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# COLLECTIVE

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STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL OF QUEENSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE • ISSUE 6

COLLECTIVE is published annually by  
Queensborough Community College,  
Christine Mangino, President  
and the Department of English, Creative Writing Club.

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# Aches

Rebecca Rota

When you feel an ache you cannot place, the kind that wedges itself between your bones, and folds itself neatly in your soul, sometimes all you can hope for is a ghost. To know you're haunted, really truly haunted, and those nights you woke up breathless, tinted in a weary sweat, you weren't just haunting yourself. How you float through your days feeling an absent presence, a thick air that fills only the space between you and everything else. How you remind yourself it's not just your ache, and you're not alone. Not in the living sense. In the sense that you're full of ghosts, and they ache too. And the air around you has to be heavy, and so does your heart, because the dead can't lift the weight of all your aches. You've never seen them but you know they're there because it's the only way you can explain the feeling in your chest. And maybe you've never seen them because you're afraid of who they'll look like, and it's best not to know whose aches you carry. It becomes tiresome, when every bump in your heart becomes a bump in the night becomes a woman crawling across your ceiling. So she has to be real, even if you can only feel her watching. And so come the days you wish you were one of them, floating in the thick empty space between someone and everything else. To be the unseen woman crawling on the ceiling of a person just like you. To be the fear you do not carry anymore, the heaviness that is no longer yours. And you know this relief could last forever, in this dead, airy self, but you stare at all the sadness that once consumed you. You can see it, forming a new ghost that sits on the edge of the bed of some sad sucker who aches just like you did. And now you're wrapped in a damp sadness again, because your final choices can't be undone. And they will have to live in the heaviness of you, or become the heaviness too.



*Mariam* by Katherine Schiraldi

# 2020

Tehmina Goodnall

stock up your homes  
prepare for the worst  
close the borders  
they are a threat  
shutdown the city  
turn off its lights  
do not go outside  
the foe is in a disguise  
send your guests away  
they are all suspects  
stay home  
It is the only way  
do not go outside  
It is a risk  
and if you must  
shield up like an armor  
for you are at war without defense  
Cover you face except your eyes  
Or they will not let you in  
watch your back  
it can be anywhere  
grab the kids  
tell them not to touch a thing  
do not shake hands  
it can be hidden in the palms  
or under the nails  
drop off groceries at the front door  
do not give grandma a kiss  
for you can get her sick  
facetime your dad  
for no one is allowed in the hospital  
when someone coughs  
look at them with terror  
stay home  
do not go outside  
It is a risk  
But if you must  
shield up like an armor



# Dead Soul

Tahreem Ashraf

When I woke up one morning to breathe in a mask  
And sanitized my hands after completing every task  
I wore my white uniform and stepped out of the main room door  
Allowed my lips to pray for the sick and the sad  
I entered the hospital and saw an old man crying  
He said he was suffocated and he knew he was dying  
I told him that in spring  
In the fragrant ambiance of delicate buds  
He will sit in the park in-front of his house  
Holding the hands of his wife with a smile on his lips  
He will breathe the fresh air without any barrier  
And no one will accuse, that he is the carrier  
You will eat dinner in Augustine  
And then go to theatre in Brooklyn  
O nurse! Don't lie, he said  
My wife is already dead  
And my time has come to go to bed  
This hope of yours is just a candy that I don't want to swallow  
Your consolation is nothing but shallow  
Because the life I will live alone, will never be mellow  
Do you know what hope is? I asked  
"It's a flicker of light in the deep darkness"  
But who will fight the darkness alone My dear, he replied sad and gloomy  
And a wave of hurt passed through me  
And that moment I knew  
That the pandemic is not only taking lives  
But also killing the souls  
Oh! Poor scared souls we are!



*Photo by Shane Singh*

> \* !

Hyvil Escayg

and after getting your closure,  
you will go to sleep with comfort in your heart  
and i will go to sleep  
uncomfortable in my skin

# Breathe

Richelle Leon

The only thought going through my mind

Breathe.

As they choke him, and he screams.

“I can’t breathe”

“I can’t breathe”

“I can’t breathe”

“I can’t...”

“I ca...”

“I”

Who would have known death was the penalty?

What we know now as just a slogan

Was the last words Eric Garner said while I watched them hold him

Standing in disbelief at what I just seen.

His life worth less than the cigarettes he was selling

At least to the three officers who killed him.

It was a Thursday in mid-July that sparked a movement and national outcry.

What I saw with my own eyes.

They approached him aggressively

He responded to them hesitantly.

What was an intense conversation not with words but body language

Turned deadly when they grab him suddenly.

On the ground they went.

One wrapped around him from the neck down.

One restraining his arm as the crowd pleaded for the officers to back down.

The last lending an un-needed hand as he screamed.

“I can’t breathe “

A sight for the world to see.

To be Black and America it apparently a crime to breathe

Like the most notorious thieves

To breathe air not meant to be received.

Stealing what those officers saw as a luxury

What to us is a bare necessity

Seen as wealth unattainable with black skin currency.



## The Protest

Sarafina Davis

“I can’t breathe” were the last words to be uttered by George Floyd before the police killed him. I remember finding it difficult to watch the circulating video of him dying because of how upset it made me. The cracking of his voice and his cries for help lingered in my mind and aching heart as I thought about my dad. George was not a criminal who threatened the lives of others; instead, he was a trying father whose only crime was being black. The uproar of the black community after his death was enough to send my inner human rights activist into overdrive. The increase of Black Lives Matter protests worldwide made me feel inspired that somehow things could change.

The days following George Floyd’s death were the hardest for me. You would think that I was his daughter based on how emotionally wrecked I was at the time. My social media accounts were filled with racists tweets, videos of nonviolent protesters being attacked and ignorance. “All of this was too much,” I remembered saying to my aunt as I scrolled through my feed with a heavy heart. I just needed everything to stop--but it didn’t. I can’t forget how drained I felt by looking at my phone. I felt as if I could not breathe as a swarm of heavy emotions hit me. The fountain in my eyes flooded as the events that unfolded became too much. I just needed a break from the injustices my fellow black men and women still had to go through in society. Yet, how could I disassociate myself from their pain? How could I step out of my skin and relax? I would still be black in the United States’ eyes, from the shape of my lips to the curve of my hips and the kink in my hair. I would still be black, an unarmed weapon.

On the little island of Jamaica, the motto “Out of many, One people” stands for people of different colors, shapes, and sizes living together. I grew up loving the glow of my skin, the broadness of my nose, and the fullness of my lips because of the love my parents showed me. The joy of knowing that my ancestors were brave black men and women who fought for their freedom made me happy. I was proud of my African heritage. I was proud to be black. I did not know how it felt to be an outsider in your own country until I immigrated to the United States. In Jamaica, classism and colorism between black people is very common. The lighter your skin and the more loosely coiled your hair is, the better chance you have at succeeding in life. With colorism comes classism, people who are lighter in color believe that they are better than others and oftentimes look down on the darker colored people. Even though these are major problems in the Caribbean, that were passed down from colonizers to enslaved Africans, we still come together as one to celebrate our freedom and history regardless of our color and struggles.

In addition to this, the harsh reality of being black in the United States does not hit me until the tragic and unbelievable news about another black person being killed by the police surfaces or when I go to the store. The thought of losing my father and him being black never used to cross my mind until the George Floyd incident. I worry about him every time he leaves for work and every time it gets too late. Equally, I worry about being falsely accused of stealing when I go to a store. The racist stereotype that everyone who is black is a thief becomes prominent when you are followed closely by store clerks. I recall the uncomfortable feeling of being watched by a store clerk who thought I was stealing or being accused of taking something that did not belong to me.

This should not be our way of life. We should not have to worry about the color of skin, equality, or our safety. The picture of George Floyd’s Memorial Mural and what it stands for is important and will go down in history because of its worldwide impact. It showed how powerful black men and women are and have been when they come together to fight for something they believe in. The unity that can be formed between people from all over the world is unimaginable to individuals who live in the United States. How can a country that boasts a front of unity can not see the division caused by racial inequality? Until the United States of America decides to fully eradicate racism and inequality, it will never truly be in a united state.

# A Flame Extinguished

Fernando Ronconi

An aerial view:

A plaza.

A sea of small flames.

A candlelit vigil

for a brother slaughtered.

Militia swarm,

Like locusts

Or a Legion of pigs,

Scattering the gathering.

We zoom in.

Skin sags

Over brittle bones.

A fragile man,

With head held high,

Gets slapped,

Then beaten.

He utters nothing,

Only a cry of anguish

When he's snapped,

a flame extinguished.

# Fatal Walk

Richelle Leon

Are we allowed to be afraid?  
After our brothers die, after our fathers die  
While being caried to the slaughter are we allowed to cry?  
Wrongfully accused and fearing for our freedom  
My arms and wrist can you please free them?

It's becoming quite the pattern  
Every week another victim  
Do we all look so suspicious while outside?  
A call came in and said he seems sketchy  
23 is way too young to die  
Asthmatic and autistic 140 pounds and all alone  
They viewed him such a threat they had to hold him by his neck  
A mother lost her son, and she is not the only one  
Your badge is supposed to represent protection  
In these situations, you become judge & juror  
execute the sentence, Lethal injection.

The crime was being black while walking with a mask.  
I recall his sister saying he was the kindest boy she knew  
The mask was for his anemia. He gets cold always had his jacket zipped up too.  
He did not commit a crime and was fearful for his life.  
But he was black and afraid so in the eyes of the police their decision was right.  
It hurts to know you died afraid  
It hurts to know you died at this age  
It hurts to know that there will never be a case  
It hurts to know that this will happen again  
But for now, I Remember your name, Elijah McClain and your smiling face.



# Glacier

Zhaoyi Zhou

When I was an ocean,  
I have many good friends,  
Until the earth changes.  
When I become a small glacier,  
Many of my friends had disappeared,  
Until the second change of the earth.  
When I grow into a powerful glacier,  
I only have a few friends left.  
I am a historian and the time incarnate,  
I'm just a glacier,  
Lonely, old, peaceful.  
But I'm almost left,  
Polar bears keep me,  
The melted water became their tear.  
I'm disappearing,  
Maybe the earth will change,  
Maybe history will repeat itself,  
Maybe humans will help me and help themselves.

# Wonder

Laura Sánchez

I wonder what owning feels like—  
skin, or hair, or teeth, or—  
I wonder if it feels like swimming  
in the deep blue sea,  
if it feels like laying in the grass  
in my mother's countryside house  
with the sun patting my skin while the  
coconut trees coerced the wind  
to keep me safe and sound.  
I wonder what owning feels like

when the shoes in your feet,  
the shirt tight against your chest, the  
blue jeans faded to white are the  
hand-me-downs,  
of the hand-me-downs  
of the hand-me-downs.  
when the rehearsed words become suddenly  
repetitive, and he notices that you are running out  
of ways of saying 'no'  
so he promptly teaches you  
not to say a damn word. I don't think we are  
both old enough to even understand  
the meaning of throwing my desk in a fit  
when the word no leaves my lips for the fifth time.  
I don't think he knows that when you are ten  
you can still steal the speech  
that I never fucking owned  
to begin with so my resolve against  
your approach could fade into a murmur in the back.

I wonder if I knew when another older *he*,  
came around that there was a sick pattern  
already forming in front of my eyes.  
I mean, there was no doubt. I don't have to  
wonder if he knows  
that he is four years older, which makes him four  
times fucking stronger, and  
four times more knowing  
of ways to verbally take pieces of me  
I never got to meet.

he knew to approach me in the backyard  
on recess time when I was alone,  
and the novelty that someone  
that was clearly older than me  
was even talking to me, covered for him when  
he stole my chances to flee.  
he was quick to force his way  
into my brain with mean words  
that I never wanted in the first place,  
and strong grips on my wrists when I  
foolishly thought I had the right to  
say that it was enough. it was as if suddenly the word  
'no' no longer held meaning to me,  
because the more I seemed  
to try and speak the more they uncomfortably  
set like stones in my throat  
with just one of his looks thrown  
filled of malice.

I wonder what one day  
provoked me to break free  
and reclaim whatever he took from me.  
I wonder if it was the  
group of older girls that called him out  
when he cursed me out as if I was his to do as he pleased.  
I wonder if it was the humiliated bliss  
that punched against my teeth  
and mockingly chanted:  
*"you are his! you are his! you are his!"*.  
His response was immediate, and the four years  
of his experiences loomed over me as his fist met  
the soft side of my belly, and tears  
ran steadily, and the taste  
of my lunch  
invaded my palate.

it was the dismissal of  
the school principal  
when I was huddled in the corner  
of an unused classroom crying my eyes out  
with my sister's protective arms around me  
that I realized that there was  
no place for me to own  
anything in this world,  
even less the things that were  
rightfully mine when I was born.

I still wonder what owning feels like—  
my skin, or my hair, or my teeth, or—  
I wonder if it would feel like playing in the  
sand and finding small seashells to make  
into a wish jar. I wonder if it would feel  
like the gentle peace of waking up  
by the sound of my mother's favorite sunday music  
the one that meant  
that it was time to clean.  
or if it would feel like the love that only the  
hand-me-downs,  
of the hand-me-downs  
of the hand-me-downs clothes  
could ever bring.

# Herstory (after *Sunny Came Home* by Shawn Colvin)

Joshua J. Olechnowski

For but a brief stay,  
but a heavy life of empty dreams,  
grey streets and raining in her heart,  
she explored those redeeming dreams  
and was left by a teal pool by herself,  
behind fences on a cul de sac.  
The flowers and vino and twinkling teal  
were her manifestations  
meant to be providing,  
but were all maintenance and money:  
Everything was money.  
These things,  
accessed by the senses  
did not light up  
the cavern of her sorrow  
The way that a gasoline lantern would.

Pretty features –  
A homecoming queen,  
A veil dyed blond,  
orbs like her  
sequestered teal pool,  
left untended, darkened green.  
Always a womanly,  
expensive scent  
and brand name merchandise,  
looking importantly crisp.  
The way these clothes soon would be.

*'Days went by, hypnotizing,  
You felt the walk on the wire.'*  
Yes you heard the voices,  
and lit the match,  
Tearing down the house  
you had built  
and the house you'd been given.  
Which was Home to you?

Well, no matter,  
You went Home that day:  
leaving ruins of wooden beams  
and labored, magical decor;  
of burnt blond  
and edifice of enamel.  
You truly went Home.  
Was it Blazing Glory?  
Move on from the macabre,  
Leave her-story not to the  
Mercurial whims of time and narration.  
A cherished mother, sister, friend –  
you led the end of the warring  
That you felt and so you saw,  
feelings becoming visions.

You went Home,  
*'with a box of tools and a mission':*  
taking matters into your womanly,  
powerful hands,  
With the flick of a wrist.



*Metamorphosis* by Daniel Cárdenas

# Deep Ocean Mind

Belky Galan

Inside the never-ending nightmare,  
Just like drowning in an ocean,  
I can't seem to find my purpose,  
Or the part of me that makes me unique.

Like searching in a dark room,  
With a blindfold on my eyes  
There is nothing but a sunless sky,  
I keep on stumbling and falling down.

Like the lifeless traffic light,  
My perception shifts over time,  
It becomes harder to tell reality apart.  
My mind plays trick on my eyes,  
Like a blind person on a chamber,  
I keep on looking but I can't see anything at all.

Like the distance from Earth to the moon,  
The quest to find myself glides miles away,  
Questions growing along the crusade.  
I keep on searching but there is no response.  
Should I give up?

It becomes complicated as time passes by,  
Merciless like death,  
It waits for no one and doesn't discriminate.  
Deep within this boundless mind,  
I will keep on looking  
Even if my time comes to an end.



# Where the Sun Meets Home

Laura Sánchez

*“¡Mami!”* The term of endearment rolls sweetly out of my mother’s mouth. *“Te quedas por donde te vea.”* The wind carries her voice obediently. I yell something in agreement, the hot sand beneath my feet marking my hurried steps, the sound of the waves calling me home. Just ahead of me the blue sky loses itself into the clear, blue sea and the shore warmly says hello to my toes when the water eagerly soaks them in. *¡Ven, ven, ven!* somewhere the small, bright fishes that likes to swim with me impatiently urges me deeper. I give in. The first dive into the water feels like gulping my first breath of air, and my arms drives me deeper into the warmth of the cold beach. The familiar push and pull mischievously tries to hold me off, but my feet are used to the same old game, and swiftly bypass it. I open my eyes, the sting of the salt gently reminding me to go back up, but I don’t forget about the rash it tried to give me a couple of years ago, so I stubbornly ignore the warning. I swim farther —and deeper,— still, my fingertips caressing the white sand just underneath, and just when one of the small friendly fishes I’m used to bumps into me, I go back up. When I finally break into the surface, the wind is cool in my face, yet the air is still playfully hot. I let my body rest in the comfiness the beach provides, and my limbs float relaxed without sinking underneath. The bright blue sky winks at me, and my eyes starts to feel heavy as the sea tries to lulls me to sleep. The sun lovingly envelopes me with a care that only she can show. The waves nudge me left and right, let and right. *Oh, I remember, they love me.* And how could they not? Me, I am their child. I am the product of the love of the sea and sand, them who have loved my ancestors and still protects and heals us with fierce determination. Me, who was personally kissed by the sun just like those who came before me. In the calm swing of the waves, the warm hug from the sun, the protective eye of the sky, I am home.



*Photo by Regina Della Vecchia*

# Five Haikus

Luck Graham

## **A Dying Star**

Look to the stars.  
They don't shine as they once did.  
No more shine in me.

## **Flutters**

Looking in their eyes.  
Stomach filled with butterflies.  
By their side, I shine.

## **Passerby**

I want to be great;  
But I'm sitting in the stands.  
Watching my dreams go.

## **Basketball**

A round orange ball.  
Bounce! Bounce! Bounce! A sound I love.  
It's my therapist.

## **Who Am I?**

A whole that can't be filled.  
In a shadow of who's gone.  
    Can't tell who I am.

# The One That Got Away

Kenneth Michael Yap

Getting over a painful experience is much like crossing the monkey bars. You have to let go at some point in order to move forward. Everything was so perfect; how exactly did we mess it up? I can't help but wonder, what if we made better choices? What if we fought for us? What if this was just a phase in our lives and at the end it still ends with us? But what if, what if I lost her forever? I still do wonder how she's doing right now; I hope everything is great with her. It's been a while since the last time I saw her, or spoke with her. I can't even remember the reason that brought us to this point, to be honest.

Let me introduce her by describing how simple yet perfect she is. That she had stars in her eyes and poetry on her lips and she's the sweetest and most selfless "GOAL digger" I know. I probably can't turn back time but I can at least write an essay about Micee. I met her at Dream Soft Internet Café on a regular Saturday which turned into an unforgettable moment and changed my life. It started out just another day off from school when I decided to take a shower to go to the café and began playing Defense of the Ancients. All of a sudden, I heard a sweet voice. I turned around and saw this pretty young lady sitting in the cubicle next to mine. She needed some technical assistance and fortunately I knew how to fix it. I paused my game and started to help her. I could not restrain myself from looking at her beautiful face, especially her eyes. She thanked me after finishing her school work and was getting ready to leave. I felt like I had butterflies in my stomach and I was unable to respond immediately. I took a deep breath, gathered all my strength and tried to keep myself grounded. I didn't believe in love at first sight until that moment and I knew that I had to do something about it. When she was about to leave, I kiddingly told her that my services aren't free and that she needs to buy me lunch. She was shocked at first but then she started laughing. At that point, I realized that I found the woman I want to marry.

Things happened so fast; we didn't even realize that we were growing apart. I had to move back to New York and leave her in the Philippines. We were not prepared for this situation because long-distance relationship is not for everyone and it is harder than in sound or look, especially when you start to physically long for someone that is a thousand miles away. Days turned into weeks, which turned into months, which turned into years then the next thing I knew, we grew apart and have a different outlook in life. One of the hardest parts of life is deciding whether to walk away or to try harder. At some point, I have realized that some people can stay in your heart but not in your life. I didn't want to drag her down and have her sacrifice her dreams just for us. Sometimes you try your hardest but things don't turn out the way you want them to.

Life is weird. You can go from being strangers, to being friends, to being more than friends, to being practically strangers again. I can still remember everything like it was yesterday. I can still feel the sensation she gives me. How she holds my hand; so tight like she doesn't want to let it go, how we hug for minutes because we want to stay in that moment for a while, how she makes everything better just by simply being there. I can still feel the excitement of our last adventure and how the wind blew on our faces while we watched the sun set, the salty taste and smell of the ocean, and the gentle roar of the waves while she whispered "I love you" in my ears. Oh God, I miss her so much. If only I can go back in time, I'd freeze that moment forever. Unfortunately, sometimes things have to change and maybe they're for the better, so I'm going to take one last look and I'm going to put it where it belongs.

A writer named Isabel Allende once said in an interview, "Write what should not be forgotten." I wrote about our story for everyone to know how amazing she is and how loving a woman like her will bring you to your knees. She's the kind of person you'll proudly introduce to your family and the rest of the world just because she deserves it. She's the type of girl you'll love to build a family with and feel blessed everyday waking up next to her for the rest of your life. She's a keeper. However, sometimes love means taking a step back. If you care about somebody, you should want them to be happy even if you wind up being left out. She's the one that got away. I treasure every moment we had but I have to let go now. If by any perfect chance she gets to read this in the future, I'd like to let her know that if by some miracle she ever finds herself in the position to fall in love again, fall in love with me.

When life gets you down, you know what you got to do?

"Just keep swimming." ~ Dory (*Finding Nemo*)

# Love Will Hurt but Will Be Worth It

Sunita Cheddie

Love is frightening, it can strike you like lightning.

Love can be cunning , I always feel like running.

There is no use in hiding because love will find you.

Love makes us weak but protected.

Love can influence decisions for better or worse.

There are questions some may ask about love but the answer is always and  
above. Love can't be forced or controlled

Love is just bold.

There are many concepts on love but one thing's for sure, love cannot be  
disposed of.

# Transformations

Joshua J. Olechnowski

Growing up, I was the runt of the litter – sometimes forgotten and many times the receiver of hand-me-downs I did not want – though learning throughout childhood that this tail-end position suited me quite well. What came with it was the parental exhaustion of expectations and a certain freedom that allowed me wide exploration. As an air sign, I now know this sensitivity to freedom to be an integral part of my homeostasis. As with many youngest children, I mimicked my elder siblings and was always quick to assure myself inclusion. With a full-time working dad and a stay-at-home mother who slept a lot, we had free reign not only of our duplex apartment, but the open grassy field adjacent to it within the complex. Here we made the acquaintance of other children whose parents sought refuge in letting them play outside, within easy sight of the apartment windows of supervision. These groupings, of siblings and of neighbors, reflect my earliest vivid experiences of becoming.

While my father worked to live, my mother lived to work herself into fits of gentle intimidation at keeping things clean and avoiding eating too much of the recently bought groceries. She was also adept at keeping us involved with our local Catholic church which served as our elementary school and home for children’s choir. Once she even sneaked all six of us including dad into their Christmas manger display outside the church for a nighttime Christmas photo shoot. Along with years of styled photographs done at Macy’s, that photo presented her desired familial image for that season. In time, our playful years and desire to release the constraints of a catholic school overrode her energy to mount a resistance, and we each transferred to public school. I still recall in fifth grade having to take the bus even though I could see the school from the parking lot of our complex. There were abductions which made the news in the nineties, but now I wonder why she couldn’t (at least once in awhile) walk me there?

Largely I recall these free, playful, exploring years of my youth with a grateful fondness. In retrospect, though all the elements do not fit, I generally describe these years as those of “The Brady Bunch”, or the congenial, saccharine “TGIF” television families of our time. The first marker of change came when I was thirteen. My eldest brother, a bookworm rule-follower with the greatest

expectations, the only one who stayed in the catholic school line, during his senior year of high school had experienced the first twitterpations of young love with a male classmate. He followed the modern rubric of that time and sat both of my parents down and gave them the talk: his “coming out of the closet”. I vaguely recall hearing this news from my social and perceptive only sister, following one of my long visits to the locked-door bathroom exploring my new parts and their actions, along with my unusual thoughts which accompanied this solitude. I, too, was thinking about males during these visits, though not consciously, and recognized a cloudy similarity in the news I had just received. No further thought was given to this other than hearing that the news was not particularly well received, though also not earth-shattering. My dad simply resumed his work cycle, and no other word was mentioned of this to the family at large.

When I was fourteen and entering the socially informative, enriching mixing-pot of high school, my parents divorced and my mother moved out with plans in motion for a castle. My eldest brother went off to college and would later come home during holiday breaks to show off his new rave lights from parties he was going to. These next few years were as free as ever, probably too free for my dad who would for the first time get angry after his long shifts at the place being carelessly messy and the garbage not thrown away. By this time, a flamboyant neighbor and I were dating girlfriends by day and experimenting sexually by night. We were always in competition publicly and the best of friends when all our classmates had gone to their respective homes. During one of these ebbs in our relationship, we reconciled after a few weeks of not hanging out and he shockingly told me that he and one of the other guys in our social group (who was dating girls) had fooled around. Again unconsciously, within the throws of day and night denial, I reached out to this classmate and asked that we hang out more often. Within short order, he was secretly trying to initiate slow overtures with me as well. This blossomed from an exploration in sex to an exploration in love rather quickly. It was clear: none of the sweet girls could compare to these pure feelings of ecstasy and becoming.



Being only one year younger than my only sister, during high school when my secret boyfriend would come over, it became obvious that she would have secret girlfriends visiting. It was an unspoken truce to keep it secret. However, during one of those adolescent riots, we would rile ourselves up and try to out the other to our visiting mother. These were confusing, detached, independent times. By this point, everyone was in their own lane and going in their own direction. Such is the fate of the family unit. We are brought into this world alone and may pretend that we will not go astray from one another in this great universe, but we will also go alone. This is not a hymn of sadness for we may create adjacent families of love wherever we go.

While we may not have experienced a warm, welcoming acceptance, we at least each had the space to travel through our own individuality on our respective journey of becoming (whether intentionally provided or not). For this I am also grateful. I find in adulthood that it is the attitude of gratitude and a view of the whole of things, rather than sheltering behind insufficient identities or victimhood, that truly lends to our compassion and peace. When we can forgive others for pain they seem to have caused us, opening to the possibility that we do not know their own journey, we begin to step further into the truth of ourself. Eventually, as did my brother, both my sister and I were able to speak our truth once we fell in love, post high school, as adults. I am grateful to have been given love growing up because I had enough self-love to express that if this were not okay, it would be more than fine with me to stay in my own lane. You were either with me or not at that point. While this may not be everyone's path, self-love is the key and we get there by first accepting ourselves, as we accept that a tree is here, and a flower is there. These are the laws of nature.

# Who Are You?

Priya Harripersaud

Who are you?

Who am I?

Are you what you say you are?

Or are you like one of us?

Like my mother, who is dreaming of a new world

Like my friend, who is standing in a new light

And then there's me, who is pondering about all the things that we can be

Or is that just not you?

Are you not inspired to take on new things?

Are you confused with what you want to do?

Is the turmoil eating away at you?

Who are you?

I don't know

Who do you think I am?

Am I what you romanticized?

Or am I just another one of your masked personas?

Because to be *fair*

The idol in the mirror sounds like a real treat

But not too long after

Is where mother reality is waiting in the heap

Giving you a gentle reminder,

"Continue making your progress, my child"

"And one day, you will shine like the moon among the dark night of shimmering stars"

She goes straight for the mirror - and pulled me back to life

"It's about time you get to work"

And so - who am I?

I am who I make myself to be!

# It's Just Hair

Sara Mareus

Snip! Snip! As Ashanti put the scissors through her long, thick, tightly curled nappy 4c hair. She began cutting her hair from the back just in case her ancestors found out about the atrocity she was committing, and they decided to shake the earth as a sign of their anger. If that were to happen, she can simply shave the back and wear a tapered look just to appease them. But to her surprise, she kept cutting and the earth was as is. She took this as a sign that she got their blessing and kept on cutting.

Snip! Snip! She continued. The back of her head was done. As she moved to the middle she froze, she was overwhelmed with anxiety as she thought about how furious her mother would be when she finds out she has just committed the ultimate sin. But her anxious episode only lasted a second as she remembered all the things her mama put her through all in the name of getting her hair done. The smell of perm burning her scalp, the agony she felt from her mama forcing a rat tooth comb through her bush, but most especially the devil itself which was the rusty hot comb. Ashanti could still taste the smell of her burning flash when her mama accidentally let the hot comb tore her ears in an attempt to strengthen her hair so she could look presentable at school. She remembered the cramps and neck pain she felt from sitting in a chair for nine plus hours as the Haitians plaited her hair. Although she loved the beauty, confidence and comfort box braids gave her, she resented everything she had to go through the process. Box braid was her go to protective style which meant no waking up 2-3 hours early to style her nappy hair before leaving the house. But the Haitians plait tight, which meant no goodnight sleep for her for at least a week and a half which was how long it took for the pain to subside.

Everything a thought popped into her head telling her why cutting her hair was a big mistake, an even stronger traumatic memory surfaces. These flashbacks of hair trauma gave her the motivation she needed to keep going. At last, the middle of her head was done, and she moved to the front. Looking in the mirror, reality struck again. What will people think about me? She thought, men will no longer find me attractive as she sobs. Flashbacks kicked again and gave her the boost she needed to cross the finish line. This time she remembered how her wig fell off in the food court of the mall as she bent over to pick her wallet from the ground. The embarrassment and shame she felt still put her stomach in knots whenever she remembers that unfortunate incident. The nausea she got from this memory made her hand weak and caused the scissors to fall off her hand. As she reached her wooden floor for her scissors, she felt her FUPA jiggle and that was it for her. Ashanti always wanted to go to the gym or go for an outdoor run, but she would rather tuck

her fupa into her high waisted jeans that be caught outside with her edges un-laid and the silky hair which took her hours to tame go back into a poof ball as a result of sweat.

Snip! Snip! She continued, as she pictured herself with a snatched waist; a slim waist that can finally complement her big hips. Without her hair anxiety she can finally get the body she desires from working out without worrying about shrinkage and frizzing from sweat. She imagined how light she would feel once the load was off her head. Finally, she was done cutting and switched to her clipper for a more finished cut. As the remainder of her hair hit the ground, she felt like the weight of the world was finally off her shoulder. Free at last! She screamed. She dashed into her closet, put on her favorite pair of tights, her sports bra and her favorite pair of Nike running shoes and went out for a run without a care in the world. The freedom she felt was nothing like she imagined.

# The Reflection of Myself

Hantz Noel

I'm the mirror you look at closely, but I'm also blurry.  
I live on my phone like a sim card while the world shutting down on me.  
I live, I breathe, I smell, with a stuffy nose.

Can you relate? Because I'm blindly closing in on my own reflection.  
Oh God! am I really blurry? Am I really a mirror?  
I think I'm a broken mirror with millions of intact pieces.  
Do I live for tomorrow or presently dying with a death wish.

My reflection comes from the forest as if I was a pine tree.  
My roots are where it all started with a lil' of nothing to hold on to.  
I may go back with a broken dignity when I hear my grandma's voice whispering,  
    oh long lost child  
come back home.

# Challenges of Black Hairstyles

Denise Hosang

It was a bright and beautiful summer afternoon of 2018, my sisters and I were out for “lunner”. We chatted lightly over drinks when our conversation turned to hair. They wore natural locks and I wore braided locks. As we sipped our drinks, we joked about our childhood hairstyle rituals, how we endured and survived hair washing and hair styling day. Growing up with four siblings, which includes two sisters, in a single parent household because my dad passed when I was eight had its challenges. My mother, who worked, had to groom us all for school and herself for work in the mornings. Structure was the only mechanism by which we survived. Hence, Saturdays were hair washing days and Sundays were hair styling days. The washing process involved shampooing, conditioning and towel drying the hair. Next, the scalp would be generously oiled and then the hair would be parted in small patches, twisted and coiled in little bumps known as Chiney Bumps or Bantu Knots. This process allowed the hair to dry without heat and uncoil from water shrinking.

On Sunday afternoons, the knots would be unwound and the hair would be styled in cornrows. This style enabled the hair to remain neat for many days, if not weeks, once protected with a scarf or head tie when retiring to bed.

The process of untangling the hair after shampooing to put it into Bantu Knots was punishing. Our scalp were always tender because, I believed, of the inactivity from not combing for a week. We would cry and hold onto the area being processed which seem never ending. The process was equally stressful for my mother who had to do this repeatedly for three girls and herself. My mother was forced to use these protective hairstyles to protect our hair, to ensure we maintained a presentable appearance and to lend latitude to her limited time. On the bright side, our hair thrived. It was thick, full and lustrous.

As soon as we started high school, my mom was more than happy to allow us to get our hair permed. We were ecstatic. The perm process involved the application of a chemical to our hair (Cream/Perm). This changed the hair pattern (straighten our natural curl), change the hair texture (from course to thin) and the hair appearance (intensifying the natural hair color). This process had to be repeated every six or eight weeks and required special hair treatment and care. While this process made the hair more manageable

thus, enabled us girls to groom our hair ourselves it was very costly to maintain. Being a single mother, while she did her best, it was financially challenging. Sometimes our hair was way overdue for processing and other times she had to apply the perm herself resulting in hair damage from improper application, over processing and scalp scarring.

As the appetizers hit the table, the conversation shifted to why we wear our hair the way we do and how that choice has impacted our lives. I thought how paradoxical it was, they both thrive holding high professional jobs in their work space with opposingly different organizational identity representation.

The younger of my two sisters, a curriculum development specialist in engineering at the university level, works in an open and liberated space where self-identification and roles are less defined by dress code and more by the quality and scope of ones work. She posited that her locks spiritually and regionally encapsulate who she is and it is the best projection of her inner self (strength, determination and resolve) especially in her work space. She furthered that her work space is male dominated and hence her thick black, well trained and neatly groomed locks serves as a bulwark against gender bias and intimidation. Her being petite in stature.

The older of my two sisters, a financial accountant at a major cooperate entity, works in a space where dress code serves as the visible expression of self-identification and role definition of the organizations' culture. She states that her natural locks not only accentuated her ancestral and cultural identity but it lends flexibility and is convenient. She reaffirm that the flexibility of the locks is most paramount to her survival in her work environment where dress code is paired to organizational and role identity. She states that she is able to wear locks in sartorial elegant hairstyles that complements the desired projected corporate image.

I stated that I choose to wear braided locks because I was afraid of permanently locking my hair. I still remember sitting in the hairstylist chair for that eventful "big chop" after my graduation hair fiasco and the frustration of the regrowth process. Presently, I admire my regrown hair and although I

am not good at styling my natural hair I'd never want to do anything to cause damage to it again. The conversation continued for while with us agreeing that locks lends flexibility in styling and is definitely a more permanent hairstyle but disagreeing on whether or not locks caused damage to the hair.

Finally, my sisters simultaneously asked why was I afraid to take that big step. Immediately my chest tightened and my mouth tasted salty. I stared in space for a little bit, inhaled and slowly began to explain that I felt that my childhood and other experience cause some amount of apprehension to try new styles. As I recounted my childhood hair experiences which went from my mother caring for my hair to perming my hair my mind became overwhelmed with new memories, each seemed to be progressively daunting.

The waiter appeared with three trays of sumptuous food. The arrangement of the food was exotic and the aroma that wafted up to your nostrils normally would cause me to salivate but this time it did not. I was fixated on the subject matter being discussed. I remained with my hands folded across my chest and recounted the following three episodes of my childhood experience/encounters with bad hair moments.

The first was the Saturday evening I attended youth fellowship just after getting a fresh perm. My hair was full of bounce and the strands swayed as if being synchronously attentive to my every movement. I felt poised, confident and assertive. My pastor, who is Caucasian, being resolved in the holiness Christian faith, posited that I altered my appearance, and was being untruthful about not adding color to my hair.

I went home livid and discussed my experience at youth fellowship with my family. One of my brother, older and more liberated at the time projected an ideology that was somewhat parallel to that of our pastors', his with a cultural identity twist. My sisters, freshman at university, were ideologically transitioning so they were cautious about taking sides. That encounter provoked and evoked the need to understand my true identity, how people understood me and how I wanted to be perceived by others. It was then that I was first challenged to use my appearance which includes my hair style of choice to project who I know I am.



The second moment was the summer of 2015 when my daughter transitioned. My daughter started wearing high puffs after regrowing her hair from the low afro style she had worn for a several months. I felt it was ok for the summer but when she transitioned to locks braids I felt scared for her bold statement look and the challenge it would receive when she started upper school (lower and upper 6th form/grades 11 and 12).

Well, on the morning of her first day at school, I received that dreaded phone call. She was asked to remove her braids and also remove herself from school to facilitate the process. She was adamant that she would not remove her braids because they were short and in line with the length stipulated by the school. Furthermore, she did not want to process her hair and the alternative would be to lock her natural hair then and now.

I tried to explain to the school the process that the hair had to go through to be locked and the application of braid presents a softer look at the genesis of the locking process. It also enabled the hair to be styled in ways that conforms to the image that the school identifies with.

The school would have none of it and so in the interest of her education, she removed the braids the next day and locked her hair the following weekend.

When she returned to school she was again confronted about her hair style of choice but this time she had her aces. Her hair was natural. Nothing added and nothing taken away. Her hair did not violate any of the school rules. Her hair style reflected her identity. She argued that the school would not ask a Caucasian or a person of Indian decent to cut their hair simply because it is growing too long. Why? Because it is natural for their hair to grow long. She then posited, it is natural for her hair to coil and tangle and hence locking it makes it more manageable. Therefore, the school needed to adjust their rules to incorporate what's natural and cultural to the community to which it serve. The school also needs to embrace the identity and individuality of the student because, after all, the school is one of the institution that taught her about her identity and individuality.

After many meetings and consultations, the school finally adjusted their policy and my daughter finished sixth form wearing locks.

The third moment was my graduation day which is still vivid in my mind. It was a Saturday evening, the overcast sky seem pregnant with more rain. The sound of thunder would ever so often rumble in the background as a reminder of imminent possibilities. There would be no cancellations. Soon the procession would march in and the ceremony starts. It was graduation 2012. I hurriedly styled my hair but noticed it did not have the bounce and fullness that it once had. My hair was limped, lackluster and thin. It did not reflect who I felt I was, who I knew I was nor who I wanted the world to know I am. It was not just graduation day, I am the valedictorian. I needed to feel unassailable, confident and in command instead I felt vulnerable, nervous and doubtful. My hairstyle of choice usually compliments the energy that I wanted to project at that time but this day it did not. I tried to rearrange my hair but nothing worked. I was flustered. My hair was damaged. I needed a new start.

I remembered staring helplessly in the mirror when my sisters appeared from nowhere. They look immaculate and stunning. Their hairstyles grabbed my attention, I thought how it made them look strong, assertive yet elegant. Their hair was a picture of health that depicts resolve and confidence. It was then that I felt that I no longer wanted to perms my hair. I wanted to go natural even though I dread the challenges. I did not know how to style or care for natural hair and my childhood memory of natural hair was a daunting challenge all by its' self. I conveyed my frustrations and fears to my sisters who encouraged me to go natural or at least consult with my stylist about protective styles for black hair. My stylist recommended the "big Chop" a necessary step for regrowth of damaged hair. The entire process was an ordeal. I dreaded the outcome and was intimidated about the way forward. As the hair regrew I tried box braids, flat twist, pony tails and corn rows to name a few. My hair reverted to its' natural curl pattern, thickness and fullness.

I ended by stating that while I am sure that I will always keep my hair in its natural form I do relish the ability to change how I wear my hair. Hence, I don't know that I can endure the permanency of locks.

They expressed that they were unaware of how my experience with my hair has affected and shape my resolve. But they still believed that one day I may decide to take the big step.

Finally, the Creme Brûlée arrived, we silently stared at each other and smiled. This was one of mom's favorite makeup treat after hair styling day. We all agreed that it tasted a little different from hers but nevertheless, it was delicious.

While I appreciate their takes and their whys, I differ. I am not defined by the texture or color of my hair. I wear my hair in braided locks because it protects my natural hair, it is convenient and flexible. I do however, agree with my sisters that locks whether natural or braided, is a protective hair style that projects inner strength and resolve.

# Closed Umbrella

Boluwatife Sotayo

Did you see it?

Whist it was opened

Taking upon it the burden of the weary weather

Shedding its owner from the crying sky and the blazing sun

The thunder grumbled like an old man

The wind howled Its mighty objection

Blew it away from the powerful grasp of its owner

Leaving the owner to endure the harsh weather whilst he went after it

Its ribs broken like an old sea struck by lightening

Its runners torn

Its springs shattered

Its canopies torn like a page torn from a book

Did you see it?

Now it is closed

Closed forever into the darkness

In a grey and spectral echoed place

Where we could see it no more

In a gloomy silent place.

# Escaping Love

Shashana Brooks

The feelings of despair  
The feelings of mistrust  
The feelings of anger  
The feelings of lust  
The yearning for hugs  
The yearning for kisses  
The yearning for fighting  
The yearning for the title Mrs.  
The feeling of laying there wanting to make up  
The feeling of laying there  
And never wanting to wake up

The internal battle my soul fights  
Should I stay? Should I go?  
What is wrong or right?  
I know this love is toxic this I wont deny  
Lie after lie after lie  
I feel like I'm going crazy  
The obsession with going through your phone  
I know I'm going crazy  
But i'd rather go at it than sleep alone  
So i'll be crazy  
Crazy in love with you baby

And one day, when I find myself again  
Free from him  
I will give her a big hug  
And welcome her back to the land of the sane  
And she will be free from his toxic pain  
She will be more resilient because  
She's free from the rain  
The rain that started to drown her in sorrow  
The rain that made it hard for her to see a brighter tomorrow  
Her eyes will be as clear as the beautiful sky  
And she will remember who she is  
And no more wondering why  
Just excited for when and grateful the past is done  
Because through all the trials and tribulation  
There's more life to come.



*Photo by Regina Della Vecchia*

# How Much I Wish You Were Gay

Ellen Chu

How much I wish you were gay!  
If only I could be dare,  
so I could ask you to stay.

When I got dumped on birthday,  
you ain't disgust with my tear.  
How much I wish you were gay!

How much I wish I ain't gay.  
At least I don't have to scare,  
so I could ask you to stay.

How much I wish you didn't say  
you're proposing in Times Square.  
How much I wish you were gay!

I wish she dumped you in May,  
that you couldn't pay the airfare,  
so I could ask you to stay.

I wish you feel the same way.  
Truth is, life is never fair!  
How much I wish you were gay!  
So I could ask you to stay.

# The Mystical Book of Demons

Sunita Cheddie

There are many unknowns in the world. An old scroll stated there is a book that grants one wish of anything your heart desires but you must be careful, there is always a price to pay. I made the mistake of making a wish upon a book known as the mystical book of demons. It granted a wish that made my life better but little did I know, I would have to become the demon who possesses the book when I die, that was my price. Even though it was hard to undo my wish I realized I rather have my life back, it is said the only way to undo the wish is to burn the book but its not that simple. My name is Rowan and I was seventeen when I found the mystical book of demons.

One day Rowan was walking home from a day of adventure with his friends. While he was walking he stumbled upon a heavy branch and fell. When he got up he noticed that a tree was hollow and he kept on tapping the tree until there was a large hole in the tree. Rowan reached in the tree and pulled out a book. The book was dusty with an ancient pattern that formed a skull. Rowan took the book home. When Rowan got home he put the book in his room then joined his family for dinner. Rowan was in his own world meaning he was daydreaming. His father had to repeat himself because Rowan did not reply when his father asked him how his day had been. Rowan's father is a man who can be filled with rage. That is one of the reasons Rowan wished he had a better life. Rowan also purposely ignored his father because his day was horrible. His friends tease him as usual and he doesn't want to be lonely so he has no choice but to hang around that group. Later that night Rowan tried to open the book he had found but it couldn't open. So he decided to go to sleep with thoughts of wanting to live a better life. Most people wake up to the comforts of their home but not me. I was awake in a room that looked like a dungeon. Then a mysterious dark figure appeared and started to move towards me. Before I explain further, I was to clarify that I realized the book I found did not open because it needed a key and I was that key. A child that seeks something they can't have or the impossible inclination becomes the key. So, as I was saying, a dark figure was coming closer. I couldn't see the face, only the shape of something that has the looks of a creature that may only be found in folklore which seems immortal and speaks with such inhumane language. The creature spoke and asked what my wish was and I answered in a muddle exterior what do you mean by wish. The creature explained I can have whatever I wish for and I wished for a better life without even saying a word.

Rowan was in a dream state and woke up to his reality but it was not the reality he was used to being in. He was in a new reality with a nice father and friends who treated him like royalty. He had his own house instead of living with his parents and much more. Rowan was enjoying his new reality. He was wondering who that creature was and if the creature knew exactly what he



wanted. Weeks went by living a life of luxury but Rowan was starting to miss his old life and was wondering if he could go back to his original reality.

Sometimes we all make mistakes but it is so we can learn from them. I did some research later that day. I found out the only way to undo the wish is to burn the book. I also found out I would have to pay the price for my wish. I would become the creature, the same creature, I had seen and grant a wish to someone else like the creature did for me. This will take place when I am no longer alive. I found out I would have to burn the book so I did. Nothing was happening so I figured, I would wait until the fire goes out. I fell asleep that day. I saw the creature reappear with a smirk on their face and said you can't undo the wish, it's impossible, it's funny that you think it would be that easy. I woke up immediately after the creature began laughing in a wicked manner.

Rowan found out it would be hard to undo his wish and was about to give up when he got a letter written to him. It was from a person who had been in a position just like him. The letter was vague and Rowan did not know what to do with the letter other than put it aside. He was thinking about his old life. He did not appreciate his old life and now he must pay the consequences. He thought like that for sometime and continued to live in a fake reality until he could get back to his own.

For a long time I had hoped to see my family again, my real family who are my true birth parents and not parents I would like to have. I know that whoever reads my journals will know what happened to me. People have happy endings but just not me. I have been trapped in this world, I wished for and fifteen years have passed by and I'm still trapped meaning couldn't undo my wish. I thought I only had to burn the book and watch it burn in fire but I need to find the special chant and burn the book in hell fire which would be dangerous to get but what do I have to lose, obviously nothing. As I sit here in my room which is not even my own, I regret making that wish and for being weak yet selfish. I had the power to turn my life around instead I chose to take the easy way out which was a mistake. I have learned my lesson, now I must undo my wish. If you don't hear back from me, you must know, I was unsuccessful in my quest or I just like a good moment of suspense.

# The Calm Before the Storm

Alyssa Pascalli

Remain calm and live for each day,

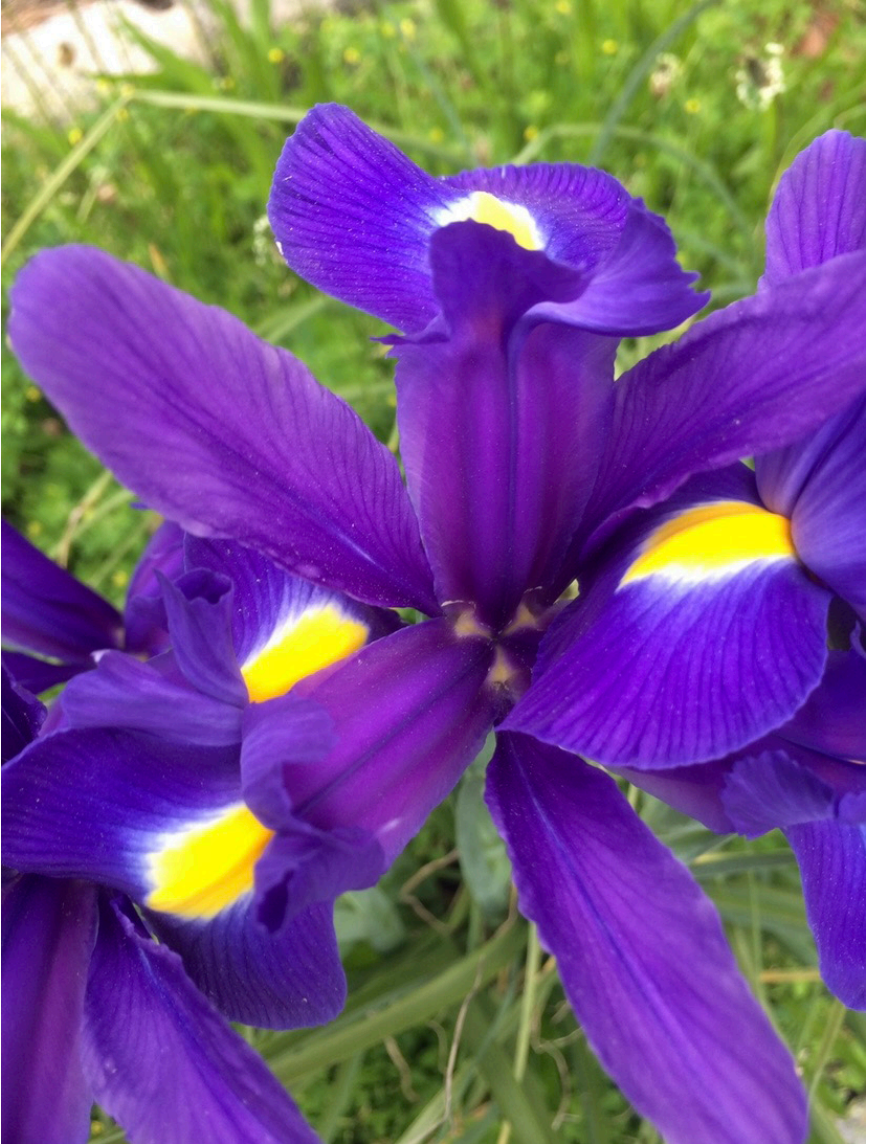
Do not be distracted by the drownings of yesterday

Love life, forget your troubles

Live happily, peacefully, and gracefully

Do not take for granted life's given dreams

Hold it into everlasting beams.



*Photo by Regina Della Vecchia*

# a neverending story about love

Hyvil Escayg

love is foreign and extraterrestrial  
it is virtually impossible to illustrate what love is through language  
because it's the only thing from another world  
that we can feel and experience—

i looked at a past lover as she slept peacefully on my bed,  
counting her freckles and  
how one eyebrow was a little misshaped than the other

and i saw love

i watched a smile peek from a homeless man as i gave him a couple of dollars

and i saw love

i saw the birds flying across the forest in flocks as they chase an eternal spring

and i saw love

i glanced carefully at the way she held his hand  
and rubbed his thumbs;  
the way they were both in different worlds, together  
almost as if both of them  
were in harmonized security and peace

and i saw love

i watched a child help and comfort their friend after they fell and i saw love

i stared at the stars that glow for a world so cruel

and i saw love

i've witnessed a suicidal boy  
look up for the first time in ages  
after he was complimented on something so minuscule

and i saw love

i've been with an artist  
who would paint the most beautiful art,

but could never see some beauty in herself

and i saw love

i held her hand since i knew she was afraid of escalators

and i saw love

i've watched the sun come out to see me

and

i've watched it descend to be with someone else

and i saw love

i saw a plane soaring through the ocean ceiling,  
resembling that white dove from genesis

and i saw love

*to be continued...*

# How It Always Goes

Imani Livingston

Jazz filled the streets of New Orleans-swirling in the spice-scented air. Beads hit the top of my head, breasts bared in front of me. I smiled as an unknown, cold liquid sprinkled down on us in the crowd. I had no idea what it was, but I didn't care. I loved this feeling: freedom. The smiling, dark-gummed grin of the man next to me filled me with a warmth I haven't felt in a minute. His pretty set of pearly, white teeth was all I could focus on, even as my vision began to blur around the edges, but that was due to the bourbon that was handed to me by the big man that followed me for a few feet.

I didn't realize he said anything to me because I was too focused on how beautiful he was.

"Huh?" I slurred, chuckling at my own voice.

His skin was sepia-brown; his bare chest showed beneath his open, button-down shirt. The orange shirt was wet with what spelled like liquor. And that's when I again focused on him, noticing he was laughing. I pouted, wondering what on earth he could be laughing at, but it washes over me when he said something again.

"You look thirsty," he said, handing me a bottle of water. I didn't realize how thirsty I was until I took a big gulp of the water. I licked the cold remnants of the clear liquid from my lips. I'm sure they were stained red from the red lipstick I put on at the beginning of the evening. It was not 12am.

I gave him my best smile and that pretty one flashed back at me. Heat pooled in the bottom of my stomach; he was gorgeous. "Thank you!" I yelled over the crowd.

"You're very welcome..." He trailed off, as if he wanted my name.

"Zuri." I replied, stumbling a little over more beads. I focused my eyes on the sea of colors all around me, then back on this man whose eyes never left me. I loved the attention, I preened under it. The fog in the street made the lights that were strung from pole to pole seem a little stretched, or maybe it was that fourth drink I had. I don't know, I was just happy where I was. What's the name of this beautiful man?

"Travis," he says. I hadn't realized I said that outloud. I chuckled at myself, which made me laugh anymore. I began laughing uncontrollably and even harder when I noticed he was laughing just as hard.

"Lets get some gumbo in you," he says, pulling me out the street, "my mom owns a shop on the strip. Best gumbo in town."

“Everyone here says that!” I argued, but I realized how good a good bowl of gumbo would be right now, so I followed. Now, I look back at this and realize he could’ve killed me, but I was glad when I was brought into Yaya’s Kitchen.

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My boys roughed me up against the wall of my mum’s restaurant. The cool, red brick against my back was relieving. It gave me something to focus on. The drink in my belly threatened to come up my throat, but I fought it down each time until the feeling went away. That’s my cue to cut myself off for the night.

“Happy birthday, Travis!” My friends slur to me. I blush a bit under the attention, bowing my head to look down at the drink I’m not gonna finish.

“He’s big twenty-eight now.” My brother Kyle smirks. He was now eighteen, his first time mama allowed him out here. Little does she know, I’ve snuck him out here since he was fifteen. I put my arm around his neck, leaning on him for a bit of balance.

My buddy Marcell flashes a toothy grin at me, “Trav, all these bitches here tonight, I’m tryna get some.”

I shoved him playfully, he was a dog. “All you think about is pussy, it’s weird.” He made a face, which he quickly covered up.

“Seems to me like a cover up,” Gordon says, falling over with laughter. If anyone was to laugh at their own joke, it’s Gordon. “Celly likes the boys!”

Marcell grumbles to himself, but laughs along with us. I shoot him a knowing look. Yeah, me and Gordon go way back, but Marcell and I were close. He would never admit it, but he knows I know. And he knows I’d never say anything. Marcell is a fit guy and real stylish, so he always had women all over him. Every corner we turned, he was walking or talking to another girl. On the surface, that made it seem like he can’t stay with one girl because he had so many, but every night, Marcell was with me in his basement room mixing DJ tapes.

I diverted the attention off him and pointed to the crowd, “Let’s pass a good time, krewe”

I wrangle Marcell and Gordon under both my arms with my brother behind us, and we set off into the carnival. I lived for this month in the year. Mardi Gras has always been the highlight in Louisiana. It just filled me with so much joy. I loved being in the buildings, watching all the adults roam around and celebrate. I couldn’t wait until I was old enough to go down here, wishing I was older for an entire month every year until I turned eighteen.

I didn't even care when Kyle threw his drink on me with a wide, crazy beam on his face. We were all shitfaced and I loved it. To be inebriated, surrounded by my closest friends and family, was amazing. I felt more free than I have all year.

That's when I spotted her. She was alone, stumbling over the beads on the pavement. A woman shook her breasts in her face, slapping her in the face with it. She laughs, staring up to the sky with elation on her face. She had a sandy complexion, that was smooth and tawny. She wore all black with only purple beads lining her neck. Her face was shiny, making her skin look like caramel.

And that's when I set off in her direction, ignoring my friend's questions as to where I was going.

\*\*\*\*

"The greatest tribute to the cooking we call Creole is its durability." Adelaida says as she sits two piping hot bowls in front of us. "My great-great-grandmother gave us this recipe and it never fails to gain appreciation from customers."

"Thank you mama," Travis grins, bowing his head and clasping his hands. I join him in prayer, stomach growling for the food. We both drunkenly consume the spicy, hearty meal.

Ever since I moved to New Orleans from New York City, it has been a task finding gumbo that wasn't too spicy or contained too much seafood. I glanced at his mother, smiling to myself for the millionth time tonight. She reminded me so much of my own mother. She had a turban on her head, almost the same shade of orange that her son wore. Green lines circled around her head while white dots meeting these swirls randomly throughout the fabric. Her dress was a warm yellow, dragging the floor behind her. You can tell she had this for a long time, or maybe she wore it often. Either way, the dress was beautiful. Her rich, black skin stood out because of the color.

My thoughts were interrupted by his mother swatting at my hand. "Aht, aht! That's no way to eat crawfish, girl. You gotta—"

"Pinch the tail and suck the head!" She says with Travis, his tone a little mocking. She swats the back of his head in a playful, yet stern manner. Yet again, she reminds me of my own mother. Never really angry, demanding—andreceiving—respect and honor.



\*\*\*\*

After we ate, we decided to go up to my apartment above the restaurant. The gumbo definitely sobered us up, a glance at one another letting us know we were both at a loss for words. We didn't truly know each other. But, God was she beautiful. I've been with women before. All types of women. But Zuri had an element of innocence to her. Our talk in the shop let me know she has goals a lot of girls out here don't have. The type of girls I hang with usually get hooked on that white girl. Something I never found particularly attractive. But she was different.

Zuri stepped forward, shyly putting her bangs behind her ear. "Hi," she whispered as I placed her head into my hands.

"Hi, pretty."

I smiled, gazing directly in her eyes. Longing pierced my pelvis, leaving behind remnants of heat in its trail. I looked to her for consent and she answered by pressing her lips to mine.

I slipped off her silk top, staining it with our combined sweat. Her warmth embraced me, the same way her eyes had when we first locked eyes. The deep, bright cave we ascended into seemed like home; drowning out a groan from either her or myself. I don't know. All I know is... this is love.

\*\*\*\*

Travis hasn't called me in two weeks. After we spoke about the news I received a month ago, he became silent. I was tired of this run around. I'd show up to his mum's shop, just for her to look me in my eye with a solemn look in her eye. She knew the truth. I know she did.

That night we shared together burned behind my eyes too often. It was beautiful and my first time allowing a man to touch me like that. We became one that night together. If I thought hard enough, I could still feel his fingers pressed into my hips; his head disappearing. Yet, here I am. On a bus,—alone—on my way to the doctor's office. Once the waiting room cleared, I was brought into the room where a doctor finally told me the gender. I grasped my stomach instinctively, clutching my eyes in preparation. You see, I was hoping for a girl. A mini me. I'd be able to teach her how to grow up alone. I'd do everything in my power to ensure she has a better life than I did.

"...twins."

Wait, huh?

"Excuse me?" I stuttered, sure I heard wrong.

The doctor smiled, putting his hand on my thigh. “You’re having twins, Zuri. Congratulations. Two boys.”

My ears were ringing. I was on autopilot mode from the time I heard the news, until I arrived home. My small studio apartment was cold and empty. I looked around to my mattress on the floor, a roach darting from underneath it. The foul smell of sewage coming from the kitchen sink made my stomach churn. I stumbled into my bathroom, emptying the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

I crawled my way to my mattress, only able to lie my head on the mattress. A feeling crept up in my head—dread. I clutched my stomach instinctively. I always put myself in these situations. Situations I had to run from. My mind went back to that night, but I tried my best not to think of Travis. Instead, I thought of that very moment I was handed the bourbon. Once the flush took over my body and happiness settled in, I felt free. Now I feel like my body is holding my captive. I never wanted this. I never wanted to be a mother of two, alone. I didn’t want this.

I let out a cry, “Why!?”

I felt myself slipping into a sleep. I needed this. I felt relaxed suddenly, like all my worries were slipping away. I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in a minute. I grabbed my belly again, smiling a bit at the fluttered I felt underneath my finger tips.

My mom was a single mother. I could do this. It would be difficult, but it is doable.

And for the first time, I actually believed it.

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Was this really where Zuri lived? I looked at the man that didn’t take his eyes off me the entire time, as I shifted the box in my hands from side to side. He looked like a statue, unmoving and relentless. I could feel the searing heat of his stare as I climbed the stairs to her apartment. She mentioned she lived in affordable housing, but not... this. I had to get her out of here.

My mom and I argued about this every single day. When I wasn’t in my college classes, I was working in her shop. I stopped working for a while after Zuri told me she was pregnant. I couldn’t believe it. I never wanted kids. It wasn’t something that I thought of doing until I was married, yet, this was my fault. I didn’t wear a condom so what did I think was going to happen?

My reaction is what truly makes my insides twist. After she told me, I couldn’t even say anything other than: “Oh okay.”

The look on her face broke my heart. It truly did. But, I couldn't think of anything else to say. I worked in my mom's shop—yes—but that wasn't enough money to take care of a baby. She didn't have a stable job, either from what I gathered. I was too afraid to ask her to get rid of it, so I just didn't say anything to her at all. And now, I realize how selfish that is. This baby is growing inside her. Whether I like it or not, I'm a father. So, I decided to put my "big boy pants on"—as momma says—and take on my responsibility head first.

So that's why I'm here. I knocked on her door, ignoring the glances of people on the same level as me. The apartment was motel style: the doors on three levels, reachable by staircases in the middle of the building. You walk up the stairs straight to the floor. The budiking was bright blue. Blue. I like that name for a baby. If he was a boy. Maybe if I have a girl, we can name her after her mother. Either way—

The man from downstairs leaned against the wall never to me, "What are you doing here, boy?" His New Orleans accent was heavy. He was missing yellow teeth on the bottom, black gums lining the base of the teeth. However, his suit was bout fresh as hell.

"Here to see Zuri," I said, showing the box I had with me. "With a gift." For our baby. I thought.

I felt like I gave a lot of information away, but I tend to do that when I'm nervous. And this guy made me nervous. His eyes were red, framing his hazel orbs. He said something, but I was too focused on his scary demeanor to here. "Huh?" I asked.

"The lady here died. She was found dead three days after," he says, "at least that's what the coroner said—"

I couldn't believe it. I had to have the wrong place. I took a glance into the window where the curtains were drawn. I couldn't make anything out, as the inside of the window was dirty. I searched desperately for anything of hers. But who was I kidding? I barely knew her. I didn't allow myself the opportunity to truly know her. To get familiar with her belongings or home style. I did this to myself.

That's when I saw the fabric of the dress she wore that night.

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I pushed the door to my mom's shop open, a blank look on my face. My black suit was stained with reddish, brown dirt. My mom trailed behind me, never letting her hands leave my back. I needed her hand there. I felt as though I couldn't stand up.

We buried Zuri today. As well as my son and my daughter. I had no idea about the twins. I barely had an idea about Zuri. Apparently, Zuri had an "incompetent cervix". I'm still not clear as to what that means. But, from what I can tell, there was a slim chance of her being able to carry the babies to term. This led to an infection, which caused her to bleed out. The coroner says she passed in her sleep, which is the only comforting thing about all of this.

My mom sat a newspaper in front of me, a solemn look on her face.

A small advert was circled by her in red ink. I dropped my head on the table as I read what was there. My mom paid for an advert that read, "***For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn.***"

# The Stars

Luck Graham

I look to the star, they don't shine the same.

I want be a star but the spark is not the same.

Passionate to passionless.

Losing sight of who I am.

Only seeing the scars.

Feeling what I lost.

This pain is not for sport.

# Aspiration

Ellen Chu

For some of us, we focus on life.  
For some of us, we focus on death.  
For some of us, we feel more of the happiness.  
For some of us, we feel more of the sadness.  
If you don't feel any motivation  
for life, it's just you haven't found your aspiration.

It could take seconds to forever to find an aspiration  
that makes you feel you live a meaningful life.  
You might or might not be lucky to find such motivation  
for life that makes you feel no regret towards your own death.  
Sometimes, you find such meaning in your sadness.  
Sometimes, you find such meaning in your happiness.

Beware! Do not focus only on your happiness  
if you want to find an aspiration  
for life. Give credits to your sadness,  
for you can't get aspired without either of them in your life.  
Since you never know when's your death,  
I recommend you: start searching for your motivation.  
If you could find your motivation,  
you'll sure also find your ultimate happiness.  
Imagine your ideal kind of death,  
for it might give you an aspiration  
for life. Talking about "living a life,"  
I bet you wish not to end it with sadness.

Who wants to immerse in sadness?  
My dear, you should start searching for your motivation  
for life! If you find a purpose for your life,  
you'll sure also find your ultimate happiness.  
I wish you could find your aspiration,  
so you would not feel regret upon your death.

My dear, I no longer fear to disappoint my death.  
In past, my greatest sadness  
was failing to find my aspiration  
for life. Now I've got a motivation,  
I know what leads to my happiness.  
That is: to live to the fullness of my life.

If you can't find a meaning in life, you're living as if living in death.  
There will be tremendous happiness outweighing sadness  
in a life that is fueled with motivation and aspiration.

# My Neighbors' Radio

Makiko Ishii

My next-door neighbor “Kay” is fourteen years old, the same as mine, and moved in with our neighbor about 2 years ago. He goes to the same school as I do but belongs to a different section for who needs extra assistance and a special instructor. I met Kay at the electric store at the mall was the first time. He was gazing at the electric appliance carefully while his mother was watching him anxiously. As she noticed me and my mother, she walked toward us and greets us politely, and said “It would be great if Kay can plays baseball with you but he rather play baseball broadcast on the radio station, but please visit us anytime”. Since I am the only child in a family, I’ve been always admiring having a brother who is not so naughty and bossy and can do something together what boys like. The only noise Kay makes is the voice from radio plays, it reminds me of my grandfather who used to operate a ham radio, making a space like noise adjusting the frequency. I started to feel comfortable whenever I hear the static sound of the radio and it was common weirdness we both like.

Kay has several radios he likes and his favorite one is the portable radio that can be used as ham radio equipment. He is having a hard time expressing himself but once he turns on the radio, it synchronizes his mood and reveals his feelings. We don’t go out much mostly, I stop by his house and we enjoy snacks together. He usually speaks a few words the whole time when we are together, but he often helps me when I drop my iPhone and the screen breaks, sneakily repairing glass behind my mom. He is so good at fixing appliances as well. My parents acknowledge that he is a very smart person like the “genius” kind, same as Albert Einstein or Michio Kaku. I wonder if he the man who knew what’s inside Pandora’s box. He has astonishing memory that not only knowledge of ham language but has eligibility to calculate square roots in a flash and knows the geographical location of the maps. However, he doesn’t seem to have a friend insight to share all his knowledge but he sees him as comfortable being with me. I have other friends to play with but Kay is a special kind of friend who can sense something. Some people keep a distance from him or even express mean words such as “He is a creep” or “you shouldn’t be near him”. I hear their pointless sarcasm but Kay’s purity makes everything purified even those meaningless remarks. He is the first person in my life who never “gossips” and knowing everything without communicating with others.

Once in a while, Kay goes to electronic stores. This activity has been approved by the clinic he visits, and he was permitted to go there by himself. This activity is his only moment of freedom without the probationer around him. Of course, he seems very happy just staring at the appliances on the array.

About a couple of blocks from our school, some of the children have to take the most dangerous roads where “bullies” hang out. Most of us in our school avoid the street like this, but for Kay, he doesn’t seem to care much. I told him not to but his reply was “Geographically, this road is the quickest way to get home.”

One day, when I am in the rush home, I have to take the chance to use this shortcut home. Unluckily I get tangled up with some thugs I am worried about. There are a few people in this group and the nastiest one is a guy named “T”. There is a rumor that “T”’s father is an internationally-wanted criminal or someone very important, which I doubt. Anyway, whatever it is, he is someone who shouldn’t be involved, and when you get involved, you can expect something definitely not goodwill happens. I am scared the hell out of me. One of a guy comes up to me slowly behind my back and says “What are you mugging me?” then they surround me. When I am in a critical situation, then I hear some familiar noise of static sound alarmed from behind me. “Bullying is prohibited under the New York state of law S12. If you feel psychologically harm, please request compensation in civil court.” It is Kay who speaks in a monotone voice from the ham radio station. A public speaker is set at the park nearby for emergency purposes. Kay worries about my situation and he hacks into a radio wave from the distance. Suddenly, Kay himself appears in front of me and said “surprise!” with a big innocent smile. While everyone is dumbfounded by Kay’s odd approaches, I held out his hand and run away. “I get you for this!!” T’s voice alerts. Kay and I just run and run until we reach our neighbor. Kay says breathlessly “I saw exactly the same scene on the anti-bully tutorial. It was nice to have a perfect opportunity to use this ad”. As he oddly smiles, he shows a flyer of attorney’s ads. That day, I owe him a great deal because he saves my life big time. I decide to protect Kay from any harmful elements.

A few weeks later, on the way back from school, I see the same group picking up on Kay on that same block. When I am about to near them, I see there was a tattooed lad teenager approaching me. He says, “Now I find you, your friend never mentions who you are. He doesn’t even speak English”. The next thing I notice myself, I am scrambling from the place out of fear. Yes, I leave Kay alone. Soon after I come home, turn around what I did with full of regret. I was unable to overcome my own weakness. I was not even aware of the gang’s bullying towards Kay is escalating, mugging, and beaten ever since that day he helps me. He is incapable of speaking and has a speech impediment. I feel mad at myself for running away after I have vowed to watch over him so stubbornly. The word I learned in English class that day was “hypocrite”. It is a perfect example of me the way I behave.



The following week, I go back to the same block, the same corner where Kay gets mugged by T and his subordinate gangs. The street is actually busy that many cars go back and forth but only a few pedestrians are walking by. Across the main street, there is a pathway into a small park. The entrance of the pathway is the blind spot. As I expected, Kay was there, standing in the pot with bully teens. "Watch the face. Don't aim at the head, hit body!" T is giving instructions to one of the guys. "Kay!" I shout, but the traffic on this busy road was so noisy that my voice was blocked out. I waived my arms and calling for help, for cars passing by but a bunch of students hanging out on the street is a very ordinary scene from the car's viewpoint that I couldn't get any attention. The next thing I see is someone hit Kay's head with his mobile phone so hard, he crouches down and winces in pain, bleeding from his head. I am too shocked that I faint for a couple of seconds while crossing the street. A car horn and the faint sound of a vehicle crashing echo is all over the place. The bullies were looking at me with shocked expressions while I am crossing the street in a frenzy way. During this time, everything goes into slow motion. The sounds and sights were moving in a slow and clear motion. It was as if I is running in a dream, and I can't move forward even though I was running so fast. Just then, like an angel flipping wings, I see Kay is taking off his school uniform, peeling off his wings, completely naked. From the neck down, his body is covered in scars, bruises, cuts, and just a painful sight to be seen. Kay's best strategy is to get naked and be noticed by people. And he is successfully doing it. Of course, Bullies are petrified. Kay is crunching down quietly, full of tears, speechless.

The passenger at the bus stop screamed, Bullies scatter somewhere already. Kay squatted down at the roadside. I try to come near him but the police officers and a lot of people block my way, making sure if I am okay. I ignore them and ran to Kay but at that very moment, an ambulance comes and he is taken away. I am alone inside my head. I can't be of use to my friend AGAIN and I feel powerless. Afterward, the smell of diesel vehicles is overpowering me and I am just stood there numb.

After that day, I don't see Kay at school nor I see him anywhere. I do not see those young thugs on street anymore either. I don't hear his radio anymore. Everything seems to be too quiet now. All that left is a distant ringing in my ears.

A month later, I am told that he had moved away. I step into his empty room, and all he leaves behind is the tiny radio he always carries. I turn it on but it has no response and I find there's no battery. So I open the battery case, there I see the piece of paper with Kay's scribbling memo. It mentions the way to adjust the radio frequency spectrum. This is the language that

my grandfather used to use. When I adjust the dial as it instructs, just then suddenly, the familiar popping cracking sound came out. When I adjusted the dial once again, another familiar monotonous voice comes out from the gadget speaker said, "This is Kay. Do you copy?"

# Eternal Appreciation

Tasleema Hiyaat

*As-salaam Alaykum wa Rahmatullah wa barakatul*

our greeting of grace and peace

That many are somehow terrified of and many appreciative of

We're constantly an outcast to society's rulings that can never break us

*Alhamdulillah* for our firmness, passion, and intellect

We've established many inventions often forgotten we've constructed

Starting with algebra  $y=mx+b$  to  $y=f(x)$

Onto coffees and cameras

*Bismillah* in the name of God

To who we're grateful for in every way

Whose shown us the peak of mercy while we're undeserving

As well as the infinite level of love bestowed onto us

Muhammad may peace be upon him

My role model and my teacher sent down by God to show us the way of life

Who's taught us humbleness and unconditional love

Who's cried for us witnessing the future of corruption

*Subhanallah* to the many glories of God

Who's blessed us with many treasures

Who's taught us that fitting in isn't happiness

But individuality and kindness are

# Unity (based on *I Was In a Hurry* by Dunya Mikhail)

Angelique Williams

I've seen divisions divide us.

But I see a light

at the end of this tunnel.

When did we

become comfortable on the sidelines

watching the number

of the slain rise.

Countless others with shattered minds

come to the reality that someone is no longer of this world.

The bonds that tied

broken because of one person's selfish act.

Grieving and in pain

since the heartache is to real,

like you've become the walking dead.

Aimlessly wandering not knowing

what to do with yourself.

What do you do with yourself now?

Can hope be found?

Or is it among the fallen hero's

who gave their lives so that you and I can see another day,

Or a smile a person gives

when saying hello,

or being together

with the one's who love you so much,  
or remembering  
like being reminded to cherish this life  
or glass  
like breaking into bits and pieces  
when hit with a hammer.  
Can we pull ourselves together?  
Yes, yes we can  
Get up. Take action. And RISE!  
Because if you don't do something about it  
who will  
And it starts with me. You.  
Because I see a light at the end of this tunnel.

# What Used To Be

Jeanine Sanchez

It was just a regular plaid button down I can never imagine it being  
anything more

I never paid attention to his clothes I just know that he used to wear them

It was dark in color nothing really special just plaid

I know that I liked to reach for it when I wanted to stay warm

And it fit me big and I liked that cozy feeling

All these years later it would become the most important item in my  
whole family's closets

The smell it smelled just like him, his cologne undertones remained  
in the fabric

It would be preserved in a bag so the smell wouldn't linger away or fade

Every now and then a certain feeling would come up and I would  
open the bag

I would just for a moment get to smell the precious smell of my father's  
natural scent

Tears fall down my face as I realized it is just a moment

A dark cloud passes as I gather myself

It is not just a plaid button down anymore but a memorabilia filled  
with emotions

A vital key that unlocks a whirlwind of emotions

# I Will Make You Proud (Mom)

Akasha Shahid

A dream, a dream, a dream, I am on a way to finding self-esteem

Snowdrift is falling like a star's beam, Who knows my life theme?

But, each day I screamed, A night (She) appeared in my dream

She held my tiny figure in her hands near a stream

She moved her feet with my feet on fireflies gleam

But, that night a storm of bright shine

Dim my eyes I could not see the brim

She disappeared in front of me

In the world of cloud's debris, But, again I never scream

I see a shiny dream, now it's time to find life's theme

Standing on the edge of sunbeams, That appear behind the hazy screen

I make a promise with my heart, Will find out a right path

People think I am crazy, but who knows my dreams

A cluster of seven seas between (us) put me

(You) far away like a Milkyway

Wait at the edge of shore (for me)

Remember a sunrise after a dark night

I forgot a promise that I made

But, now I will not come back again

Until achieving an amount of grain (grades)

I will never stop again, Promise will meet you again

(After) Completing a college cloud, That makes you proud

# Agony

Josephine Tabara

The difficulty in understanding  
how you were involved in the cross-fire  
Oh Isaiah, now I comprehend  
Wrong place at the wrong time  
My eyes shut and feel  
as if my heart wants to come out my chest  
Such a joyful and smiley little boy  
Loved showing others how he spoke spanglish  
But the cruelty and violence never stops  
The hatred for others is greater  
than forgiveness, that has an even greater power  
to heal and reunite many  
I am the disconsolate mother  
Who has no name  
I am not an orphan who lost their parents  
I am not a widow who lost their spouse  
But am motherless,  
there isn't even a name for a mother who has lost a child  
Because it's not supposed to happen  
So here I am broken and frozen  
Not knowing if I'd ever surpass this  
profound sorrow and emptiness  
That only my miracle baby was able to embrace.  
As I go to the bathtub I remove my robe  
to step in to lay in the warm water  
Head relaxed, as it sinks down  
I open my eyes to look at the surface  
of my wobbly ceiling  
Then close to exhale to see my precious boy  
once again.



# Trauma

Christopher Powell

It seems every year we are reminded of the continuing trauma that  
accompanies the issue of race.

The color of our skin whether paper white or ink black is not a sin so  
why does it carry weight?

The roots of brutality are deeper than the face

Value the bullet-points in the message of those oppressed people whose  
last markings may be as simple as a “we were here”

To prevent the white pages of history from blacking them out. From  
redacting their stories from the record.

For acting as judge, jury and executioner in the street confrontations  
that once recorded and uploaded will rally outrage on both sides.

Those with the badge and bullets to take a life seem eager to hide from  
the consequences

Is this justice or is it just us being put in cuffs? If we are lucky enough  
to be spared a premature “sentencing” to the absence of life

Might I be so bold as to ask why the double standards, the glass ceilings  
and the gaslighting?

Why the little white lies that lock away the truth with dastardly distractions.

Because they aren't frightened by our words they're terrified by our actions.

And the possibility of what we might be if only we are able

So Trauma is introduced as a sedative

As a cure all for their “problems” and to keep us from drooling on their table

Maybe if, only if, there has to be a solution somewhere soon

Something to erase this trauma that we wear like a temporary tattoo

Maybe if, only if, there's something that we can all do.

May the wounds of the past be healed with time, and tremendous effort  
on our part

Or Trauma will be the gateway drug for a much worse alternative...

# As Life Goes On

Tiara Butler

“Swoosh, swish, whoosh”

Can be heard passing by the river

Waves of blue water

Flowing in many directions

Big rocks are like obstacles

But the waves overtake them

Life is like a river

Flowing in many directions

Life challenges are like obstacles

But we must overtake them

# My Plight !!!!

Julio Cariño Navarrete

“The sea comes in like nothing but the sea” (Maxwell). The “siege” they called it, the “undertaking” they called it – this past year was anything but easy, it was in all ways known – tough....To stay inside, immured, imprisoned, incarcerated, jailed or cooped up, locked away like some caged bird in an Avery, with its wings clipped, its wings have fallen into despair, its head down, no longer rises, unable – incapable of soaring to success like they say, it’s fallen into sorrow, its purpose has been taken away; much like a giraffe without a long neck, or a fish without fins say a Whale Shark, a lioness who can no longer hunt, take her cubs, teach them how to hunt, so that they can eventually from a once prey to becoming now a predator, it too has had its purpose taken away, it has lost its sense of self, unwanted, undesired, unloved, like some stray dog, not wanted on one side or the other. Like a lunatic in an insane Asylum think or Psychiatric Mental Hospital Facility think Arkham Asylum, it would be very easy to LOSE your MIND... Like an Abyss – the place where YOU DON’T see the end of the tunnel, you don’t see the end of it, incapable of understanding it even – you can’t visualize it – (a better tomorrow) – (the light) – (HOPE) – (NOR FAITH), YOU cannot see it, nor the very bottom – it is inconspicuous, obscured, occult, out of sight in this unfathomable endless NIGHTMARE...

Each time, your fingers (your mind, body, heart, soul & Spirit) are gripping at your conscience each month, day, hour, minute, second that passes by – each time, you’re losing grips, parts of yourself – YOU JUST CAN’T HELP IT! (You’re crying OUT for HELP – to NO AVAIL)

So, You listen to Black Veil Brides (BVB), SKILLET, METALLICA, Three Days Grace, Led Zeppelin and Linkin Park, and then life gets better!

# The Pattern in White & Black

Kristopher Harris

What do you see when you look at this picture?

A **pattern, history**

The **truth** is covered in **black**

A **distraction**, a pleasant, appealing **distraction**

But look closely, and if you don't see it look closer.

The words of **evil**, true **evil, Genocide, A plan, Evicted, Disrupt**

**History**, these are words of our **history**

This pattern, is **the pattern**, a pattern repeated

How **evil** triumphs and remains on top

They've **distracted** us for years, our **attention** is put on each other, **against** each other

**Disrupted**, we can't see past what we've been told

Somehow it's always comes out in anger, their **plan** is put into play

The **plan** is to **distract**, while **disrupt**

**Evict** those that stand, **evict** from this land, their land, how?

**Genocide**, how many have died?

Paint the **truth** in **black** and **distract**, "it is in their nature."

No, not this time.

We've looked **close**, to **see** the lie, we know

The **truth** is covered in lies

There is a fog, the words painted in **black**

But in all their **precision**, they put themselves in a **trap**

This **pattern**, we've **seen** it before, it is what is by definition

We know the **rhythm**, the rhyme **scheme**

We rise against it, we **marched** for the **better**

To do **better**, be **better** than the **lies** they make **us** out to **be**.

# Footprints of Emotions

Angelica Persaud

Why do I feel bad

When indeed I should be mad.

But it makes me sad to see you down .

I look at you hoping you would want to try but even one look makes me  
wanna cry.

I wanna get high so the hurt goes away.

But how does it feel?.

knowing all what we had just decayed.

You called me your daughter but who are you when you're not here to  
support her.

We're both amateurs for not wanting to be the bigger person which causes  
this to worsen.

Everything I do feels like a burden. You just gotta remember I'm only a person.

Time is flying by and it hurts that you still see me as the bad guy. I don't  
want you to die without saying a proper goodbye.

I saw your progress in becoming sober only for me to follow up in becoming  
a smoker. It doesn't make me any cooler, only bipolar.

If you need me, I will be busy being a hardcore promoter.

Don't worry about me. I have always been a loner.

Don't come around cause I don't want your closure.

To you, I have always been the joker but no sir I don't play poker to end up  
as a broker.

Let's get this over quick shall we?.

How are you doing mentally?.

I know it's killing you internally.

Just grab a bottle of hennesy and feel the relapse eventually.

Generally I don't promote this ish but karma's a bitch and it ain't my fault  
you took the hit.

Respectfully, Learn how to quit.

# The Wonder Wheel

Glorianne Escobar

It was mid-August and I'm finishing up another 10hr shift at the office. I was usually the last one out of the which is common when you obtain a management position. Especially one I was very grateful to have. This is why I made sure to cross my t's and dot my I's before I would leave. However, it was Friday and like every Friday I knew there was a short weekend ahead of me, two whole days I could actually take a moment to breathe and sleep in...if my 4 year old allowed it. Being home with her was a non-monetary paying job in itself yet it was the job I worked the hardest at. She was my ray of sunshine at the end of a long day. A ray of sunshine that sometimes shined too bright at times, but sunshine, nonetheless.

Zooming in my Grand Jeep Cherokee on the Belt Parkway as fast, but as legally as possible to pick up my daughter JJ up from my mother's house to the Wonder Wheel in Coney Island had become a weekend ritual. Other drivers honking their horn at me, most likely offended by my driving, did not slow me down. Once I arrived, I rang my mom's doorbell and I could see JJ show her face through my parents' bay window, yelling out for everyone in the house to hear, "My mommy's here! My mommy's here!". Nobody has ever looked happier to see me in my life. This was a happiness she would feel every time she saw me after a long workday. On my way to get her, I had debated with myself for a brief moment, "Go home, Glorianne. There are more reasons for you both to head home and relax, she will understand". However, the thought was short lived now that I could see her gleaming smile in my rear-view mirror, strapped into her booster seat, excited to get going and so grateful to be with me. I couldn't believe I had that selfish thought for that moment. I knew how much she looked forward to the very little time she got with me, and here I was daydreaming about hitting my couch and watching Netflix in my jammies. Her little voice snapped me back to reality.

Now back on the Belt Parkway, the sun already starting to set, I was juggling the task of driving, trying to get the automated Bluetooth in my car to work so I can call my best friend Melissa back, and also "mmhmm"ing and "oh wow baby"ing my talkative 4 year old who seemed to never run out of things to say and questions to ask. My best friend Melissa was supposed to meet us at Coney Island that day. Up until then, it was just JJ and me taking these weekend trips after work to Coney Island, every Friday to get on the Ferris wheel. However, this time Melissa wanted to join us. My daughter always loved these kinds of "all girl" outings, because in her eyes, the more girls the merrier. I was able to instill a sort of "girl unity" by bringing some of my best girlfriends around who consisted of great role models for her.

Driving around for 15 minutes looking for parking was yet another thing that came with the territory, literally. JJ asking me “Why can’t we park here mommy?” every other block did not help my anxiety. She didn’t know it, but I was terrified of heights. The Wonder Wheel she so very much looked forward to was not something I enjoyed when I was her age. All my life, I had been referred to as a “wuss” by my older sister, father, cousins, etc. due to my fear of heights and refusal to get on Ferris wheels, let alone roller coasters. I was usually the one waiting at the bottom of ride, watching everyone’s belongings while they all got on the rides and screamed their lungs out. I literally found nothing appealing about their idea of fun. However, looking back at this picture which I had asked Melissa to take of my daughter and me, I realize what that Wonder Wheel actually meant for me. Finally, we found parking, met up with Melissa, and proceeded to purchase our ride tickets. I gripped JJ’s hand as to not lose sight of her in the crowded park.

The Wonder Wheel had three color coded lines. Some of the carts on the wheel were stationary, some shifted very little, and the third line was for the carts that slid in midair, giving a roller coaster effect. JJ always chose the latter. While waiting in line, my palms were sweaty, but I kept that smile as to not instill fear in my daughter. I asked Melissa to snap a picture of JJ and me as we barely had any pictures together due to usually nobody being around to get us in a frame together. Trying to get a nice picture of us was a hassle as JJ loved moving her head around and being silly for the sake of seeing me get worked up. Until I said “Please baby! I really want a picture of us”. In that moment she seemed to understand and managed to stay still long enough for the picture to be taken.

We finally got on, the ride lasted about 10 minutes and every time our cart reached the highest point, I shut my eyes tight as I could. The one time I peaked, I saw the entire park beneath so I looked over to see JJ’s face and saw the awe and joy, I looked forward to seeing every day after dealing with stressful phone calls and staring at 3 computer monitors all day. As a single mother, the financial compensation this job provided was extremely helpful and allowed for me to afford these weekend trips with my daughter. However, looking back, the toll it took on my mental and physical health made the finance part unworthy of my dedication. The trips and outings with JJ were what kept me sane and going. She has been my rock since she was born without her even knowing what a grand support system she has been. That is why this Wonder Wheel was an apparent milestone. Getting on this ride with my daughter, was not about the thrill of the ride to me. It was about knowing how safe and happy she felt with me and how she can always rely on me. That ferris wheel is proof that for the right reasons, I would do anything.

# Holiday Smile

Shivangi Lal

With a smile on my face  
I hide my pain  
Pain that resides in my heart  
Which I cannot show  
Or it'll tear me apart

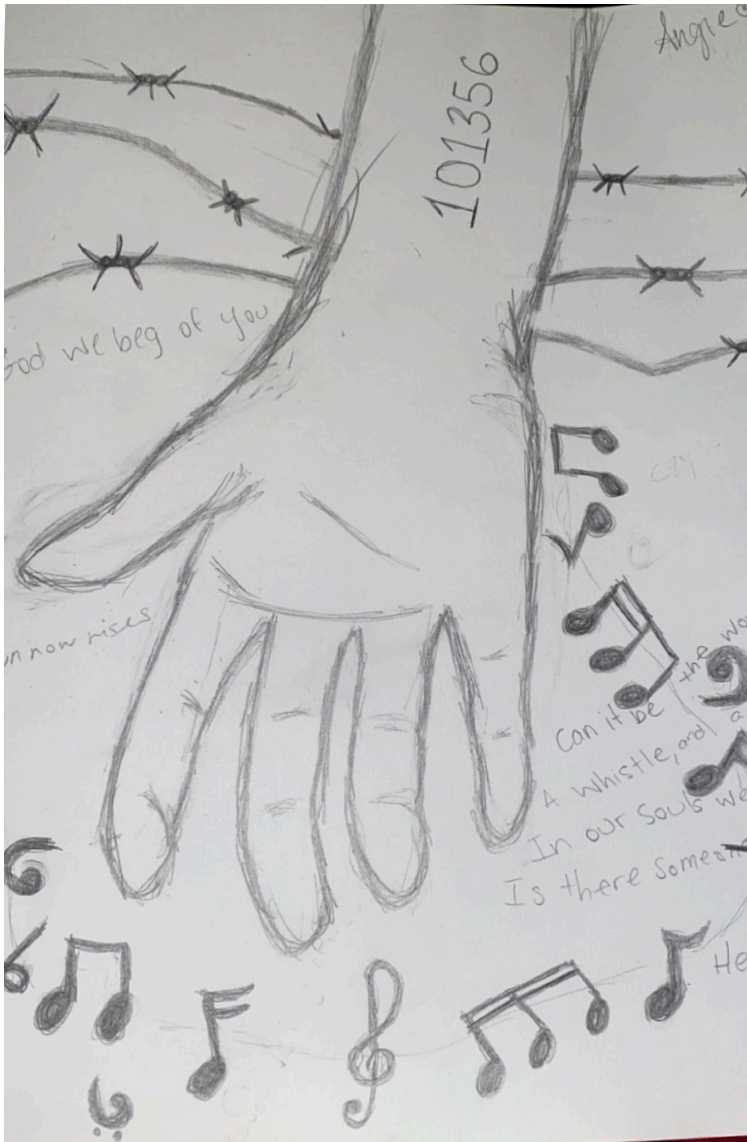
Streets filled with holiday cheer  
Laughter in the air  
Christmas time is near  
The wind in my hair  
Chills in my skin  
Families get together  
Asking how have you been ?

Through this stormy weather  
I tell myself  
Just smile and nod  
They won't bother  
To ask twice

With a smile on my face  
I hide my pain  
pain that comes alive  
During this time of year  
Won't I be able to fake it Yet again?  
This my biggest fear

For if they find out  
It will never be the same  
And so  
With a smile on my face  
I hide my pain  
Forever.





Untitled by Shivangi Lal

# A Tree in the Forest

Sabiha Akter Nur

Identity is a simple word of eight letters that can describe and separate one person or thing from the rest. When we think, read, or hear the word identity without knowing the definition, what comes to our mind first? Name, face, structure? What a person does? Their gender, race, culture? What they believe in? Now, let us see how books describe the word identity. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, “identity” means who a person is or the person’s quality or group that makes them different from others.

Now that we know a little bit about what identity means, we can identify people or things. For example, if we are trying to identify a tree, think about how trees can be distinguished. Trees are considered a living thing, but they cannot move, cannot talk, and cannot do most things other living creatures can do. They breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen, opposite from any other living creature or humans. Trees produce their own food by trapping sunlight, which no other living thing can do. Trees are living creatures that have a unique way of surviving; that is the identity of trees. We know what a tree is, but a tree can have multiple identities as there are a hundred thousand types of trees, and each type differs from each other. For example, some trees can be toxic, some are medicinal, and some are nutritional and can be eaten as normal food by other animals or humans. We also can separate one tree from the other by their physical appearance and their different properties. So, we can say each tree has their own identity.

After knowing and identifying a tree’s identity, let me describe how I or anyone who knows me would describe my identity. According to the definition of the word identity, if I were to describe myself, my identity should look something like this: I am an Asian female Muslim student, and my name is Sabiha Akter Nur. This makes sense but is that my identity? If I am honest, these are the classifications the people and society give me. I was born with a body that looks like a female, but I have always envied a male child’s life. I was born in a country that is a part of Asia; hence, I am called Asian. My parents follow the religion of Islam, so I have become a Muslim, and even my name was decided by my parents.

I kept thinking if identity means who I am as a person, then why it describes everything that was given to me and not who I wanted to be. If my identity is supposed to make me different from others, why does my identity describe most women I know from my country? Well, where I grew up, I was told and constantly reminded that how I should look and behave, what I should do and believe, and who I should become as a woman. The environment I grew up in forced me to follow the rules and regulations that women of my culture followed for ages, and I did as I was told. I started going to school and realized

that my generation's women think and handle things differently from what my parents and relatives have told me. I started confusing myself as I unthinkingly built a split personality. I created a different nature of myself in my imagination; I thought I am a girl of this generation who can be independent, decide for herself, and do what she likes. In reality, I was used to following some strict rules of my culture and religion of the ideal feminine behavior. At one point in my teenage years, I realized I did not know or understand who I was and my identity.

I suffered from an identity crisis my whole life, which means the entire time of growing up, I was uncertain and confused about my identity. I was so into pleasing and coping with everyone around me that I did not know who I was. I was not happy with my given identity and decided to create my own identity. So, I started exploring. I began breaking the rules a little and tried to know if everyone has the same experience when they try things differently. I began to learn new things that I felt interested in and not what I was told I should be interested in. I started researching Islam and other religions because I wanted to believe in what made sense to me and not what I was told to believe in. This whole experience made me go through many ups and downs because I have experienced some harsh reality while breaking the rules and got my heartbroken. The good part was I noticed my parents never cared about those rules but made me do a lot of things for my good and to protect me from any trouble as they loved and cared about me. I started singing classes, which was an awful experience but then I knew I was more interested in artistic things and not memorizing hundreds of books or being a doctor. I did end up sticking with Islam. Now, I know I want to be an independent woman but respect my culture too. I want to be a polite and kind person, but I want to fight back against the wrong things.

Now my current thought on everything I wrote so far is my name, gender, race, culture, religion, and physical appearance are all a part of me. Some of them are similar to others, and some are not. I do not need a unique or special identity. All that matters to me that I know myself better now and happy with who I am. However, one day, I want to be identified as a successful businesswoman; I would love to be a daughter my parents can be proud of, live a simple positive life with my partner, and maybe someday be a good mother. In short, I want my identity to be an independent, positive, simple, and happy woman.

# Make Your Bet

Jafet Montufar

Come sit at the table  
Lets play a game  
The dice is scarlet red  
Waiting for you to make your bet  
Let the game begin  
What will it be ?

The dice was rolled  
The bets were made  
The time has come  
You have to go  
And in the warmth of your bed  
Your eyes were closed  
In an eternal dream you must go  
A long life you lived  
Now is time for you to lay to sleep

Come sit at the table  
Lets play a game  
The dice is scarlet red  
Waiting for you to make your bet  
Let the game begin  
What will it be?

The dice was rolled  
The bets were made  
The time has come  
You have to go  
Your breath almost gone  
Your eyes shut close  
It was not the time for you to go  
But he trapped you  
As he did with thousands more.

Come sit at the table  
Lets play a game  
The dice is scarlet red  
Waiting for you to make your bet  
Let the game begin  
What will it be?

The dice was rolled  
The bets were made  
The time has come  
You have to go  
But how to let you go  
It is too soon  
So many dreams ahead of you  
Your life was cut short  
By the hand of the one  
Who swore love.

Come sit at the table  
Lets play a game  
The dice is scarlet red  
Waiting for you to make your bet  
Let the game begin  
What will it be?

# The Border

Dwayne Brown

As I stand and look across the other side, my mind is running wild in fear  
Waterfall, that is iced cold separate the border, the currents are swift but calm  
at times The sounds of the birds are deafening, but can be tuned out by the  
rides that goes by I believe, I will make it back over the other side, even if it  
cost life People of both sides chit chat, language barrier is deleted  
I believe I will make It back home, without interrogation  
after that sight, I had a spicy meal and prepared for my journey.

# Person's Another Self

Chan Mi Hwang

A lonely bird is moving  
to crave freedom.  
There is a man on the stage,  
He seems like empty  
and gestures both sides.  
Repeats,  
His face been screened  
with illumination,  
his shadow is dancing  
instead of him.  
Circle light follows him.  
Legs reflecting by light  
tremble finely for balance.  
Oh, I can see a man's self

With another self,  
dancing and conflicting.  
Three girls stand on the stage.  
Their dances are powerful and has big motions.  
Sometimes is same, at times is different,  
All support lights are shined toward them.  
I felt it like sense and sensibility. Incompatible,  
If choosing one, other is disappeared.  
Oh, I can listen women's selves.

People who wanted to express something  
filled emotions on the empty place.  
They were moving as if plumage, very lightly,  
talking to each other by using their body.  
Dancing body line brings about amazing and beautiful,  
I know their practice and effort will not betray,  
because I can smell their perfume of dancing.

No matter which music,  
can express their emotions.  
Whatever, can't stop the feeling.  
Moving following them.  
I think that the dream  
was realized.  
They found their wings.  
Each self will show energy.  
In any situation,  
Oh, I remained their selves  
in my mind.

# Remote Dreams

Akasha Shahid

Ah a sinking dream, who is hearing a harsh beam  
Wish someone could save it, But, time is freeze  
Hoping for the sunrise, before the hope dies  
Wealth wins again, cannot realize poor's pain  
But hearts are same, Shuts the doors of vain  
Who knows the student's pain, a dark room and a short screen  
Can give us a way to succeed, of bright future street  
How hard a few of us are trying, but look why dream is crying  
One day it will be over, when these days will cover  
But wait before its too late, Colleges will open their gate.  
Do not feel tired, but use heart for guide  
Listen to your heart, build a dream chart  
Look at the sky, feel like you fly  
Then open the book, find an interesting hook  
Write your dream, think you are a Kream (top layer)  
Among your classmates, then try to get straight A's.  
Remember a path, and it's not short  
Success takes place when simply you graze  
Your dreams like cattle and horse maze.



# Free Minds Wonder

Delasia Vanterpool

They say the past stays in the past for a reason.  
Thinking far back will be committing Treason.  
You swore an oath to protect yourself.

Your own well being.

To keep yourself out of harm's way.

But

A Free Mind Wonders

Even to this day.

I walk in the streets like a man  
Because I was nourished by his  
Right. Hand.

A mother's love never carried me.

A Free Mind Wonders

What will it be like as a whole?

I'm only half of what I was meant to be.  
My childhood fades away into oblivion.

Trapped.

In Hatred. Bewilderment. Guilt. Envy.

Poison

Filters my blood stream.

I laugh believing this is the end.

How can you watch someone you love perish?

For years I've been trying to grasp the understanding of abandonment

But I never came to any conclusions.

As a little girl all I ever wanted was a family.

I cried until Tears weren't enough.

I grew depressed until I wasn't immune to depression any longer.

I slept outside for hours on a cold bench right next to the homeless

Until I grew tired of being alone.

From that point on I knew you wouldn't come for me.

A Child's song is a Dove's Cry

But

Not even my heart can witness how much I love you.

Free Minds Wonder

How to become a better person than the one that left them behind.

I'm not alone

For the little black girl in me has learned

How to fly all on her own.

# A Girl Lonely

Nsambi Williams

I see a girl sitting at the edge of a rock, the ocean laid out in front of her, her back is turned from the camera. The picture is black and white.

You can smell the rawness of the ocean, The sea salt is filling up your nose. The wind is very high, the girl hair blowing.

A girl is by herself in the picture, maybe she wants to be alone. Maybe she has no one to talk to

I believe she got up and got a blanket, it looks cold where she's at.

I believe she wants someone to care for her and ask her what's wrong.

The wind is very high the girl hair is blowing- her hair is high in the air, her hair is wavy, her hair is singing in the wind.

A girl is by herself in the picture, maybe she wants to be alone. Maybe she has no one to talk to.

# Bravery

Alyssa Pascalli

Clay touches on her hands,

Squished in her fingertips

Flame of fire, finest desire

Shooting stars across the sky, heaven in her eyes

She overthinks and feels faint

She is bold and brave

Paper cuts on her hands

Makes red gushy blood drool

She can take the pain

For she is a warrior that is brave.

# Acknowledgements

The Creative Writing Club would like to thank Dr. Christine Mangino, President; Dr. Jennifer Maloy and the faculty of the English Department for encouraging student submissions, in particular the members of the Creative Writing Committee; Dr. David Humphries for initiating this project; Tim Hillis and the Office of Marketing and Communications; Gisela Rivera and the Office of Student Activities; and all of the Queensborough students who contributed writing and artwork to this journal. Thank you all.



Photo by Regina DellaVecchia

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