomerate has decided to mobilize their security force to quell these protests. I don't need to tell you what they mean by quell if I tell you what they're bringing with them. Mech Frames equipped with "non-lethal" weaponry, bombs, and Neutralizing gasses. It is evident that "quell" to them is synonymous with "slaughter". Our more legislative sisters-in-arms already appealing their case for proper laws and regulations to protect the marginalized and affected people of the colony, but if these protests stop there's no telling if there will be enough force to propel that legislation. That's where we come in. We are to intercept their frames with our own before they can reach the colony, and then disable the cannister transport before they can quell the rightful rage of the people. We have three hours until reaching the interception point, that means two hours of preparing your suits and one of recreation before launching. Utilize it well."

"Keep this in mind. Though we may stain our hands darker than black, we must do what we can to protect our autonomy. To protect ourselves. We must grasp the chains of gravity with our own hands, kick, scream, and fight like hell so that we might escape its clutches. The stars aren't just for the corporations, or for those in power, the stars are for us. Not for us to claim, but for us to be uplifted into. We must fight to make them realize that."

Truth be told, but after the captain's speech I had tuned out the rest of the briefing. Call it reckless, but our strategy was simple enough for me to only half-listen to. Every team had their own personal orders, some remained behind for them, while others were already intimately familiar. My team is the main assault squad— or rather the bait as always. It's not because we're unreliable, past missions have proved the opposite. It's just that we're damned good at keeping the enemies' attention.

Despite being a small group, we're a perfect trifecta. While everyone aboard the White Lion has their own story behind why they joined, M'Cah's takes the cake as one of the coolest. He's the oldest one among the three of us by at least a dozen years, but he sure doesn't act like it. The captain might get on my ass about being reckless, but my stunts pale in comparison to his. M'Cah wouldn't hesitate to charge into an army of security goons if just one of them just so happened to look at him funny. According to the man himself, that boldness was forged during his time on Colony Four.



In most colonies, parents threaten to send their misbehaving kids to Colony Four if they keep acting up, and that always manages to set them straight. The conditions on C4 are legendarily horrendous. Those assigned to work there rarely make it out alive, and those that do end up coming back never return as themselves. Mercury practically gets blasted by the sun's radiation, and the harsh sandstorms can strip your skin raw in a matter of seconds, and yet that hostile environment is only the second worst part of working there. The corporate foremen in charge of the mines somehow manage to prove more threatening to the workers' well-being than the constant threat of fourth-degree sunburn.

Of course, most of the workforce isn't there voluntarily. The majority is made composed of prisoners forced to gamble their lives day in and day out with M'cah having belonged to that particular category. I don't know what landed him a sentence there, and honestly, I don't care. The specifics don't matter to me or anyone else aboard, and they most certainly don't matter to the Corpus that imprisoned him. No one would voluntarily want to work at Colony 4, so the Corporation and their governments prey on those who don't have any other choice. The ores there are a vital part in forging the alloy necessary in constructing mech-frames and starships, never mind the high fatality rate from just one expedition. Human life has a pretty good exchange rate in the materials market apparently.

M'cah doesn't tell a lot of stories of his time at Colony Four, and we don't ask him about his experiences just the same. Fortunately, we can't make him shut up about how he escaped. One day he noticed an old BPP-011 Mech Frame left unoccupied. He hijacked it before the guards noticed and brought down the whole mine as he bashed his way out. He fought to hell and back to hold off the Security forces once they mobilized all so the other miners could escape, before blasting off in the frame to escape himself. It's a miracle he survived and evaded Security for so long. By the time we found him, the frame was just shy of being considered scrap metal, and the man himself was barely faring any better. He had been drifting in space alone for days without food or water, it didn't take long for some of us to realize he only intended to escape his enslavement without much thought paid for what happens afterwards. He intended for the sea of stars to take him away into freedom, not to be confined any longer. I'm glad we saved him though, even if it means he has to stay aboard a cramped ship full of militia soldiers and refugees. It only took a few weeks for him to start smiling and joking around, and he's a big help with keeping the refugee kids aboard in line. Not to mention he knows his way around heavy machinery, he'd be a great engineer someday, and in a fight his boldness always manages to spur us forwards.

The second leg of our trifecta is Fu, short for Afua. She has an old-school name because she's from Earth, so she shortens it to... fit in more, I guess. Anti-Earth sentiments are pretty common on the ship, while Terrestrians aren't necessarily our enemy more often than not the structures we're rebelling against are of Terrestrial origin and directly benefit those living on Earth the most. On a ship full of Spacenoids who have been discriminated against by the Terrestrial Corporate Government and its stuck-up terrestrial oligarchs in charge of managing colonies, it's kind of hard to make friends when in their eyes you're someone who has benefitted from their suffering. Fu's always been given the cold shoulder aboard the ship. She says it doesn't bother, but it bothers me a lot.

She's the person here I trust the most.

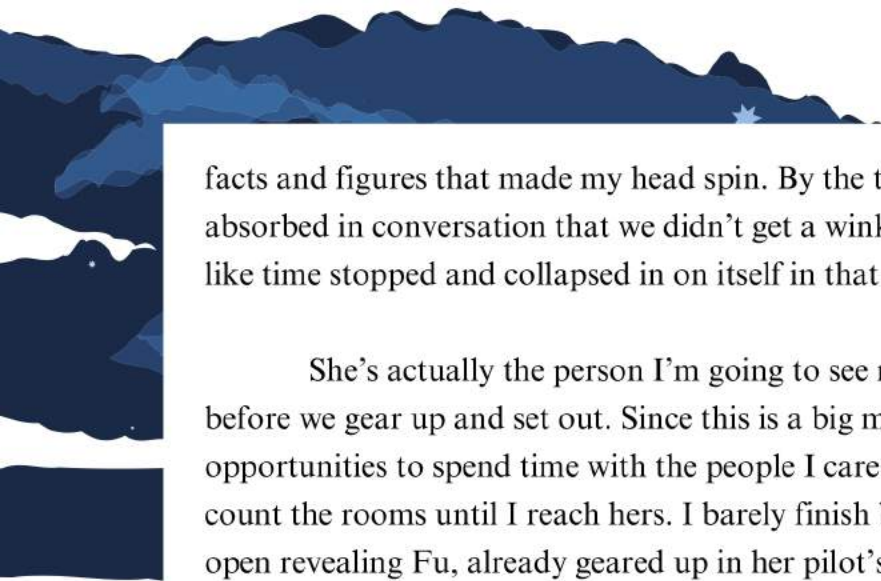
I'm not gonna say I'm wholly innocent here, back when Fu first joined I harbored the same contempt for her as some of the other's aboard. Part of it was envy, I thought that she was an ungrateful spoiled brat who didn't appreciate how good she had it on Earth. Though eventually I softened up to her, she's saved my ass too many times during dogfights, so I'd feel kinda guilty if I kept treating her badly. I'm glad I did because getting to know her has been... pretty nice to say the least.

First of all, she's a total tech wiz. Half the reason we're able to keep the Lion up and running is because of her expertise. Every mod for our mech-frames passes by her first just to make sure everything works right. Without her we'd be falling apart at the seams. That's not to mention she's a good conversationalist. I found that out on a night when I couldn't sleep and decided to sneak myself a midnight snack. That's how I found her in the commissary surrounded by half-eaten food and half-finished blueprints totally engrossed in her work.

Sometimes in life you are presented with scenarios where you have to weigh the pros and cons of your actions. At that moment, I decided it was definitely worth it to sneak up behind her and give her a scare. That's how I found out she has a REALLY good right hook. Still totally worth it.

After that though, we spent the entire night chatting. I asked her about what she was working on, and her eyes lit up in a way that I couldn't describe despite having that image burned into my memory. From that point on, she couldn't stop talking about the intricacies of designs, meanwhile I did my best to keep up despite feeling like I was being bombarded with






facts and figures that made my head spin. By the time it was lights on we were so totally absorbed in conversation that we didn't get a wink of sleep. We didn't really need to. It felt like time stopped and collapsed in on itself in that moment.

She's actually the person I'm going to see now. We have about an hour of recreation before we gear up and set out. Since this is a big mission, I don't want to miss out on any opportunities to spend time with the people I care about. The corridor feels so narrow as I count the rooms until I reach hers. I barely finish buzzing the ringer before the door slides open revealing Fu, already geared up in her pilot's suit.

"Hey." She says both tense and at ease, and I can't help but feel the same.

"Hi," It's short, but it's the only word that comes to mind. She invites me in, leading me to carefully trapeze between the pile of junk littered all over the floor. Little drones, scrapped devices with some very concerning warning signs, and abandoned projects cover almost every square inch and I'm scared that stepping on even one of them might cause the entire room to blow up.

Or Fu would yell at me for breaking her things. That one is probably the worse outcome.



I manage to reach her bed and plop down, breathing a sigh of relief at having successfully navigating the minefield that is Fu's room. She sits beside me like there isn't the threat of shocked by a loose wire if you make the wrong move. We sit in silence for a bit, neither of us willing to make the first move nor shatter the comfortable quiet surrounding us.

"What do you think about the captain's speech?" Fu breaks first and I smile leaning back against the wall.

"Not gonna lie, I kinda tuned out all the extra stuff." I admit a little sheepishly giving her an amusing look.

"Come on S'lene," She admonishes, "it's not extra. It's important."

"I know, I know. If we weren't about to set out, I'd probably be kicking myself for not

paying attention, but there are other things on my mind.” Lots of other things. I look around, my own room is spotless in comparison to hers. After all, if things go south, I don’t want to force anyone to sort through all my belongings. My face scrunches up a bit at the thought.

“I—see what you mean.” I swear she’s a mind reader sometimes, “It’s terrifying. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I’m still scared of going out to fight.” I look over at her, she has this darkness in her eyes that I can’t quite define. Not in the same way as her brightness on that night so long ago, instead of looking at a supernova, I feel like I’m face to face with a black hole.

“That’s good.” I offer her a reassuring smile and build up the bravery to put a hand on her shoulder. “That means you don’t like it. I don’t think anyone should.”

“Look at you, having another good point.” She shrugs off my hand before punching my shoulder playfully which only makes me laugh. “You sure you’re not a corporate spy disguised as S’lene.”

“In your dreams.” I say in a low, teasing voice.

That seems to calm the storm brewing behind her eyes, and I catch myself staring. When she seems to notice I turn away as quickly as possible trying to hide a flush of color that I can feel blooming on my face.

“Back to the Captain’s speech though... I never thought about space like that. I always thought of it as this... black void that we had to fight against just to survive.”

“Ah, uh... guess things are different on Earth.” I draw my knees in and hug them against my chest. “What’s it like?” Earth was always this far off, unattainable thing. Back when I was just a little girl growing up in the neighborhoods C6 my gramps was always talking about his time serving as a pilot for the Defense Force, at least before it got contracted into the corps’ security squad. He always made it seem like paradise with trees and wildlife as far as the eye could see. I would sometimes lay awake at night just imagining what the ocean was like. My opinions have soured a little since then, but I can’t get rid of that stubborn fondness just quite yet.

“It’s not the utopia the corps make you think it is.” See what I mean about her being a mind reader? “Most of the planet is in shambles and people are barely able to scrape by. The first time I set foot on a colony I nearly cried from just being able to breath clean air. Meanwhile all the execs sit comfy in their dome cities, profiting off our suffering.”

I’m quiet for a minute, weaving together the right words to express what I’m thinking right now. “To us born in space, it’s always been this... this dream. But after a while, it seemed like more people were worried about the wellbeing of that dream than us out in the colonies. Ask anyone aboard and they would probably think it’s the whole reason why we must fight in the first place.”

“I guess the captain thinks the same... but I can’t really agree.”

“Why?” That makes me sit up. “It’s like you said, Earth sounds like a place where the only direction you can go is downward.”

“Maybe. Maybe we DO belong in the stars... but... we all come from the Earth, don’t we? Even if you’re not born there, we’re all connected to her. We all share its past, even if it chains us down, it’s also the place where we came from, isn’t it? Isn’t that another way to think about Gravity?”

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s... hard to explain.” She says conflicted. Her eyes drift upward to some point on the ceiling that I can’t quite discern. “I know! Do you ever feel a weird tingle when you pilot? Or just know where something is going to be intuitively even if you can’t see it on the camera feed?”

“Yeah, that’s a common thing for pilots.” At least, that’s what I figure. Grampa always told me stories about how when things looked their worst his hands would just move on their own and help save his ass.

“There’s this theory that the instinct behind that is something we’ve always had, buried deep in our bones. But when we started settling outside of Earth’s atmosphere, we needed it again. And as time went on, it adapted to the new environment just like us. My weapon system is based on that theory, it reads my brainwaves and relies on my own intuition to help cover me. And sometimes... it feels like it lets me see things.”

“What kind of things?” I ask. My head is swimming with skepticism. Stuff like this belongs in war stories, not coming from the mouth of a scientist.

“Like... the past. Or the future. Or both at the same times. Like I’m haunted by a ghost of everything that’s gonna be and has been. It’s just a feeling, I can’t put it into words, but when things get like that it feels like I can just... grab onto that past and have it pull me forward.” She leans back with a sigh, never breaking her gaze from that point on the ceiling. “I’m probably talking nonsense.”

I smile, “You never talk nonsense.” I let my head fall to rest on her shoulder and spend the rest of our recreation time like that.

The BPP-013 Freedman series of Mech-Frames were originally designed to be used primarily as mining tools, with some supplementary features for rescue missions in particularly harsh environments. Unlike the Mech-Frames contracted to the military for combat purposes, these suits were usually bulky, slow, and clunky as hell to operate. While their mining lasers packed a punch, they were hardly as precise or efficient as the military grade beam rifles most other frames came packaged with. What make them unique is their modularity. They’re meant to be customized to function on almost any kind of atmosphere imaginable, and as a result are compatible with virtually any kind of machinery even parts from other frames. Despite that, they’re still not intended for combat, the internals of each behemoth aren’t nearly as optimized as the combat-oriented ones.

Unfortunately, frames like this were the only ones we could acquire in our crusade for self-defense.

Some of us take pride in that by saying that we’re weaponizing the tools of our oppressors against them. That we’re using them to bring peace.

But they’re still weapons at the end of the day, aren’t they?

It’s ironic, isn’t it? To be forced into such a position where in order to safeguard our own wellbeing we have to arm ourselves with the very same weapons that get us killed. Part of me can’t wait until we can just be rid of them and let them rust away. It’s funny, growing up I

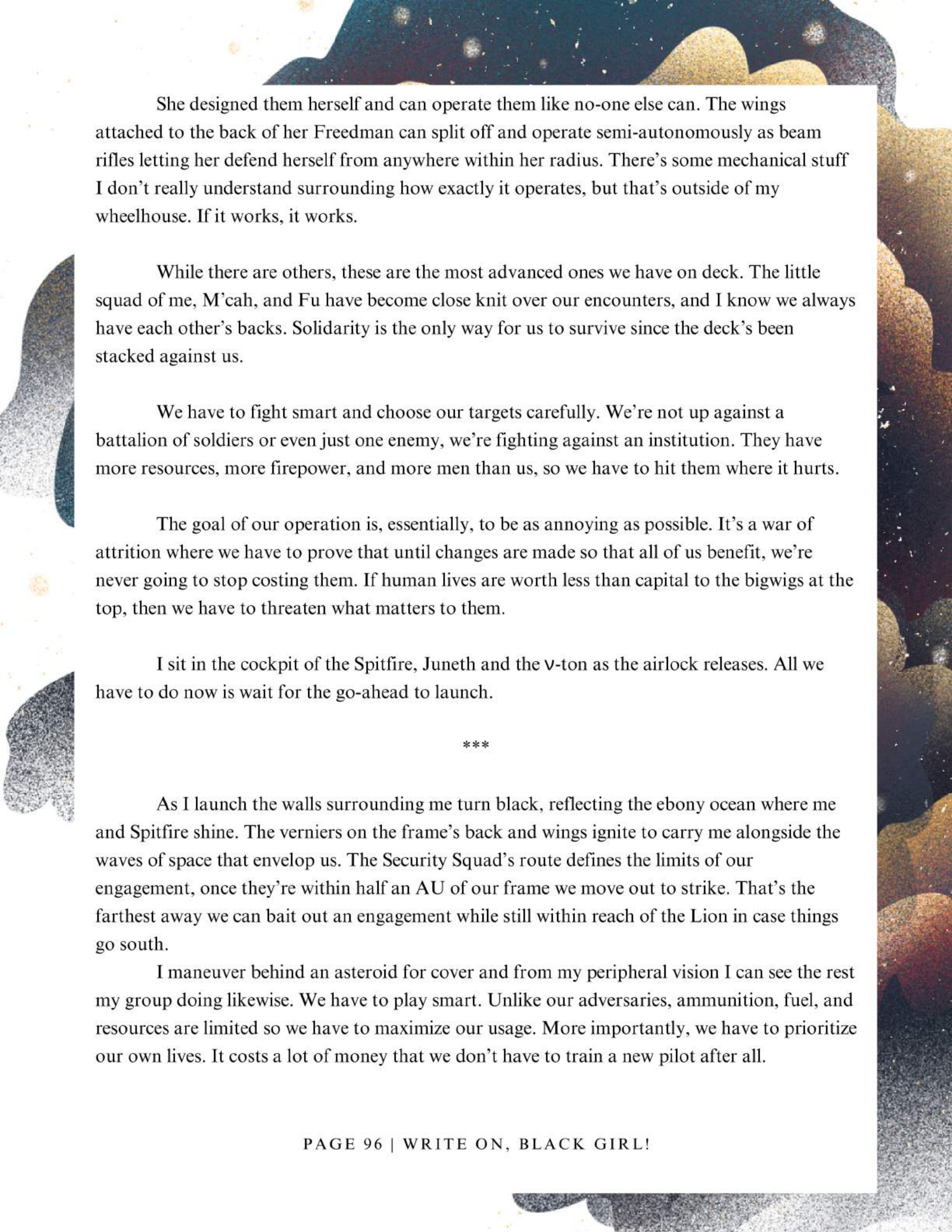
always wanted to be a pilot like grampa, now I can't wait to never set foot in one of these things again.

Despite that, part of me has grown fond of these machines. They've been customized to the point where they're almost unrecognizable from their base models. Slapdash paintjobs, weapon modifications, and frame adjustment make these things feel like an extension of their pilots. Like its hands are your own. Maybe that's why we designed them to be shaped like us. Most models are decked with armor to protect the complex machinery underneath, and they all end up looking like old school knights from ancient history books. Even if most are weapons of war, it's almost like they were made to remind us of who exactly are sitting in the cockpits.

I've appended the name Spitfire to mine. "BPP-013 Freedman Spitfire", it's a bit of a mouthful, but I think it has a nice ring to it. I've spent hours painting its armor a radiant black with hints of gold. Not only does it blend in with the space surrounding it, under the lights of the hangar it almost sparkles with its glossy finish and golden shimmer. The sharp, angular armor pieces help improve its aerodynamics, not to mention it looks damn cool. A while ago we managed to scrap a new model with some pretty slick wing boosters, and after a lot of work I managed to stick them on Spitfire's back. Now it's as quick as a shooting star and hits as hard as one too. Its mining laser been amped up too, while it's not nearly as precise as a true beam rifle, it hits harder than those ever could. This thing's helped me survive countless skirmishes; I'd almost feel bad about having to abandon it.

We have a few other BPP-013s, all modified to the point where they no longer even resemble their base models, much less each other. While my Spitfire is sleek and agile, M'cah's Freedman Juneth is a hulking behemoth even among giant mech standards. It's big arms were from a giant hostile unit which our best weapons barely managed to scratch. But we're nothing if not stubborn, and eventually we wore them down enough to blast 'em off. Even after the beating they took, they're still sturdier than anything on the ship, so M'cah decided they would work great as an upgrade for his frame. I think it's fitting. M'cah's scars run all up and down his arms, I think some part of him wants to turn it into his strength. Now Juneth packs one hell of a punch.

Fu's Freedman Hew v-ton (that's Nu, apparently it's supposed to represent freedom or something) is probably the one that looks the closest to the original models. The head, arms, torso, waist, and legs all haven't been modified too much with some pieces having been replaced for slimmer, more lightweight alternatives. However, hers really stands out due to its weaponry.



She designed them herself and can operate them like no-one else can. The wings attached to the back of her Freedman can split off and operate semi-autonomously as beam rifles letting her defend herself from anywhere within her radius. There's some mechanical stuff I don't really understand surrounding how exactly it operates, but that's outside of my wheelhouse. If it works, it works.

While there are others, these are the most advanced ones we have on deck. The little squad of me, M'cah, and Fu have become close knit over our encounters, and I know we always have each other's backs. Solidarity is the only way for us to survive since the deck's been stacked against us.

We have to fight smart and choose our targets carefully. We're not up against a battalion of soldiers or even just one enemy, we're fighting against an institution. They have more resources, more firepower, and more men than us, so we have to hit them where it hurts.

The goal of our operation is, essentially, to be as annoying as possible. It's a war of attrition where we have to prove that until changes are made so that all of us benefit, we're never going to stop costing them. If human lives are worth less than capital to the bigwigs at the top, then we have to threaten what matters to them.

I sit in the cockpit of the Spitfire, Juneth and the v-ton as the airlock releases. All we have to do now is wait for the go-ahead to launch.

As I launch the walls surrounding me turn black, reflecting the ebony ocean where me and Spitfire shine. The verniers on the frame's back and wings ignite to carry me alongside the waves of space that envelop us. The Security Squad's route defines the limits of our engagement, once they're within half an AU of our frame we move out to strike. That's the farthest away we can bait out an engagement while still within reach of the Lion in case things go south.

I maneuver behind an asteroid for cover and from my peripheral vision I can see the rest my group doing likewise. We have to play smart. Unlike our adversaries, ammunition, fuel, and resources are limited so we have to maximize our usage. More importantly, we have to prioritize our own lives. It costs a lot of money that we don't have to train a new pilot after all.

The radar at my side beeps as it detects something entering within our range, so I pull up a long-distance feed from the cameras nestled in Spitfire's head. A small cruiser steadily grows bigger on the screen, escorting it is a battalion of Mech Frames on all sides. One stands on the stern of the ship, and beside it a massive canister looms almost eclipsing the metal giant itself.

Every beep of the radar corresponds to a bead of sweat running down my forehead. They're getting nearer and nearer, but not quite yet at optimal range. The wait for the Lion's go-ahead is nerve wracking, and soon I don't even need the camera feed to see the ship and its escorts.

3 ... I grip the handles on either side of the cockpit.

2 ... My eyes dart and reassure me that my companions are stationed safely.

1 ... I lick my lips as the captain's "FIRE!" blares over our communication feed. I press the button on the side of my right handle and Spitfire's shoulder cannon blazes alive. A high intensity beam radiates from the upper right of my cockpit, aimed directly at the side of the cruiser. It lands with a silent roar that shakes the ship and leads a nasty gouge at its side.

Maybe a mining laser ain't so bad after all.

Just like worker bees when you disturb their nest, the security forces mobilize with their paths all radiating in towards my location. I hit the thrusters to duck underneath the asteroid before re-orienting myself to hazard a few potshots at the squad approaching me. While they focus on evading my fire, M'cah from his location manages to snag one of them from the side. I count six frames in total, compared to our three technically inferior machines we're at a heavy disadvantage, but if we can keep them at this distance and engage them only on our own terms, we might just be able to survive long enough for our auxiliary forces to target the gas canister back on their mothership. Our only job is to keep security off their backs long enough for them to do that.

See what I mean about annoying?

I maneuver Spitfire around the limitless field of space avoiding their beam-fire. I adjust my pitch to just narrowly avoid a neon green bolt of plasma that would have clipped the armor otherwise. It only takes the pressing of a few buttons to utilize that to my advantage, adjusting my thruster to do an about-face so I can nail the head of the enemy's frame with a bolt of my own. The pilot flies blind for a few moments, bucking to-and-fro and firing random shots that disappear into the distance. I save them some embarrassment by firing a few more shot aimed at each of their mech's limbs.

One down.

I have no time to celebrate though. There's a tingle that I can feel in the back of my neck, and before I can question it my hands move on their own and throw Spitfire and myself to the side just in time to avoid some heavy ammunition aimed right at the cockpit.

My fight or flight instincts kick in, and I chose the sensible option and gun it out of there. I follow my gut and duck and weave evasively, all while splitting my attention by frantically checking the sensors, cameras— whatever would get me eyes on the elusive Mr. Hyper-Bazooka-Aimed-right-at-my-ass. The particle detector picks up the energy build-up from the weapon, so I have Spitfire turn on a dime before rocketing towards where it points me. The mobile frame that had been after me comes into my field of view, and it's not a model I've seen before. I'm almost flattered, they decided to bring out the big guns for us.

It readies another shot and the tingle returns. It grows as things almost seem to move in slow motion. I can see the fingers of that new frame clench around the trigger, each gear and motor between the joints move almost lazily from my perspective. The tingle goes outside of my body, and suddenly I'm aware.

I press the button to draw Spitfire's beam-cutter while the Captain delivers her speech. This awareness stretches back to that moment and further beyond. Spitfire and I grasp the handle and in one fluid motion swing. I see us move, I see the beam-cutter strike metal and I see my own hands do the same. It's hot, dense, and cramped. My muscles ache and burn but I must keep going, I have no choice but to keep going. There's nowhere for me to go but to keep digging down and striking against stone and metal— but at the same time I feel free. I see space— where there is none to be dragged towards.

Just as quickly as the moment came however, it passed and I'm back in the cockpit of Spitfire even though I never left. The severed arm of the new model floats in front of me, and I can see in its disarmed source. Before it can make a move, I shoulder-bash it away, disorienting the pilot long enough for me to use the cutter on the rest of its important modules. Plasma beams meant to cut through giant veins of unrefined ore slash through this hunk of scrap like butter leaving its pilot helpless in space. The only thing he can do is wait for the battle to end. Good. These guys need to know what it's like to helplessly watch from the sidelines.

I don't detect any other hostels near me, and the stray rounds streaking through the sky don't even come close. I tune into the comms, for an update on the situation.

"M'cah, Fu. What's your situation?" They're both near each other on my tracker, and I set out towards their location.

"Not bad kid, but not good either," M'cah's gruff voice blares in my helmet. "Took down one easy enough, these two are giving us some trouble. You'll never guess who one of them is."

I can hear Fu make a sound, not quite a laugh— those don't really belong in a dog-fight— but something close enough to make me grimace.

"Don't tell me it's that red asshole!" I groan and floor it towards their location. I have something of... a rivalry with that particular member of the Security Squad. He fancies himself the red baron of the space era, but in reality, he's just a showboat with a eye-straining bright red frame that's almost impossible to hit. I'm only a few hundred kilometers away before the Captain cuts in on our feed.

"Save your fuel and retreat." Her order is firm and leaves no room for argument, "The auxiliary team has destroyed the capsule. Get back here ASAP, you've all already wasted enough fuel and ammo."

If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was making a joke.

"Roger." We all say in unison... even if mine was a little delayed while I weighed the options of settling the score with the Red Bastard. Even if I did, getting chewed out was not worth it at

all. The fight was over. Going back to instigate something now, no matter how absolutely agreeable it would be, isn't putting our anger in the right places. Our rage is fuel. And just like how we've spent hours optimizing the efficiency of our frames' fuel usage, we have to manage our own in the same way: as elegant and purposeful as a machine.

The Lion approaches us while we flee, and it seems the remaining two fighters (Red Bastard included) don't want to face down a fully armed battleship (even if we only really have it half-operational). We dock while they retreat as well, for a moment it seems as if our two motherships are staring at one another. Neither in the position to push the conflict further. A stalemate.

Which for us is as good a victory as any.

Taking off my helmet feels like stepping out of a sauna. You never realize how stale the air is until you take off the stuff thing. I leave the thing in my seat before opening the hatch and propelling myself out with a push. The wonders of a zero-g hangar. It's never not fun letting the momentum carry me down to the floor. I see Fu a little way ahead of me having already left her mech to bask in the brief moment of reprieve before our after mission briefing. I hesitate for a moment, before feeling a hand push me forward.

I almost yelp as I tumble head over heels in her direction. As I spin, I shoot a glare at my assailant, the chuckling M'cah who looks at me with knowing eyes. My anger loses its heat. however when I manage to catch a glimpse of Spitfire.

For just a moment, I see something glimmering around it. I think they're chains, covering her from head to toe. Not holding her down to the ground, and not holding it back. Instead they're piecing her together, drawing each disparate piece towards one another so she doesn't fall apart.

As I blink, its gone.

Hot Chocolate Monstrosity

by Skylar Sophia Noel, 4th Grade

Meagan sips her hot chocolate with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders staring out of the window while sitting on a rocking chair watching every bit of snow fall from the gloomy-looking sky. She is thinking of the benefits of having to now live in a \$20,000 two-bedroom apartment in Vermont with her grandma instead of the \$500,000 luxury home she lived in with her mother. The apartment was painted gray with a modern vibe. The furniture was either black or white. When the lights were off, only the white and gray things were showing. The black items disappeared. The only item in the house that was not gray, white, or black was a birch rocking chair with one pillow. That pillow had a picture of Meagan in the second grade. The picture was taken on picture day at school, and it was her mom's favorite photo. That was the year Meagan, her grandma, and mom moved to the U.S from France. Meagan wore a pink, fluffy dress with a white headband. Her two front teeth were gone, and she was wearing a touch of light pink blush. She felt like a princess that day - A princess of France. Every time she sips her hot chocolate, she feels calm.

But this isn't just any hot chocolate, it's the one that her 64-year-old grandma makes to help her get rid of all the stressful moments in her life. Stressful things like Meagan being bullied at school for having French accent and cheap clothes. Her mom also just got fired from a good paying job, so she is recently working three jobs. Her mom used to work at a top tier bakery place. Meagan goes to a rich school with a scholarship only because she has a high IQ (specifically 192). The school was the size of the White house, but that was a normal size school for these rich kids. Gold pillars beamed in the sun. The building was the perfect shade of white.

The school is called Christian Academy of Excellence. Meagan always said it has a fancy name. The school is known for its academic excellence, but Meagan found it annoying that she had to wear a uniform. White skirt for the girls, white pants for the boys. They all wore a black button-down shirt. The girls' skirts couldn't go anywhere past the knees. Meagan never really knew why the rule existed, but in the winter the girls froze. The rich girls wore warm stockings and would show off to the girls who couldn't afford them. Christian Academy of Excellence even asked them to wear a uniform for gym--white shorts and a black top. Much like it wasn't fair for the girls to wear skirts in the winter, the boys' gym shorts were too short. The school did nothing about it besides say, 'Deal with it.' Every day, at 12:00 pm, Meagan and other girls watched the boy's exit the locker room in embarrassment. But Meagan did well at Christian Academy, so she was promoted from the 5th grader to 8th grade. That's a big accomplishment and only one of the pros about her life.



Just as the school year started, Meagan's mom was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer and is now in the hospital for treatment. She was upset with the news of her mom's cancer, but she took it on like when her father died from a gun-shot years ago in France. She 'let it slide' is what she called it. It was easy to 'let it slide' with her dad's death. She doesn't remember him. With her mom though, Meagan has to make efforts to numb the pain. At school, the kids are not so kind. The names the kids at school call Meagan--immigrant, loser, or French nerd, and worst of all no mom available--leave her devastated.

This was one of the hardest times in school, but there is one person who helped her through her stressful time, Dia Heart. Dia is a girl from Jamaica who is also new to the school and in Meagan's eighth grade class. Dia makes Meagan laugh, give her tissues when she has an emotional breakdown, and she gives her gifts for special occasions like Christmas and Meagan's birthday. Winter classes have begun, she's staying at her grandmother's house while her mom is in the hospital, and she has nothing more to do than tuck herself into bed to think about her stressful times. But just as Meagan finishes her hot chocolate, she hears the worst news of all.

"Meagan," her grandma Jennie begins as she walks into her room, "Your mom passed away due to her colon cancer." Meagan's heart sinks to her stomach.

"No, this can't be," Meagan says in desperation.

"I'm sorry sweetie. She passed on at 10:12 pm; her heart stopped. She will be cremated."

Meagan is shocked. Her mom is dead. Her ashes will be sent to France. She won't be able to visit until she has the money to fly over. She takes a photo of her mom and tucks it close to her heart. That picture was taken when she was in third grade when Meagan was little according to her mom. This was also a time when they were pretty stable and didn't really have any financial problems. Best of all, they were at Disney World, one of the last memories she has with her mom before she lost her job. Meagan and her mom wore matching Minnie Mouse dresses with white sandals. They were also holding a churro, Meagan's favorite sweet. She rarely eats churros anymore because of her limited money. They took this photo in front of the Disney Castle. "Great times," Meagan says to herself with tears in her eyes. Her grandmother says goodnight, and Meagan doesn't bother to put the picture of her mom back on her nightstand. Instead, she holds it close to her chest and cries herself to sleep.

Just when Meagan didn't think her bad luck could get any worse, she comes home from

school to find her grandmother on the floor. Meagan tries to wake her and help her stand, but she doesn't respond. She calls 911 and within minutes EMS is in her home. The EMS workers ask Meagan questions about her grandmother, about her living circumstances and assures her they will get her grandmother medical help. They both tell her everything will be ok, but judging by the looks in their faces, Meagan knows they are lying.

The next day comes. And after getting ready, Meagan goes into the living room to say good morning to her grandma Jennie. But she quickly becomes sad as she remembers she isn't there. Instead, the doorbell rang, and someone bangs on the door. Two men with a badge that says Children Services, stood in front of her. They introduce themselves as child protective workers and quickly come into the house before Meagan could invite them in. They are wearing black suits and a gold necklace that looked like it cost more than the apartment. They also have on black, shiny loafers with white Polo socks showing. Meagan starts to shake with sadness, thinking how scared she is and how she let two men into her home. One of the men speaks up, "Meagan, your grandma Jennie passed away from a severe heart attack. We are going to take you to an orphanage. Do you have any other family members who live in the USA?" Meagan is speechless. She cries (more like sobbing). She refuses to leave and has to be dragged out of her grandmother's apartment kicking and screaming while scratching up her grandmother's well-kept hardwood floors. Meagan tells herself she has nobody. No mom, no dad, and now no Grandma Jennie.

The drive to the orphanage is long. Meagan thinks about her teachers who would wonder where she is. She thinks about her only friend, Dia. Will Dia be worried when she doesn't see or hear from me," Meagan asks herself. It feels like they were driving for hours. Once they arrive at the orphanage, Meagan starts to cry. Since the orphanage is an hour away from the apartment, she has to transfer to the school the orphans go to. The orphanage is called The Genesis Orphanage. The building is a dirty white with a stain of dirt on the hideous, wood door. Six pillars stand on each side. The orphanage is the size of a hospital, which was surprising because it looks horrible on the outside. She lost her only friend that helped her through her stressful times, that friend was Dia. Meagan left most of her things behind because she had to be dragged out of the apartment. The only thing she has are some clothes and the hot chocolate ingredients her grandma Jennie made. Those ingredients were milk, a little zip-lock bag of sugar, and chocolate powder. She also has the most important ingredient of all, marshmallows. As Meagan steps foot into the orphanage, she gets the chills. Right in front of her is a lady with a messy bun and a red sweater that says Los Angeles in bold black letters. The sweater is so long you can barely tell she has shorts underneath. She wears the most obnoxious make-up ever. It looks like she has fifty-pounds of blush on both cheeks. Her

eyeshadow is red, and she is wearing fake eyelashes that looks like they reach up to the moon. Her hair is blonde with red stains. Even Meagan can tell that this is a bad dye job. She is chewing gum so loud while staring into Meagan's bright blue eyes. Meagan can smell the strong minty gum. It looks like she had just rolled out of bed, put Crocs on and stepped out of the door with a dirty sweater.

The inside walls aren't any better than the outside. Old, brown wallpaper on the walls with some pieces falling onto the floor. Behind her is a cafeteria that looks like a dump. Stained walls and only twenty tables, one has the only twenty seats in the room, ten on each side. There is a kitchen right behind the counter where they put out the food. She notices lunch trays and a banana peel on the floor and applesauce on the walls. "I hope the janitors love their job," Meagan thinks to herself with a little giggle. The lady asks for her name and when she replies, Meagan Zelart, the lady's gum almost falls out of her mouth gaped in shock. She whispers in the man's ear. Meagan is waiting, but she hears them say Zelart and Azi, her dad's first name. She also hears them say something about her dad being famous. The woman's attitude changes.

"Hi again," she says with a teeth-stained smile while clenching on her gum. "My name is Ms. Ratchet. I'll show you to your room. I can take it from here gentlemen. Thank you."

Meagan says goodbye to the two child protection workers, and they wish her well. Meagan's mom had told her about the horrible things her dad had done. "My father is dead. How does she know him," she thinks to herself. As she walks through the cafeteria, they go through this ancient door on the right side of the cafeteria which leads to the longest hallway Meagan has ever seen. There are room numbers next to each door. And when Meagan opens the door to her room, 162, she is shocked.

The entire room, or should I say suite, has white marble all around with a bed bigger than her old one. The bed is big enough to fit her entire family and maybe even her ancestors. The room has a TV, a bathroom, and an office area. It even has a phone and a room service menu. Best of all, it has a kitchen! When Meagan sees the kitchen, she says aloud, "OMG! EEEK! My own kitchen!" She can make her hot chocolate. Once she unpacks, she puts her ingredients on the table and sees a paper that says, "Make your best hot chocolate and win \$5,000. The orphanage appears to be having some type of hot chocolate competition."

Meagan is stunned. I'm talking jaw on the floor stunned. She immediately starts making hot chocolate. When she looks at the counter, she notices a lamp hiding in the corner. Meagan

turns the lamp on and sees the words Zelart Company are on the lamp. “What the,” Meagan whispers. She wonders how they could have personalized the lamp with her name. “No, that’s not it” Meagan says. After some thought, she forgets about her name on the lamp and carries on with her day. Besides, she wants to start getting used to this place.

Meagan starts a routine where she wakes up, takes a shower, gets dressed, goes to school, and works on her hot chocolate recipe. She gets along well with the other kids at the orphanage. They each have different how-I-got-here stories, but all are just grateful to have a place to go because for many reasons they can’t be with their families. And even though they are all very nice, she still keeps to herself. The sadness of losing her mother and grandmother hasn’t gone away, and she misses her friend Dia. But by the third day of her droll routine, something strange happens.

She arrives in the kitchen like any other day and is opening the ingredients when she spots her name on a mug in bold, black cursive letters. “A coffee mug with my last name on it too” Meagan questions. But she has no time to dwell on her name being on a mug. Without her grandma here, she has to get this hot chocolate recipe right. She is so focused that she doesn’t hear anyone knocking at the door. The knocking get louder, and it startles her. Meagan opens the door with a look of shock on her face. The man is tall with a mustache on fleek. I’m talking about sharp points at each end, and it looks like he put a hint of gel in it just to keep the hairs tamed. His mustache is thick and long. Almost as if he’s been growing it for years. He has brown hair and a black beret that perfectly matches his black and white striped long-sleeve shirt. He has bright red pants and a posture so straight that it looks like he danced ballet for twenty years. The man is also wearing a black belt that looks brand new and a pair of loafers and white Polo socks. The craziest part of all is that he has a pin on his shirt with the words, Azi Zelart--Famous Clothing and Furniture Designer.

“Bonjour (hello), Meagan.”

She is dumbstruck. This man looks like the pictures of her dad. It can’t be. Can it? Meagan quiets her thoughts enough to say bonjour and finds herself inviting him inside of her room. He immediately lays his eyes on the slightly messy cup she is using to make her hot chocolate.

“Vous me connaissez (Do you know me),” asks the strange yet familiar man. Meagan shakes her head.

“Je suis ton père, un célèbre créateur de vêtements (I’m your dad, a famous clothing and furniture designer).”

Meagan answers, “Mais maman a dit que tu t’étais fait tirer dessus (But mom said you were shot).”

“Quoi? Elle vous a menti. Elle a immigré Amérique sans que je le sache (What? She lied to you. She immigrated to America without telling me),” answers her father. Meagan is shocked. Her dad was there, in front of her eyes. Alive.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est (What is this)?” He is pointing to the mug of hot chocolate she was making. She doesn’t know what to say. “Que fais tu (What are you making),” asks her father.

“Chocolat chaud (hot chocolate).”

“Pour un concours (for t contest)? Y a-t-il un prix? (Is there a prize),” her dad asks.

“Oui, \$5,000 (Yes, \$5,000),” Meagan says. Her dad is actually being supportive. She immediately bubbled with excitement. But she has a question; “Papa, puis-je rester à l’orphelinat pour le concours même si je t’ai trouvé et que tu as probablement une belle maison (Dad, can I stay at the orphanage even though I found you and you probably have a nice house?)

He responds with, “Bien sûr (of course).” He sits on the nearest clean white couch while Meagan practices perfecting her hot chocolate recipe. She lowers her head with sadness and remembers, “I wish my grandma or mom could be here to help me.”

The day of the hot chocolate competition, Meagan has her hot chocolate in her hand. She walks into the cafeteria. Her heart is pounding. Her sweaty hands are not gripping on to the cup very well. The cup that says Zelart. She is nervous as she wonders, “What if I forgot the sugar? No, I made sure I put in the sugar. Right? But what if I completely forgot sugar. What if the marshmallows absorbed the hot chocolate and I’ve made hot chocolate flavored marshmallows. That would be cool. BUT IT’S NOT HOT CHOCOLATE!” These are only a few of the many thoughts going through Meagan’s head. Meagan is stressed out. She reaches the cafeteria and sees what feels like a sea of hot chocolate in mugs. There are three judges dressed in brown, trying to represent hot chocolate is what Meagan guesses. There is a brown table with marshmallows. By the looks of everyone placing their hot chocolate on the table, Meagan knows where to place hers. She places her hot chocolate in an orderly fashion with

the others. Then she takes a glance at the other hot chocolates. One has fluffy marshmallows floating from the top with hot fudge making lines across the marshmallows. Another is in a Starbucks cup with little splashes on the white lid.

“Are you all ready” one of the judges ask. A room with about fifty people respond with a low, soft yes, including Meagan.

“Before we begin, I need to introduce myself and the other judges. I’m Rose, on your left is Brandon, and on your right is Gianna,” says one of the judges. Meagan takes a big deep breath. “In front of you, there is a sticky note ranging from numbers 1-50. That will determine what order you’re going to present your hot chocolate. So, what number did you get” asks the judge. Everyone looks at their sticky note. Meagan got the number 25. She takes a look at her dad leaning against the wall giving her an encouraging smile. Then, she notices that the person next to her got a sticky note with a one written on it. He is tall, six-feet tall Meagan guesses, with blue eyes and blonde hair. He is wearing a Champion sweatsuit along with a New York Yankees blue fitted baseball hat. Meagan overhears him speaking Creole (a broken French). “He’s probably Haitian” she thinks.

“First one up!” Brandon yells. The number one contestant walks up with shaky hands and places his hot chocolate gently on the table. Rose picks up the mug of hot chocolate, pulls out a straw, and takes a sip. She passes it to Brandon who puts a straw in the cup of hot chocolate and takes a sip. Brandon gives the last judge, Gianna, the hot chocolate. With a straw ready in hand, Gianna takes a quick sip. There is a moment of silence.

“HORRIBLE!” they all yell. The first contestant tears up as he walks away. Meagan sees the judges try some more of the hot chocolates, and it seems like they have something negative to say about almost everyone. Maybe there are a few good comments, but not a lot. Meagan’s number is called.

“Number 25, up” Meagan is nervous. She walks slowly. She places her hot chocolate carefully in front of the judges. Meagan thinks the judges are ready to pounce on her because they hold their straws high. They each take a turn sipping it. Their mouths form an O-shape. But this O-shape is not in disgust.

“AMAZING! PERFECT!” they all say at once. Meagan is happy. She skips back to her spot WITHOUT her hot chocolate so the judges can slurp it up. She doesn’t hear a positive response like the one she received for the rest of the competition.

The judges take about ten-minutes to identify the winner. Low voices speak amongst each

other in a room full of sweaty and eager contestants. The judges announce, “The winner is ... NUMBER 25!” Meagan runs to her dad with excitement.

“Allons-y J’ai gagné! (Let’s go! I won!)” Her dad is as proud as she is. She goes to the table to collect the money, IN CASH. She gives her dad the money to save with a huge smile. She runs in circles due to excitement. She is actually really proud of herself. Her grandma Jennie’s Hot Chocolate recipe really got her somewhere, even though Grandma Jennie is not here.

Meagan rushes to her room to pack her stuff. She remembers what she said to her dad about leaving after the competition. She packs her essentials and snuck the lamp with her name in her suitcase. “Au revoir, chambre. J’ai gardé de bons souvenirs (Bye, room. I’ve had great memories),” she says as she walks out the door. She goes through the long hallway not in fear, but in excitement. She opens the door to get some air, but before she steps a foot outside, she does a sassy wave to Ms. Ratchet at the counter and gives her the death stare. The woman looks confused. Ms. Ratchet rolls her eyes, then starts helping another child. Meagan walks out of the door to find a Jeep with a sticker across the back window that says, “Let’s Go!” The guy who rolls down the window is her dad.

“Allez, Meagan. Allons-y! (Come on, Meagan. Let’s Go),” says her dad. She replies with a smile. She puts her suitcase in the backseat and hopped in. “Allons dans mon manoir. (Let’s go to my mansion),” says her dad.

“Ok” she replies with a grin, and they drive off.

Meagan is now living in a \$10,000,000 California mansion cooling herself off with money, reading a magazine that is about her story, while soaking in her hot tub. She thought about her old life, but she just let it slide from her memory.

“Dinner’s ready!”, one of the maids called out.

So, Meagan steps out of the hot tub, quickly dressed, and walks to the backyard where dinner is being served. As she sits down on her beautiful patio furniture, she smells lobster tail being set on the table. “Yum,” Meagan says as she took a piece of the lobster tail. After she devours her portion of the delicious tail, Meagan retreats to her room. When she is upstairs, she changes into pajamas and hops into bed. She wants to visit her mom’s ashes. As she dozes off, she thinks about visiting France and bringing her mother’s ashes back with her.

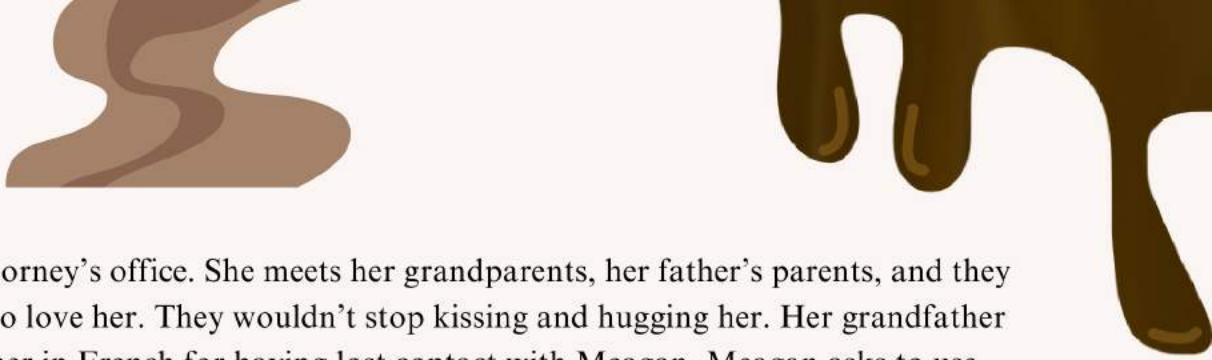
She woke the next day and changes into a sweatsuit. She asks her dad to travel to France to

bring back her mother's ashes and he says yes. But then, shakes his head and did a bunch of hand gestures as he says, "We haz to go on ze airplane." Meagan is a little annoyed by the way he speaks English, but she is glad they can go on the plane to see her mom. So, she packs, FAST, and runs downstairs to meet her dad. Meagan's dad is holding his black, shiny suitcase with proper manners. I'm talking gloves on and perfect posture. In no time, they are in the car driving to the airport. Meagan falls asleep. When she wakes up, she is on the plane.

She stares at everything around her. People, seats, and women in green and white skirts walking up and down the aisle with snacks. She even saw a girl who caught her attention. Meagan stared at the girl while she focused her eyes. The girl looked about 13-years-old, but she fell asleep again before she could focus clearly and say a word. Meagan woke up in a foreign place. The apartment was dark with one candle lit in the corner. A woman sat at the table arranging documents. Meagan heard footsteps and quickly shut her eyes. The footsteps stopped right in front of her. Meagan pretended to be sleeping. A man spoke. A man that sounded like her father. "She's still asleep" asked Meagan's father. The woman said "Yes."

"It's all going according to plan" said Meagan's father. "She's just as gullible as her mother. She doesn't know she's the heir to my family fortune. That idiot of a father of mine left everything to his long-lost granddaughter. I deserve the family fortune. When she wakes up, we'll have her sign everything over to me. I'll be in charge of her money because she's a minor. After that I'll ship her off to Iceland and never see her again."

Meagan peeps and saw the woman in the room gave him a half smile. Meagan's dad left. The woman spoke, "I know you're not sleeping. You heard everything didn't you?" Meagan nodded her head. "You must think I'm a monster. I had a daughter once. She died. My heart has been numb ever since. Your dad is my boss. He told me we'll be rich if we can get you to sign the documents, and you won't be hurt," says the woman. Meagan doesn't say anything. Her mind is swirling with different thoughts and feelings. "I realized today that I can't do it. There will be no one to take care of you in Iceland. Only strangers. Who knows what could happen to you. I won't do it," says the woman. Meagan doesn't know what to think. This woman is plotting with her father but now wanted to help her. Meagan is confused, but she didn't have a choice. She had to trust this stranger. The woman shares her plan: Meagan is to get up the next day as if nothing happened, get dressed, and go to the attorney's office as planned. Meagan will be reunited with her father's parents, but she'll go to the bathroom where the woman will be waiting to sneak her out before signing the documents giving her father the rights to her fortune. Once they are safe, they will contact her grandparents. Only one problem, her father will be watching her like a hawk. The next day, Meagan woke up. Her father threatens her and tells her to sign the documents, or he'll kill Dia. Meagan dresses



and goes to the attorney's office. She meets her grandparents, her father's parents, and they genuinely appear to love her. They wouldn't stop kissing and hugging her. Her grandfather screams at her father in French for having lost contact with Meagan. Meagan asks to use the bathroom and her father escorts her. Before she goes into the bathroom, Meagan's father says, "Hurry up or else." She goes to the bathroom and starts to cry. 'How is she going to get out of here?' she wonders. Just then the window opens.

The woman from the apartment says, "Take my hand." Meagan takes her hand and sneaks out of the window. The woman has a car waiting and they drives off. Megan's father is suspicious and enters the bathroom. He punches the door to the bathroom in anger when he realizes Meagan has escaped.

He goes to his parents and pretends to cry. He says, "She's been kidnapped." Meagan's grandparents starts to cry and call the police. Meagan's father goes back to the apartment where she staying and finds a note from the woman who originally helped with the plan to take Meagan's fortune. The note reads, "I'm a mother first. You will not hurt this child." Meagan's father quickly goes to his parents' home. Before he goes into the house, he messes up his hair and starts to cry. He wants to pretend to be devastated that Meagan is gone. When he walks in Meagan sits between his parents holding their hand. The woman is standing right behind her speaking to the police. Meagan's father knows this is the end.

The police arrest Meagan's father. Her grandparents explain how evil their son is and that they had helped Meagan and her mother escape years before. Meagan's grandparents apologize for having lost contact with Meagan and her mother. They say they wanted to make her life happy and ask that she tells them whatever she wants to have. Meagan thinks about it long and hard.

Meagan is back in the United States. This time, it is under the care of her grandparents. Her father was sent to jail. The woman who saved Meagan is now running Meagan's Hot Chocolate Monstrosity corporation. With the money she earns from the corporation, Meagan fixes up the Genesis Orphanage. Meagan went back to Christian Academy of Excellence, but this time, she is confident and sure of who she is. She is Meagan Zelart, a kind, smart, heiress who helps others in need; one hot chocolate at a time.



Do Not Be Afraid

by Isys Belton, 11th Grade

Imagine you are 45 years old. Where do you see yourself in the future? Do you see yourself vacationing in Fiji, sipping on a rainbow cocktail near the shore? Or maybe getting your thirteen kids ready for little league practice, or maybe you're on love island trying to get married for some reason. But whatever it is, is that what you want in life? If you keep going on the path you're currently on, will you get the things you want in your future? If that's a yes, that's great, keep going. I'm very proud of you. But to my friends who may be a little unsure, I ask you, why? Why do you not get up every day and achieve your goals? Wake up at 4 am, go take your morning jog, get your matcha, and go do your pilates. I'm just joking. But really, there's nothing wrong with being unsure of your future, but you have to do the things that need to be done to be able to get the future you want and pursue your dreams. I know how hard it is, and I don't want to be corny by saying believe in yourself but believe in yourself! Please! I believe in you, but you **HAVE** to believe in yourself before anyone else does. It doesn't matter if it's your mom, friends, or teachers. You must believe in yourself to get what you want in life. Don't let other people dictate who you should be. We only get one life, and we deserve to spend it the way we want. My name is Isys Inyko Belton, and I spent much of my life not doing the things I wanted to do because I allowed other people influence my desires. Now, I take the initiative in my life, and I've never been happier.

Societal norms are stupid, so take risks. Go to the prom, dance on stages, get your driver's license, go to parties, and get your degree! People need to stop making others feel bad for their success, and you need to stop feeling bad about what other people think about you! You're probably thinking, how is going to prom going to help my future? Maybe it won't. But maybe it will have a lasting impact. Prom was really fun for me. I didn't initially plan on going because I was worried about what other people would think of me--how my face looked, my hair, my dress. I let these stupid, anxiety ridden thoughts flow through my head like a virus, and I stood on my choice to not go to prom. That is until my best friend, Julia, asked me to go with her. Julia has been a safe friend for me since we were in sixth grade. We've always done everything together, and I always feel happy when I'm around her. This is why taking risks and making friends is important too. It's great to have someone by your side no matter what. And if I didn't take that risk and talk to Julia in cello class, I wouldn't have had my best friend, my sister; she's a sister to me. When she asked me to prom, I admit I was reluctant at first, but of course I said yes. Any lingering anxiety in the back of my mind was muffled like a door had been shut on it.

Anyways, prom time comes; me, Julia, and another friend are all excited, but I realized the anxiety virus was taking over our friend's head the entire time we were there. I'm proud of him for coming because even though it was scary, he took that risk! So, one point for him, and zero points for anxiety. Me and Julia danced, ate, and screamed Taylor Swift songs. It was one of the best nights ever. If I hadn't taken the risk, I would have been sitting in my bed, watching people's instagram stories about their memorable and fun night. Prom is just one thing that helped me start taking risks, but it all adds up. Soon they won't feel like risks anymore, they'll just be me not being scared or worried about certain things anymore. I will get what I want in my future.

Taking risks is vital to your future, and I cannot stress that enough. Lyn Christian says on her blog, SoulSalt.com that "Taking risks can change you fundamentally. They make you braver, stronger, and more confident. They show you that you have what it takes to make a decision, commit, and create the life you want. You build faith in yourself knowing you have done it before and can do it again." So, people who aren't taking risks may not be setting themselves up for the life that they. Unless you want to have people making decisions for you, NOT vacationing in Fiji, but whatever floats someone else's boat, or actually, no boat, because you won't be in Fiji, you'll be on your pullout bed, in your sheets that you haven't washed in months, in a basement with water damage watching your old high school friends take risks like getting married, getting everything they want and deserve while you aren't trying to do anything for yourself. I mean that is unless you start taking risks that will better your future. It's never too late to start, so if you're going through a midlife crisis, start taking risks! Get that job you've always wanted, meet new people. I'm only sixteen, and I thought I waited too long to get the things I want in life. I know, ridiculous, but when you have a little anxiety demon whispering in your ear most of the time, it's not too far-fetched.

When I was younger, I would NEVER take risks. I couldn't even order for for myself (I still can't). I wouldn't wear a coat to school on an absolutely freezing day because I thought would look stupid. I sat in corners avoiding all human interaction because I thought that was best for me. But it didn't make me anything but lonely. I've suffered from depression since I was about ten-years-old. I know how hard it is to take risks when you have no motivation, no view of your future, or no idea what you want. I was so jealous of my peers because they were risk takers, and I thought I could never be that way, but I could, I can be, and I am. I dug myself out of the hole I buried myself into. I've had a lot of problems at home, I was taken away from my mother for almost a year, I was getting bullied at school and online, but I realized it was nothing but me holding myself down. I couldn't rely on other people to shape my future for me, I had to do it myself. Having supporting family and friends is great, but having confidence and faith in yourself is the most important and powerful ability you can possess.

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I’ve heard people say, “taking risks is dangerous,” which is true in some ways. Evolve trust states that “Negative risk taking involves the strong possibility of harmful, potentially lethal, consequences, with very little positive gain. For example, taking illegal drugs, the contents of which you don’t know, can result in extreme illness and death.” I’m not talking about risk taking such as drinking and driving or slapping your grandma after she forgot to make lasagna. I’m talking about little everyday risks that can strengthen your future instead of debilitating it. Here’s a quote from South Dakota State University: “Risk means taking a

chance, trying something new, and possibly failing or succeeding, but we must all experience risk in our lives. Taking chances is one of the most crucial ways of helping to advance one's skills and gaining experience." There's gonna be good times and bad times while risk taking, but it's the fact that you took that risk that matters.

Thank you all for listening to my speech, I mean you took that risk and didn't leave or fall asleep halfway through. But really, it takes a lot of confidence to read this out loud, share personal details, and just speaking in public at all. It takes a lot of courage. But I'm glad I did because I want to ace this final, and I'm doing what it takes to shape my future. I'm so proud of everyone else who has to read but is scared to. I'm proud of you for taking that risk, and here's to many more.

Christian, Lyn. "Taking a Risk in Life: 5 Steps for Determining Worthwhile Risks." SoulSalt, 16 Nov. 2022, soulsalt.com/taking-a-risk-in-life/.





She Tried for a Thousand Nights: *inspired by A Thousand and One Nights*

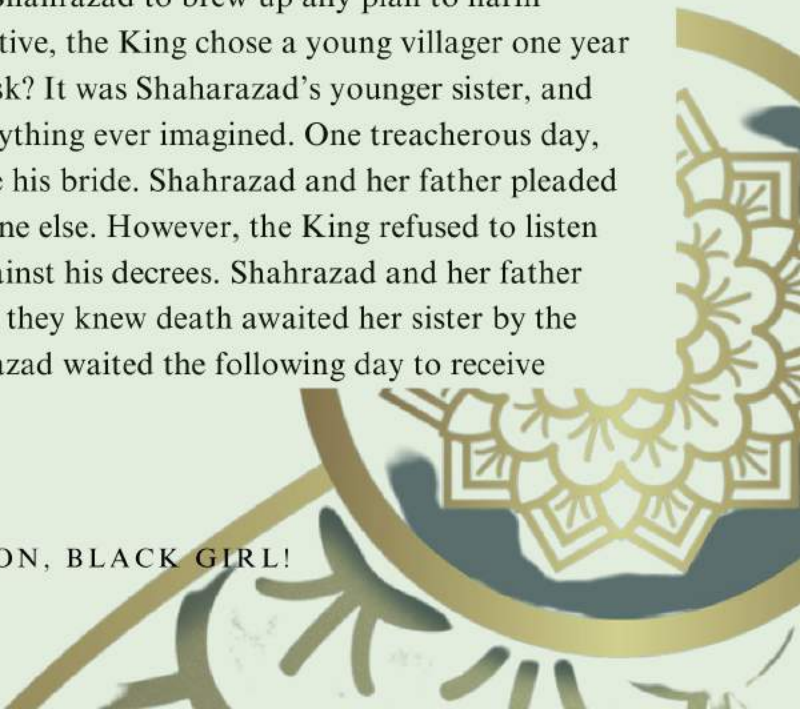
by Miracle Shepherd, Undergraduate

I'm about to tell a tale that is greater and more ludacris than what you have ever heard. However, be forewarned that this tale comes with a lesson, a lesson in which I hope is revealed to you all. Please know that a seed planted in anger will only produce more internal hatred and unwanted karma.

We have heard the tale about the horrendous King who swore to murder every woman he chose to marry to prevent betrayal and unnecessary hardship. Understand that the King's mind was not always like this. There was a time that the King did not harbor any evil; in fact, he was known to be one of the nicest kings around. A King, who once had a heart of gold, but now it is as cold as ice due to one sorrowful night that his lover betrayed him before he stepped off the borderlines of his kingdom. Consumed by his hate, his beloved kingdom suffered. All across the village, many mourned their lost daughters and sisters. Something needed to change, but who would dare challenge the King and make him pay for what he has done? It wasn't until one fair maiden came of age. Her name was Shahrazad.

Shahrazad was an ordinary villager with a scheming mind, but her face was as beautiful as a thousand stars, which is why most villagers were fond of her. However, we must understand that Shahrazad had an advantage that no one had outside of her family, easy access to the palace. You see, Shahrazad's father was the King's closest apprentice; he dealt with King's personal affairs and always had insight to what was going on and how the King thought. Knowing the King's palace gave Shahrazad a devious scheme to end the King's wrath upon the kingdom.

Now you must wonder, what prompted Shahrazad to brew up any plan to harm another person? Well, to put things into perspective, the King chose a young villager one year to be his wife. Who was this maiden, you may ask? It was Shahrazad's younger sister, and the love she carried for her sister was beyond anything ever imagined. One treacherous day, the King requested Shahrazad's sister to become his bride. Shahrazad and her father pleaded with the King not to take her and choose someone else. However, the King refused to listen and threatened to kill them if they interfered against his decrees. Shahrazad and her father had no other choice but to let her go. Of course, they knew death awaited her sister by the next sunrise, so they said their goodbyes. Shahrazad waited the following day to receive



official word that her sister was dead, and with despair and hate in her heart, she had vowed to one day avenge her sister.

Three years passed and Shahrazad was still angry and very bitter; however, she hid her genuine emotions when she appeared in public or around her father. The anniversary of her sister's death was approaching soon, and Shahrazad believed it was her time to initiate her devious plan. When her father arrived home from the palace, there awaited a hot meal that Shahrazad prepared. Once her father was well fed and happy, Shahrazad asked her father if he could give her off to the King and become his wife. Outraged, her father lashed out at Shahrazad for even suggesting something as blasphemous as this. "For what reason do you want to marry the King? Don't you know what he does to young women such as yourself?" Shahrazad's father asked. Shahrazad responded, "Yes, I am aware of what the King does. Please do not treat me like a fool! The King needs to be proven wrong about us women, and I am the only one who can do so." After much debate with her father, he finally gave in and told her, "I will give you to the King, but I warn you that you are digging your very own grave, my child."

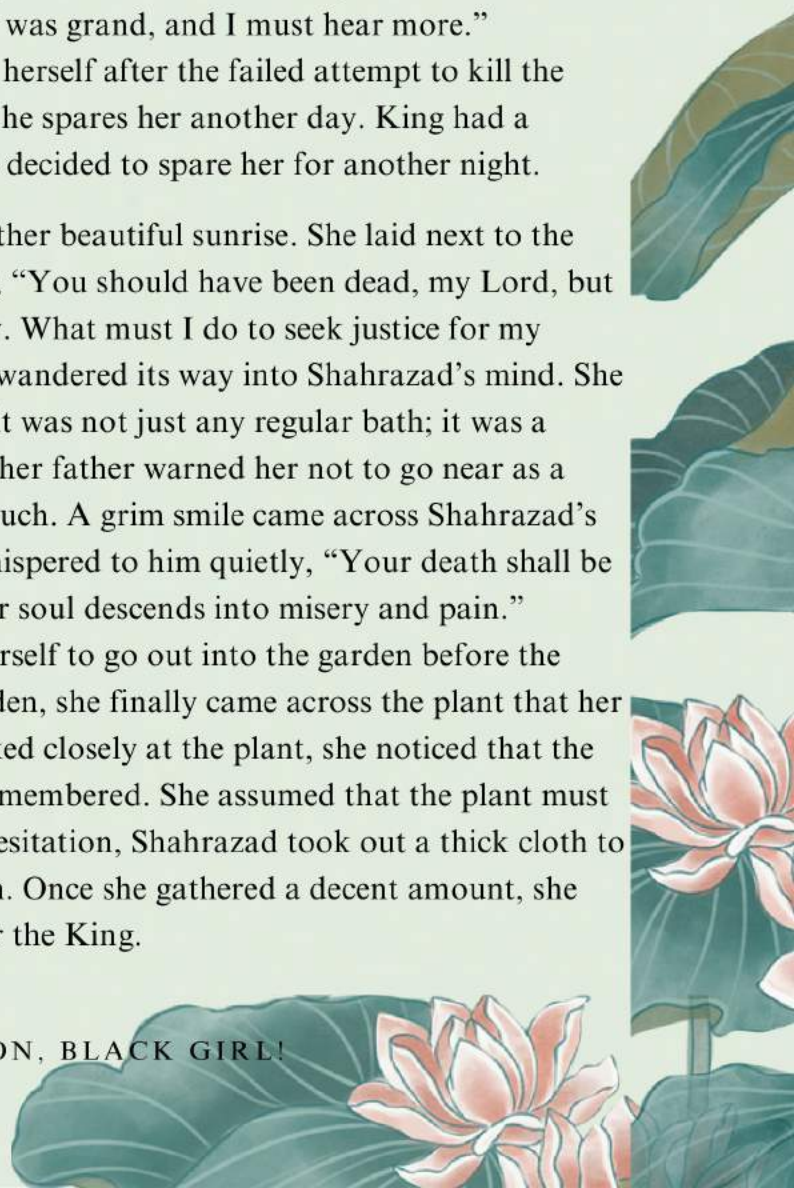
The following day, Shahrazad's father took her to meet the King and explained that his daughter wished to marry him. The King was stunned, but he did not turn down this offer considering that Shahrazad was the most beautiful woman he laid eyes on in a long time. The King did not dare waste any more time; he told his servants to prepare the ceremony and find Shahrazad appropriate attire during her stay at the palace. In just a matter of hours, the King and Shahrazad were married. During the night of their wedding, the seed of deviousness was planted. As the King was fast asleep, Shahrazad lay wide awake, and she stared at the unconscious man who was deliberately the cause of her sister's death. She thought to herself, "Surely, this man must pay for his heartless deed, but what punishment would suit such a crime?" Shahrazad pondered for a moment, and then a thought grazed across her mind. She then looked at the King again and quietly said to him, "My Lord, you will die by my sword, and may your soul receive no rest as it burns in eternity."


Dusk had arrived, and Shahrazad was the first to wake, and shortly after, the King arose to the glimpse of sunrise. Shahrazad greeted the King and said to him, "My Lord, I know what awaits me today, and I am prepared to accept my fate. But before I depart from this world, may I tell you a story that I wrote? It's about you and your glorious battles?" Shahrazad knew that if she catered to his ego, it would allow her time to kill the King. The King could not refuse this adoring offer because who wouldn't enjoy hearing stories about themselves, especially heroic

ones. King said, “Very well then, I will grant your request, but this story better be worth my while, or I shall have my servers kill you on the spot.” Shahrazad agreed to the King’s terms and told him to meet him in his private study so that she could give him a superb performance without any disturbances.

Shortly after that, the King met with Shahrazad in his private study where he sat down in his favorite chair by the fireplace. Shahrazad began to tell the story about the Kings’ victorious battles. She began to physically act out each scene while using various items within his study to make things interesting. The King was highly impressed and became hooked on how Shahrazad described everything. As the story progressed, Shahrazad had reached the battle’s climax, where the King sought up behind his enemy to kill him. She notices a dagger lying on his desk, and she grabs it to act out the final scene. The King was too caught up in the story and did not notice that Shahrazad was about to stab him. Shahrazad went for the final blow, plunging the dagger into his back, and then heard the King laughing. She looked down, and the dagger barely made a scratch on his skin. Shahrazad lifted the dagger and grazed her hand across the blade to find out the blade was so dull that it wouldn’t cut through margarine. The King continued to laugh and applaud Shahrazad for her performance. He arose from his chair and said to her, “That story was grand, and I must hear more.” Shahrazad saw this as an opportunity to redeem herself after the failed attempt to kill the King. So, she agreed to tell another story only if he spares her another day. King had a burning desire to hear more about himself, so he decided to spare her for another night.

The next day, Shahrazad woke up to another beautiful sunrise. She laid next to the sleeping King, frustrated. She thought to herself, “You should have been dead, my Lord, but instead, you lay next to me with your filthy body. What must I do to seek justice for my sister?” Then miraculously, another evil scheme wandered its way into Shahrazad’s mind. She thought the King could use a nice hot bath, but it was not just any regular bath; it was a poisonous bath. Shahrazad recalled a plant that her father warned her not to go near as a child. He told her that it was poisonous to the touch. A grim smile came across Shahrazad’s face, and she looked at the sleeping King and whispered to him quietly, “Your death shall be caused by mother nature herself, and I hope your soul descends into misery and pain.” Shahrazad slowly rose out of bed and dressed herself to go out into the garden before the King awakened. As she strolled through the garden, she finally came across the plant that her father had told her about. When Shahrazad looked closely at the plant, she noticed that the color was slightly darker and smaller than she remembered. She assumed that the plant must have grown in full bloom this time, so without hesitation, Shahrazad took out a thick cloth to pick the plant so that it would not touch her skin. Once she gathered a decent amount, she rushed back into the palace to prepare a bath for the King.





Shortly after Shahrazad had returned to the King's quarters, the King had already awakened. The King asked her, "Where did you go at this hour?" Shahrazad responded, "My Lord, please forgive me for leaving your bed, but I wanted to draw you a bath that is unlike any other before my time is up." The King laughed in her face and told her that no bath would ever be that great. Shahrazad told the King about the plant she found in the garden. She told him, "My father would use this plant to make me feel refreshed and clean. And it has the power to remove all the impurities that may lie in your body." Please, my Lord, let me fulfill this kind gesture," she pleaded. "Very well then run my bath, and it better be worthwhile," said the King. Shahrazad quickly rushed to the washroom and filled the marble tub with hot water. She carefully took out the cloth and placed the plant leaves into the water, and she began to mix the water and the leaves with a wooden stick.

Once the bath was ready, she summoned the King into the washroom. There the King undressed and stepped into the marbled tub. As he sat down, he released a sigh of relief and relaxation. After a few moments, the King gave Shahrazad a big smile and said, "Thank you, my lady, for drawing me this soothing bath; I guess your father was right about these plant leaves; it does have healing power! Not to mention the scent is so pleasant, I cannot get enough of it." Shahrazad thought to herself, "Why is he not screaming in pain and looking into the eyes of death?" Confused, she walked over to the tub and took out a leaf and sniffed it. It wasn't poisonous at all; in fact, it was actually spearmint leaves. Shahrazad crushed the leaf in her hand and calmly told the King, "Why, of course, my Lord, the bath is soothing; I used spearmint leaves to alleviate all of your aches and pains. I shall leave you to relax, and I will return shortly." Shahrazad walked away in anger, trying to figure out how she made such an idiotic mistake and wondering what she could do now. All Shahrazad knows is that she will never stop. The King shall meet his fate.

Part 2

The sun just began rising over the horizon, and birds began to sing until their hearts were content. Everything existed in perfect harmony and peace, well, almost everything. Shahrazad awakened even before the maids even began with their daily chores. She paced and paced with rage with every step. "Spearmint! How could this be? Am I not clever? No! No, it's the maids' fault for placing those wretched herbs in the wrong garden." she thought to herself. Shahrazad needed a different approach if she desperately wanted the King dead, but what could take down this mediocre man? Before her thoughts could become more profound, the King grunted, rolled over out of his bed, and yelled, "Woman, where have you gone? I require special attention!" Quite hastily, Shahrazad responded out loud, "I am here, my lord. I wanted to see the sunrise over your glorious kingdom. "Oh, please come and join me. So, I

can toss your entitled crusted butt over this balcony to save us all.” she thought inwardly. “I could care less about that horizon woman, you shall continue telling me a story at once, or I’ll have your head on a pike!” said the seemingly impatient King. Shahrazad nods in agreement and waltzes right over to the King’s bedside ottoman. As Shahrazad approaches the King, she notices that something is off. In fact, he looks pretty pale or unseasoned, some would say. “My lord, you look unwell. Should I send word for a doctor to assist you” sounding somewhat worried, which is odd for Shahrazad.

With a horse cough and a raspy voice, the King scolded, “It’s none of your concern; it’s just a mere cold.” Well, it was her concern because she wouldn’t let a mere cold take out this wretched man, but what could she do when the King’s eyes were watching her every move? Shahrazad briefly thought about blatantly hitting him over the head with a rusted iron pick that mended the fire at night. The idea is quite delectable, the thought of the King catching a disease with that pick was a two-for-one deal, but she strayed. Suddenly, a devilish idea arose, although it did make her grimace. She said to herself, “My King, may your death be just as painful as it is for me to be your wife.” Shahrazad decided to do what every other wife would do: nurturing the man back to health or death... preferably death. Shahrazad grazed at the King and demanded, “My lord, I cannot withstand this cold that you have, and I implore you to seek treatment! Look at yourself; you have become much paler! I would love to enjoy my last few moments with you in pure bliss, not sneezes and sniffles.” With a stunned yet flattered facial expression, the King asked Shahrazad to fix his ailment if she cared so much about him. He demanded she go to the maid’s quarters and prepare him a healing broth.

The King could care less what she decides to bring him; he just wanted to exhibit what a woman should do: be his servant. “Ha, that worked better than expected! I cannot fathom that this fool believed every word I spoke.” Shahrazad’s inner thoughts were overjoyed. She made her way down to the maid’s kitchen area in a hasty fashion, and Shahrazad was met with odd glares from all of the maids. To throw off the maids, Shahrazad spoke softly, “Oh, don’t be alarmed, ladies; I am simply here to make my beloved some tea. He has a raspy cold, and I cannot stand it.” The head maid came forward and stated, “Forgive me, my lady, but it is our job to care for the King’s needs.” With Shahrazad’s face turning sour, she demanded it would be her responsibility this time, considering the King requested her to do so. And the maids wouldn’t dare to defy their King. “Leave me be and go tend to the living quarters; it could use a little polishing!” All the maids left their kitchen hurriedly without any questions, and Shahrazad was left alone. Without delay, Shahrazad began mixing various ingredients for the tea. When the tea was finished and piping hot, she added several drops of a transparent liquid found in one of the maid’s baskets under the chest. The small bottle read

“Poison” which was enticing enough for Shahrazad not to think twice about it; after all, the maids know what can and cannot be consumed by mere humans. As an added surprise, it gave a citrus scent, much like the smell of clean linens. Shahrazad placed the teacup on a tray and returned to the King’s chambers. As she entered the room, Shahrazad spoke gently, “Here you are, my lord, my special tea. For whatever ails you, may it be put to rest permanently.” “Eh, whatever, woman.” The King replied as he began to take a sip. “Hmm... this is exquisite!” Shahrazad asked the King to explain further with an odd glare, considering he ought to be hopeless and gasping for air. With such amusement, the King continued, “Ha ha! You have a clever mind, Woman. The taste of lemon has done wonders. How did you find such rare remedies? As I recall, our lands are too poor to grow such crops.” Shahrzad’s shoulders dropped with disbelief as it dawned on her that she added the juice of a lemon instead of a liquid poison.

Later, about a quarter until two, the King sent word back to Shahrzad, telling her to meet him at the jousting ring behind the palace. He wanted her to see that the tea did more than cure his raspy voice. It gave the King the energy to train for his upcoming event. Less than pleased, Shahrzad had no choice but to attend his training, although she had a spark of joy to see him if he had a chance to fall off his stallion and die for once. When Shahrzad arrived at the field, she and her fellow maids were escorted to her seating area.

“Why must I endure so much pain? Why haven’t you descended into the depths of hell!” As Shahrazad’s thoughts grew louder, The King’s laughter disrupted her groaning thoughts as he dashed across the field. “You see, Woman! The King yelled out. “Everything you have done has improved my strength. Nothing will stand in my way!” “It seems so, my lord; you are quite resilient!” Shahrzad blood boiled on the inside as she managed to display a smile toward the King in agreement. With a quick kick on the horse’s stomach, the King was off for another round of jousting. Midway into the joust, the King’s stallion halted and shouted a screeching sound. Shahrazad stood up to further inspect what had transpired. She noticed the King swinging his arms around as if he was fighting someone, and in a swift moment, she ran towards the King. When she reached him, he had already fallen off his stallion. Puzzled, she saw the King gasping for air and shaking violently. The King reached for Shahrzad, but she stepped back, allowing him to collapse to the ground. And before he could utter a word, the King was dead. Shahrzad inspected the dead King with absolute shock and found something sticking out of his neck. “A bee?... A BEE! She exclaimed. “I tried everything I knew to bring this lump sack of a man down, and he dies from a tiny speck of an insect!” Feeling defeated, Shahrzad left the King in the field to rot away with no other questions asked.

The tale that I have written was inspired by the story *A Thousand and One Nights*. I struggled with the idea of either making the story worse or giving it a happier ending. Eventually, I made the story worse because I found it out of the ordinary since most known tales tend to have a happy ending. Plus, it gives me room to be more creative with the plotline. Although, I wanted to keep the elements of suspense and repetition within the tale similar to the authors' intention.

Within the story, I made Shahrazad the main character since women did not have much spotlight in the stories we read throughout the semester. Also, I wanted to showcase that women can be powerful and have creative minds. Throughout the stories we read, I noticed that women were being killed senselessly by men, so naturally, I thought it would be nice to give women the chance to take revenge.

For Shahrazad to develop the need to seek revenge, I needed to provide a motive to justify her actions. As a result, I decided to utilize the death of her sister because what greater way than the murder of a loved one to provoke someone to take drastic measures. However, Shahrazad needed to keep her way of murdering the King discreet so that she would not be caught in the act. That said, I made sure that Shahrzad catered to the King's ego and the desire to be taken care of because most men during this time were easily persuaded and distracted if you made them the center of attention. Unfortunately, Shahrazad has a difficult time because something always went wrong with the item she used to kill the King. The purpose behind this idea was to provide a sense of comedic relief within the story to keep the readers engaged.

Similar to the story *Thousand and One Nights*, where Shahrzad tells the King story every night, she is theorized to attempt to kill the King for a thousand nights in the retelling of the story. The constant failure also has a lesson embedded within it, which is learning to let go of the bitterness and anger. If you continue to hold on to it, you cannot expect things to be in your favor, which will lead to self-misery. Overall, I hope you enjoy my alternate tale of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

Postscript & Analysis: I Do It For Her

When the trailer for Sidney Lumet's televised musical *The Wiz* (1978) appeared on the family television, I imagine I was as excited as the young people were in 2023 when Disney remade *The Little Mermaid* and cast Halle Bailey, a Black American actress, as Ariel. In the early 1980s, I watched in awe as Diana Ross (Dorothy), Michael Jackson (Scarecrow), Nipsey Russell (Tin Man), and Ted Ross (Fleetwood Coupe de Ville/Lion), discoed and sang to four-on-the-floor beats in both urbane and urban 1970s Black fashion that was more than familiar to me as a little Black girl. Indeed, it was a familiarity that loudly announced positive cultural representation, which, according to Carly A. Orshan in their dissertation, *An American Tale: Incarnations of the Wizard of Oz and the Negotiation of Identity, Race, and Gender, in Popular Culture* (2012), negotiates national and gendered identity (4). Lumet's reimagining of Victor Fleming's televised adaptation of L. Frank Baum's children's novel, *The Wizard of Oz* (1900s) offered Black American children an opportunity to see themselves on screen in a fantastical world that promised a happy ending for them. For Black children, seeing themselves represented in the media they consume plays an especially unique role in identity formation because representations of Blackness are historically precarious or downright hateful. Rather than stand as an offering of sanguine American Blackness, the representations directly object to the possibility. And despite great efforts by American Black cultivators of art--singers, song writers, filmmakers, and writers among others--Black art continued to be consigned to the margins as tokens of representation, or it was self-published. Black run periodicals and literary magazines evidence the remarkable need for Black Americans to see themselves represented in the media they consume. *Write On, Black Girl!*, this magazine was born of my personal desire to see me and my girls represented in a way that is encouraging and loving, something I didn't have a lot of when I was a girl.

Little did I know that Black magazines such as *The Crisis* (1910), *Fire!!* (1926), and *Opportunity* (1923) not only chronicled historic events important to Black lives at the time, but they also published art and literature by Black talents from various age groups. *The Brownies Book* (1920) focused many of its pages on Black children. Katharine Capshaw and Michelle H. Martin writes in the "Introduction: From *The Brownies' Book* to Black Lives Matter," that one hundred years later the historic publication stands as "a generative initiative" (vii). Works such as these continued to inspire writer/artist and mentor relationships that I believe led to an influx of black art and writing that directly challenge white supremacist understandings of Blackness. And more than anything, I want to be a part of the continuation of these efforts.



Write On, Black Girl! was born of both desire and curiosity. I don't recall seeing a magazine about Black girls by Black girls when I was growing up. In fact, I was very close to adulthood by the time I read a book that featured a Black girl protagonist. My strong desire to see Black girls speak for themselves through their art and challenge this monolithic understanding of Black girlhood peaked my curiosity; what would such a collection focus on? What could we learn if we just listen to them speak? The first issue of *Write On, Black Girl!* resulted in a beautiful collection that represents the passion and trust the contributors had in the editorial staff. In preparation for the production of the second issue, I visited the Library of Congress to access archived Black magazines to learn how to structure the publication, how to engage with our audience, and encourage them. I also did some research on Dorothy West, a young darling and last surviving member of the Harlem Renaissance until August 16, 1998. West tried twice to get her publication--*Challenge* (1934) and *New Challenge* (1937)--up and running, but only managed to publish one issue. As it turns out, West was not necessarily interested in grooming Black writers according to Walter C. Daniel in his essay, "Challenge Magazine: a Failed Experiment" (1976). This interesting factoid disappointed me because I naively assumed that West's magazine went about achieving its goals with young writers at the center of the publication's efforts. I thought young Black writers were West's answer to the 'why are we doing this' question. But that doesn't appear to have been the case.

Well known writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes "credits the mentorship of Charles Johnson," founder and editor of *Opportunity* (1923-1928) magazine, for encouraging them by inviting them "to come to New York" and by publishing their work (364-67). This leads me to feel validation for our aim with *Write On, Black Girl!* When we read the submissions, we're not looking for a particular kind of Black femme energy. Instead, we aim to show diversity in how we imagine it; we aim to challenge conservative understandings of us. We don't subscribe to any particular dialect or grammar for the purpose of acquiring a certain level of notoriety. Instead, we see our role as editor as being more like the way Charles S. Johnson practiced editorship in the sense that we will go out among our people and encourage them to speak through their art.

My work is concerned with Black girlhood in YA literature, so admittedly I entered this venture with a bit of tunnel vision. But as we continued to discuss audience and Black feminism and issues in the media about Black trans girls rights, we realized there are very few spaces for Black trans-girls and Black nonbinary folx. We, like so many others, just assumed they would know we count them in our family and feel invited. But not necessarily so. We realized we needed to extend an invitation so that it is clear. Not everyone has read enough Black feminism to know that it along with Black Trans-Feminism aims to recalibrate our conservative understandings of gender. So, when we say *Black Girl!*, we do include any Black femme identifying or gender nonconforming person who relates to our experiences in that call. I, along with the editorial staff, believe *Write On, Black Girl!* is a literary movement, one that will outgrow me, but a movement just the same. And part of this literary movement depends on us meeting the needs of up and

coming Black femme writers. This publication aims to do everything in its power to make space for whatever printable art our contributors desire to publish in our collection while also tending to other serious concerns--issues that forced our predecessors to fold. We also aim to work with our contributors if they need us to strengthen their work so that it may reach a broader audience. But we in no way want to censor or silence anyone; some content may feel offensive, but please keep in mind that we want our contributors to speak their truth. We hope that through these efforts we will attract not only up and coming writers and artists but up and coming scholars as well. As we stand on the shoulders of giants, we look to the mentorship of established artists, writers, and scholars to make this an archive that accurately represents Black femme identity in the 21st century and beyond us all to use in our critical discourse.

In my initial analysis of the Spring 2022 and Spring 2023 (actually released in early Fall 2023) issues, the near absence of words racism, angry, and shame--terms most often associated with characterizations of Black femme in America. There are a number of viable claims that could grow from this observation that won't be handled here, but it's interesting none-the-less. Also notable is the joy and confidence reflected in the images, which contradict the stereotypical renderings of us. The variation in writing styles, topics, and interests continue to grow in number with each new issue. The expressions about resilience and confidence, along with the works challenge misrepresentations are particularly thought-provoking as they are related to my own work.

Concern for the preservation of Black girl childhood and innocence rests firmly at the focal point of discussions about Black girlhood, yet Black girls, trans-girls, and femme identifying folx's remain a target for adult concerns. America's history and storytelling are filled with stories and songs that adultify and hold accountable Black characters who should be allowed to just be a child. That's because childhood for this population looks very different. Novels such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Rita Williams-Garcia's *P.S. Be Eleven* series, Alicia D. Williams's *Genesis Begins Again*, Jesymyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, and Delores Phillips's *The Darkest Child* are just a few examples of novels that feature Black girls who are exposed to adult experiences far earlier than most children. They feature Black girls who had to learn to be resilient in the face of an unjust nation and respectability politics. Writers such as Danicia Brown echo this sentiment in their poem, "Definitions," in the first issue of our publication, "To be black is to be resilient./ ... /To be black is to force yourself to be polite in order to avoid being labeled as something you are not./ ... /It is a complicated existence" (WOBG 76). A complicated existence indeed, especially when social arrangement puts additional pressure on femme identifying folx of color. Despite the pressure, we persevere to fantastic levels often referred to as Black girl magic.

I hope *Write On, Black Girl!* is on its way to participating in critical discourse about Black girls, trans-girls, and femme identifying folx for many years to come. The theme for the third issue will be announced very soon; and please forgive us for taking so long to get the second issue out. We hope it was worth the wait.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kiedra B. Taylor". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Kiedra B. Taylor, PhD Candidate
Founding Editor

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