

Spring 2024

Issue 4

CAKE



A Literary Journal

CAKE

A LITERARY JOURNAL

The logo features the word "CAKE" in a large, bold, black, serif font. The letters are slightly irregular, with some decorative flourishes at the top and bottom of the 'C' and 'E'. Below the word "CAKE" is a thin, black, curved banner that arches under the letters. Inside the banner, the words "A LITERARY JOURNAL" are written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. The entire logo is centered on a white background.

Cake: A Literary Journal is produced by the students and faculty of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University's Department of English and Modern Languages.

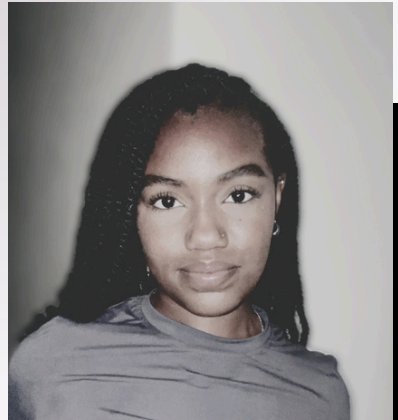
Editor's Note

As we bring to light the latest edition of our literary journal, I am reminded of the profound power embedded within the lines of each piece we have carefully curated. This issue is more than a collection of words; it is a testament to the abstract nature of the human spirit, beautifully captured by the moving portraits, poetry, and prose crafted by our talented artists; its depth is only truly revealed as readers immerse themselves in these works of art. The themes explored in this issue resonate with the complexities of the human experience—moments of heartbreak intertwined with glimmers of hope, moments of anger tempered by the quiet strength of resilience. It is within these moments of vulnerability that we find the true essence of our humanity, stripped bare yet unyielding in its resolve.

I extend a bevy of gratitude to all of the contributors whose words and creativity breathe life into these pages, and to you, our readers, for embarking on this journey with us. May this issue ignite a spark within your soul and remind you of the profound beauty that exists within the written word.

Vehemently,

Xochitl Yanelis



Meet the Team

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Issue #4

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Inspired

x Phillip Simmons Jr.

Anansi grew tired of humans, his legs hungered for the ache of new adventure and the stories he'd once inspired happily had made their ways across the world and thin white papers drew over these travels and made maps, ten times over and as white hands flip these pages, he feels a tug at the center, this ringing tenor Anansi's lineage, his life's blood, his beloved. He, the spider sleeping under the snake's tongue. He, the spider who eats fat flies that hear stories with no ears and a hundred eyes. Anansi knows the crescendo of flat palms meeting cowhide drums and the sting of a century of heroes becoming subplot sinking down another story lost to time and buried beneath the waves, ten times over another "trade" to a new land where stories are translated to a language Anansi cannot keep up with the words as they change. He, the father of stories told orally. He, the father who only feels stories with full bodies and a hundred lies.

Anansi: he who steals stories from the sky.



accept this offering, a poem from my mind
accept this praise, a prayer for my muse

Learning To Pray

x Carlos DiOrio



“Salt and Seasoning of the Earth”

x Sharard “X” Saddlers

I stood at the mountain top, looking neither down nor up but outward. Right there was the circle of clouds I had viewed from below, tickling the upper reaches of this high prominence. Just as I thought, they had silver linings of shimmering, seemingly boundless dimensions.

I tried to stretch toward their fibrous outlines but found my attention diverted. Oddly, for this elevation, I espied a trodden ledge. Curious, I inched forward, slowly, toward the visible portion of a rough-shorn path, then poked around the corner to find a longer, rockier trail.

I trudged onward, despite some bramble bushes that tugged at my clothing and caused me, repeatedly, to look down and finally to stumble and fall. And roll.

And roll. Rolling down, down, still further down, until

I settled, uneasily, having crashed into the rubble of my fractured ego.

The Scare of Dreams

x Linda Louise

The youth of life dreams with infinite possibilities, dreams with the strength of mountains that rise above the earth and reach toward the heavens with majesty and grace, with power and might.

In the midst of life, dreams with possibilities

dreams with the bounty of hills and valleys that roll along the mountainside and rest beside flowing streams that embrace the richness that life offers to dreams.

The age of life dreams with the reality of what a thing is, not what can be.

It rests in the valleys of darkness, dread, and fear.

No longer reaching with power and might toward infinite possibilities, plunged far below the mountain whose peak is obscured by the clouds.

Remembering the dreams of youth makes the pain of this place even greater for the realization of dreams lost is...

...the scare of dreams

But Who's Checking For You?

x Tylah Keys

Such a good helper are you?

Checking on others

Taking on other woes out of fear of them doing it alone

Making sure they're mentally sound

But what about your health?

So selfless and always being conscious enough to not be selfish
You forgot to heal afterward

You forgot to be your own cheerleader

You forgot to love the parts you struggle to embrace

You're preaching to the choir but I don't think you fully understand
your own sermon

Imma need you to comprehend what's at stake here

So listen..

You are so quick to pour into others but who's watering your garden?

Who's tending to your roses?

You can't expect your flowers to grow if they are wilting

You don't want a garden?

Okay, fine...

Then what do you want?

You still don't know?

Walk with me...

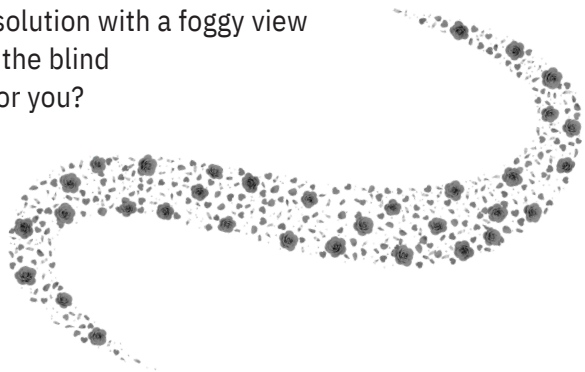
Love struggles tend to show in areas that are neglected and have
suspended energy to flow

In order for you to grow you have to let things that no longer serve
their purpose go

It's hard to verify a solution with a foggy view

The blind can't lead the blind

So who's checking for you?



We Listen to Hear

x Saga

So how does it feel to fare so well?
The gaping monstrous arms of hell
Never concerned with the pain you left
Problems that fall on ears that are deaf.
All you do is stand and stare
And yet no atonement for their fervent, not ever heaven sent, ways of
destruction are always there
So dangerously in the eyes of the castaways
No addition of safety can lengthen or strengthen, just stuck waitin for
better days!
For this isn't a tome fabricated by woe;
Not all contrarians argue to know
Some open their mouths because they love when they speak

Engulfed by stupidity that leaks when they wreak such asinine beliefs
Like oil spills that turn bright countries bleak; they seep into cracks of
society that have never been reached
To places untouched by ideas so meek.
So riddle me this
Do you listen to hear?
But it's futile to ask when the answer is clear
How could you invite us to a house with locked doors
With a veil of ignorance that guards every floor?
So you'll never hear the screams of low echelons
When you could drown them out with the stereo you robbed.
Always hoping and coping, waiting for the day you see the masses
eloping
To marry ourselves, on our own we are proud submitting vows that swear
this is the last day a cow leads us back to the slaughterhouse we share.
We don't listen to think, we listen to hear
And sewing them shut won't strengthen your ears
So when you see disobedience from those you call dumb
Disband that entitlement
And hear them for once.

A Woman's Rage

x Tylah Keys

I held the screams in
Frightened by what I may hear
Afraid that it would become its own entity inside of my own
Almost like it could control me
I would become a puppeteer to the rage confined within me
The one controlling the strings would be me separate from my body
Separate from this mind but yet still sowed to this soul
Every insecurity became alive and made itself detrimental
to each decision I made afterward
What have I become?
Why must I be silenced?

tall telling

x Patrice Joseph

our future has been forsaken
i love fairytales but this time it wasn't make believe
cause you made me believe
you told me a tale
a fucking folklore just for you to fuck an ogre
folks telling me about wassa name
you tall telling me
telling on me for telling ya folks about wassa name
to the point you don't even remember which wassa name it was
recounting
repenting
cause word of mouth and your pen ain't matching
you ran out of ink without thinking about the griots that do this shit for a living
i can't tell if you're grits
a baser
or a junkie fiending for every loop
chasing dames that don't even want you



LACK-EES

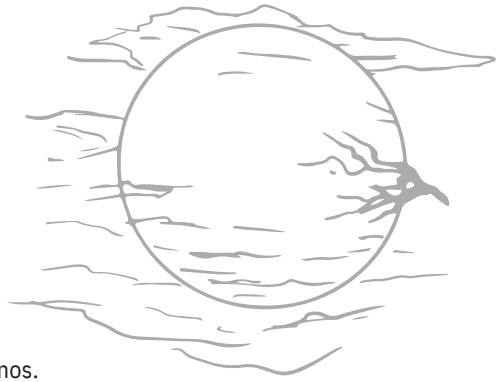
x Carl DiOrio

We stuff ourselves with work and then explode into fragments of fun-seeking weekend “activities.”
Why?
To keep our minds, our mind, away from the hollow core that plunges ever so downward.
Downy thoughts may comfort us when darkness creeps, but for how long?
How high the walls of our fort of insecurity, easily scalable by almost any sort of foe we know, or don't.
It seems the only recourse left may be to find the means of finding — what, exactly?
Joy ...

Heart of Wolves

x Kanijah Stevens

Sometimes I'm a defibrillator
Applying electric currents
Into the pulse of the past.
And you're a glowing ghost
With all of your lights slowly
Sucked into the black hole
In the centre of my chest
Until I'm left with nothing,
But your shadow.
I follow the vestiges of your light
Beyond the event horizon
To find myself in the mind of chronos.
Where infinity is frozen into slices of time.
But even if the planet saturn is a broken clock,
We're still prisoners.
And the light at the end of the tunnel is a trap.
They never taught me in school
What happens when you make
A permanent home out of a fleeting moment.
Looking for pieces of eternity in transient scenes,
Stripped nude into bare nothing by the forces of entropy.
I feel the teeth of the moon
Sinking deep into my neck
And I can't help but smile
Because I finally understand
The tides of melancholy
Inside the hearts of wolves.



Space

x Tylah Keys

I think I ask for space as a deep fear tactic to make sure my peace and clarity still
remain at its roots

I give them space out of fear of being too much

I avoid loving so much so it doesn't get confused with being overbearing

I give space out of habit because for some reason I want to avoid all eyes on me

I am so used to feeling like someone's second choice that becoming someone's first
choice only feels like a circus

I isolate myself not only to regain my peace but just to lose it 10 minutes in
because I'm no longer asking for space due to me but

because I do not want the other person to become bored of me

I do not want to feel or be seen as disposable so I'm avoidant

And if I do become as such, it is easier to leave because

I didn't allow myself to fall in
too deep

I didn't allow myself to be 100% vulnerable enough for me to eventually be deemed
as weak...

DIOGENES

x Carl DiOrio

It was particularly pleasing,
if not downright delectable
to have so many fine and
fashionable folks find not
fault but thoroughly fabulous
enjoyment in many of the glib
bon mots I so readily let fly last
evening, the thisandthat of
conversation composed into
splendid strands of wise and
jocular quips. Then came

Diogenes. The cynics among
us were unsurprised, though hardly
unimpressed, as into the room
he strode, eyeing each awestruck
inhabitant of this once carefully
commodious now suddenly,
sorely crimped space upanddown, as
if to say in an accusatory, ocular
lingo, "Insufficient, inferior, ignoble,"
only then to sit, striking a strikingly
quiescent pose, if pose it was. Since

then, he and I have become fast
friends. He details my shortcomings,
and I respond in mannerly fashion,
as I dutifully and dully integrate those
faults into a faultlessly constructed
character of great disrepair, bearing
a seemingly endless array of irksome
attributes, careful to carve away any
hint, any trace, any morsel of evidence
of concern or care about matters of
perfection, progress, grace. For now...

Life & Gaming

x Elijah Valcin

Ups and downs,
smiles and frowns,
all come around from he.

At first, it works,
earns perks, beats jerks,
all to avoid defeat.

For you, it was long,
don't mean you was wrong,
depends on the song you sing.

Both press play,
have something to say,
at the end of the day, it rings.
Now it's done, you had a good run,
recorded is fun to read.

Next plugs in,
is in it to win,
will begin right where you sleep.

Us Dance wit da Firefly in Civil War

x Linda Louise

Late at night, just afo de fight, ol' folks gathered us round de low burnin' fire light
Waz a call ta pray on hallowed ground wit soft groans ta win dis cibil war fight
War's coming, it's gonna be a long hard mess
ol' massa mad, gonna do he bess
Keep us down, so low to da groun'
Back bent hard from the load us carry
Whippings spell, boy, don't ya tarry

Lordy, Lordy, Help us please
Ta dance wit da firefly on de breeze
Dey say us be free atter three years of fighting
But Jim Crow ain't call a cease ta de firing
Lordy, Lordy, Help us please
Ta dance wit da firefly on de breeze
A dance in the stillness ov eben da darkest night
Dat's wen da firefly on wing takes flight
Gentle heaves ov soft guidin' light sendin' beacons of hope
ta us families, ta all us kind, and tomorrow's morrow
So us dance wit de firefly ta give us souls life,
 Movin' forward on de rocks ov war to rise,
So us dance wit de firefly ta keep us souls strong
 Movin' forward on the rocks of war rung by rung.
We dance with the firefly to thrive
 In a world where Jim Crow ain't called fer a cease ta de fire

Dey say we be free atter three years of fighting
President Lincoln don signed da paper in his own hand writin'
But Jim Crow ain't call fer a cease ta de fightin'
So us dance wit de firefly in da mid ov de firin' .

When yo way seems lost, yo soul need ease
Recall da dance wit de firefly on da breeze
When de young'uns is toss'd wit de wind, to and fro
Teach 'em ta dance wit the firefly, da way YOU know.
 Teach 'em da way ta onward go
Den pray da prayer ov dem ov ol'
wit soft groanin's on hallowed groun' it be told:
Lordy, Lordy, Help us please
Ta dance wit de firefly on de breeze.

My Oldest Friend

x Kanijah Stevens

The moon is my oldest friend.

In her pale moonlight, when it seems like time has frozen
And everything is dusted in a silverish-white glow,
I look up to her, my irises becoming twin moons themselves.
We've never spoken a word to each other
but I'll never forget the things she's told me.

She's seen me fall apart and rearrange myself more times than a phoenix rebirths
itself in its fire and ash.
The moon has been witness to each time my tears have painted the canvas of my face
with salt and glimmering sadness.
She's been by my side through each silent cry and each breathless echo.
Love and hate, joy and grief, it matters not.
She has been present for it all.
She watched me emerge from my mother's womb, crying from a grief I didn't quite
fully comprehend, and she will watch me when I descend into the earth for a final
time.

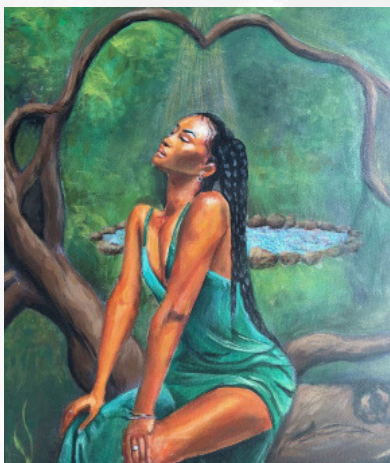
The moon has been the only constant in my life,
And yet I am but one of millions to her,
Just another bodiless voice travelling to her from across the cosmos.
But it's when she burns bright red against the navy canopy of the sky that I finally feel
alive.



aster's lior

x Patrice Joseph

you see, this growth was long overdue
my roots were extending to deep into the ground
you know bounded with the comfort of the dirt that made me believe my growth
had to be hidden
you know? safe with the earth worms and shit
providing me with nourishment
i was soaking up the water that mother nature drops but i never got to see it
i was so comfortable sinking lower with my roots
but as time passed
my vines came out the ground
but the first day out it was a drought
i was cussin' out the clouds fuck you and your whole generation,
EXCEPT GOD THO
my body mind and soul couldn't take no more



Peace of Mind / Enchanted

x Maci Fulton

and i fell
heavy waters drowned me
i couldn't get up muddy and slimy waters lie here, but if i told you my flowers
grew here would you call me a liar?
because my petals opened one by one so effortlessly
but you can't handle the fact that i radiate internally
i don't need your projection
my resilience symbolizes prosperity she reminds me of the why
aster's lior
the star's light
i infinitely move through galaxies
filling up darkness for those who never thought they'd reach the stars
so don't fuck with me
but fuck with me

“He”

x Cassandra Wilson

He pried open the window to my soul
with a single request: “Give me water
for I thirst.”

I, with sorrow, declined for I was parched,
dry land without water for seasons countless;
moisture a memory longer than Elijah’s curse.

He led the way, careful, as he gently
pushed aside my pain, distrust
and scornful hesitation.

I followed, unsure at first, but eager
to heed the soothing sounds of his words
as they provoked profound meditation.

He found the path around the barricades of doubt
and whispered into my itching ears
the wholesome speech of peace.

I clung to his hand as I stumbled toward the light.
His strength and wisdom were like that of an archangel
as he supported and encouraged my weak knees.

He was not meant to continue with me
but to provide, like the dawn, the
audacity of hope within the night.

I wish time’s circumstances had led
our paths to cross at some other road;
a place where our souls would have melded and taken
flight.

Becoming:

He = Me = We



palms

x Patrice Joseph

our palms tell the fortune of the future
and these lines telling me that this ain't just a season
your flesh
your plains slip so effortlessly into my mounts
cause i fit into your developed areas
knowing that touch ain't my favorite love language
you give me breathing room cause you know my hands get clammy
let's compare our hands
but not by the curvature of our brown lines
but the way your hands are bigger than mine
lets lock hands
interlace our fingers
slow down my fleeting heart
expound my solace
i've dreamt about the lines on your face when you smile
the lines in the sky that aligns with your zodiac sign
your divines lines that tickles my spine
i'm in the palm of your hands
your dark apollo creases does not cease your success or our success
i am your aster's lior
your sunlight
so can i trace infinity signs on your palm?



Separation

x Adiyah Thomas

I have been lost for days.

Even months,

Yet when I couldn't remember who I was, where I am, or how I got here, I remembered that I loved you

And that small feat is more than you've ever done.

How can I move on from you when we never started?

You blame me for the guilt and the shame that you carry.

You blame me for believing that you could recover from it.

You want me to feel ashamed for loving you.

You sit there

and

you lie

and

you lie

and

you lie.

You get frustrated when I respond with an emotion that doesn't cater to you .

Understand this,

I am not angry and I am not bitter.

But somehow, the only time you hear me is when I scream

I am not like you.

You sit locked in a glass room and watch the chaos ensue around you claiming you are at peace; I will not run at the possibility of being open and vulnerable because I fear the past.

We are not alive if we feel no emotion.

This is a beautiful tragedy.

You may break my heart but it will mend itself together a thousand times over because the love I put out will return to me.

And when the time comes and you ask yourself "Is it better to speak or to die?"

I will stay and you will go,

Every single time

Because that is how I love.

I will love you til' there is nothing left

And when I see your light dimming,

I will give you a piece of me to burn longer.

Forest Fire

x Kanijah Stevens

One. When she tells you she is a forest fire, or a clenched fist, or a bloody knife, do not correct her. When she tells you she is damaged goods, do not try to change her mind, instead, tell her you will love her anyway. She does not need fixing. She does not even need saving. She just needs someone to look at the wreckage and see something worth making a home in.

Two. Listen to the songs she tells you about. Even the silly ones. Even the ones she only mentions in passing. Buy her the books you notice on her to be read list. To love anybody, you have to know them. **To love a forest fire, you have to want to.**

Three. Remember, you carry a piece of your childhood home everywhere you go. Your crooked smile reflects the off-centre picture frames on your wall. The smell of coffee every day keeps you as warm and inviting as your kitchen. But she lived in a house always on fire, and a part of her will always carry the burning. Remember to carry extra bandages with you. You cannot love a forest fire girl and come out unscathed.

Four. You are not the hero in this story. Neither is she. Truth is, you're both just trying your best. We are all just trying to be holy. You are not the hero in the story. Do not congratulate yourself for loving a forest fire. Call yourself a lover, and you might get to be both.

Roses & Relationships

x Elijah Valcin

Thorns like a barrier to the heart,
Protecting the rose from those who wish worst.
Fighting through terror for the part,
Climbing the stem 'gainst them who quench thirst.
The rose-painted red souls the art,
Given to he whose fee pays love's curse.

An Ode to Autumn

X Kanijah Stevens

Some people
Part lips to part ways
Part sorry
And fully whole on the step out of the door

I sit in awe underneath the trees
And appreciate the leaves
That wash away without regret
Not wishful, or anxious about the new leaves to replace
them If our bodies were words
And this place here beneath the autumn air
Was a goodbye letter
Lingering on the pages of the pavement
A tear would say goodbye
A step in the direction of the fading sunset reads
"With love"

Some people part lips to part ways
Dancing around the pieces hidden beneath the fallen
leaves
I like to let my body write the hardest things to say
As long as the departure is signed
"With love"

Summary

x Linda Louise

It is rare to be blessed with such a treasure.

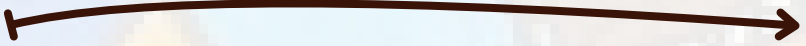
A friend who provides support, encouragement, and love from a sincere heart
A friend who understands the pain of loss and helps to heal wounds
A friend who guides with strength and gentle caring
A friend who listens with the heart...a forever friend

It is rare to be blessed with such a treasure.

The gift to ride the waves of life over a sea of turbulence and live to know WHO
brought you over
The gift to see that life goes on in the face of trauma, drama, doubt, the feeling of
failure, embarrassment, abandonment, loss, anger, self-pity, and heartbreak
The gift of time to grow, to develop strength, to explore in word and deed, as well as
to Explore the inner being and connecting more closely to God
The gift to know and accept that a thing is what it is without self-recrimination,
accusations, frustrations, or regrets
The gift of knowing that this journey of transformation shines so brightly that only
those who love enough, give enough, accept enough, share enough will be granted
entrance and granted permission to sit in the front row of my life.

It is rare to be blessed with such a treasure.

PROSE



"Braggin Different"

x Sharard "X" Saddlers

“The Crowned Serenity vs. Theft”

x Annette Burns-Glisson

In the dimly lit gallery, I crouched, heart pounding, eyeing "The Crowned Serenity." Anton LaCroix's masterpiece adorned the wall, its colors swirling with emotion. The deserted gallery hinted at the isolation that enveloped the artwork. My months of planning echoed in my mind as doubt crept in.



The security guard, lost in a book, symbolized the false sense of security I relied on. The painting, a ticket to a better life, beckoned with its allure. Gloved hands trembling, I touched the frame, feeling the weight of my life-changing choice. As I delicately removed the artwork, panic surged at a sudden noise—the guard approaching. His footsteps echoed, disrupting the silence. The choice loomed larger; steal and face consequences, or leave and abandon the pursuit. The artwork slipped, crashing to the floor. The shattered frame mirrored the fracture in my plan.

The guard, an impending storm, confronted me, shock in his wide eyes. A split-second decision—confront or run. Clutching the painting, I lunged, knocking him down. Adrenaline surged as I fled through darkened streets, sirens in the distance. My triumph, however, was tainted by the question: Did my newfound wealth cost me my serenity?

In that fleeting escape, I transformed into a thief, a fugitive. The stolen masterpiece cradled, I questioned the worth of my choice. The gallery's setting and the struggle for the artwork highlighted the internal conflict, shaping the character's development in the shadows of doubt and fleeting triumph. The cityscape, bathed in neon lights, became my accomplice, weaving a tale of redemption or ruin as I disappeared into the night.

I felt the weight of "The Crowned Serenity" as I ran through the dimly lit city streets. Distorted shadows created by neon lights reflected the unclear routes that lay ahead. My doubts followed me across the city. The stolen masterwork identified me as a criminal and served as a burden. Once in time with the rhythm of the city, my heartbeat now echoed fear. I was reminded that my retreat was just brief by distant sirens. Once my ally, the city now appeared to whisper the implications of my hasty decision. With police authorities closing in, every nook turned into a place of regretful retreat. I considered my options in the shadows. The valuable painting reflected my internal dilemma. My fate was becoming a drama on the verge of legality, with the city serving as the theater.

As I melted into the crowd, I became aware of how transient my victory was. The artwork that was taken now represented my decline into dishonesty. The city awaited my next move, a step toward either irreparable devastation or redemption, full with possibility and danger. Sirens sounded, stepping up the chase. I wondered if giving up my peace of mind was worth obtaining the money I desired. I was presented with the stark truth that I might have sacrificed my true self in the chase of a better life, surrounded by whirling shadows and flickering lights.

“Writing Exercise #4:

A scene about a father in prison told through the eyes of a teenage daughter.”

x Madison Jackson

I look at him through the worn-down glass screen. The vibrant man I once knew, is now just a pair of dark circles beneath absent eyes. It’s been 3 months, but I still remember the day the group of men swarmed into our home and took him away. Tears welled up in my eyes as he stared at me through the police car windows, and the vision of a perfect dad that every little girl has disappeared just like the car as it turned the corner. I snap back to present time and look at my dad in the eyes.

“I’m so glad you finally came to visit your old man, Autumn.”, he says with a slight glimpse of hope in his eyes. This is my first time visiting him in prison because I simply feared my own dad. The man that I’ve known for the last 18 years is not the same man that can commit such a vicious crime. I look around the room thoroughly before I speak to ensure that no one was listening in.

“Dad, why did you do it?” He looks down in silence for what felt like an eternity, almost as if he was trying to concoct a believable story. I sit in patience and allow him time to think because, I mean, it must be hard to explain to your 18-year-old daughter why you killed her mother. I look back at my father and his pensive expression began to look more like anger. Before I can finally get the answer the question that’s been hanging over my head for months, I hear the loud slam of my dad hanging up the phone and see an officer escort him back to the barred 4x4 cell that was now his home. I leave the facility, a building made of concrete, so harsh and cold on the outside, but within it held the man that once warmed my heart daily, and a dam of tears threatens to break and flow down my cheek on my entire ride home.

The house is eerily quiet these days now that I am the only one that occupies it. A structure that was once filled with music and laughter, now silent, with the only sign of life being the occasional creak of the settling floorboards. As I walk to the kitchen to prepare some dinner, I’m startled by a phone ring that echoes through the house.

“Detective Adam Washington LAPD.”, the voice on the other side of the phone proclaims.

“Is this Autumn Jones?”

I confirm to him that it’s me and proceed to inquire about his reason for calling. He ultimately tells me that he wants me to testify against my father.

“I will get back to you with an answer as soon as I can. Enjoy the rest of your evening.” I hang up the phone and stand in disbelief.

I choose to forgo dinner and crack open a bottle from my parent's wine cabinet, well I guess it is my cabinet now. The scratches on the cabinet's wood brought back vivid memories of that night as I begin to ask myself questions. Testify against my dad? How could I do that? Well, I know how I could do it. I remember the night so vividly. The knife, the blood, my mom's blood-curdling screams, my anonymous phone call to the police. I remember it all. But that's still my dad; the man I used to have tea parties with, play catch with, how could I testify against him? I take a gulp of wine straight out the bottle and spend the rest of the night trying to drown my thoughts.

For the second time this week, I am face to face with my father. I decide to skip the small talk and get straight to what I came here for. "I'm only going to ask you one more time dad...why did you do it?" I plead. Yet again, I get no response, so yet again I get up and leave.

I choose to forgo dinner and crack open a bottle from my parent's wine cabinet, well I guess it is my cabinet now. The scratches on the cabinet's wood brought back vivid memories of that night as I begin to ask myself questions. Testify against my dad? How could I do that? Well, I know how I could do it. I remember the night so vividly. The knife, the blood, my mom's hurdling screams, my anonymous phone call to the police. I remember it all. But that's still my dad; the man I used to have tea parties with, play catch with, how could I testify against him? I take a gulp of wine straight out the bottle and spend the rest of the night trying to drown my thoughts.

“My Little Planet”

x Christopher Osborne

I was an alien from a far-off galaxy and had traveled across space to reach this little blue world called Earth. Over the years, I took it upon myself to protect this majestic but vulnerable planet. Suppose it was my child. It was full of varied landscapes and many hitherto undiscovered life types.

A shimmering, translucent energy field shrouded my arrival, and I fell into the planet’s surface, into a thick forest. Earth’s atmosphere was thick and rich, with sounds and smells I had never experienced before. I reached out with my senses, taking a closer look at my surroundings. My many senses registered the verdant foliage and vivid hues of the unusual plants that flourished in profusion. I could hear the rustle of leaves, the hum of insects, and the beautiful symphony of birdsong as I traveled farther into the forest. I was struck with a profound appreciation for the planet’s natural beauty by the enchanting chorus of life. The woodland floor was covered in mottled patterns as sunlight streamed through the thick canopy.

My senses led me to a small, peaceful space with a babbling stream winding amongst the rocks. I watched vibrant fish dash beneath the surface while the water shimmered in the sunlight. Though it was a beautiful and calm view, it was nothing compared to what I was about to experience. I turned to view a unique entity after seeing a rapid movement. It was a soft pink, almost translucent tone, and it stood on two legs. Its eyes were big and expressive, and a cascade of long, dark tendrils adorned its head. The lips of the thing moved, uttering sounds and sentences that I could not understand. I was not sure what to do, so I hesitated. Although my main goal was to watch and learn, I couldn’t help but feel a connection with this unusual individual. I projected a range of vivid visuals and feelings to communicate my calm intentions. The creature lost its initial trepidation as its eyes grew more prominent.

“My apologies. I am Jupiter, Latin for The Supreme being. I’ve come from a galaxy far from here called Salvator Hominis. I happen to be studying your planet for years you all need a peculiar punch.”

I moved slowly up to the creature and offered it a peace sign with one of my limbs. It reached out gingerly, its hand shaking as it made contact with her soul. I could feel the warmth of her soul. Our bond broke down language barriers instantly, and I had a deep sense of oneness. Woah...

We sat there together as the sun started to drop, watching the sky become darker, and the stars come out. It was a turning point in our encounter’s narrative, a profound moment of kinship between two alien species. We had created a link that exceeded our differences

and crossed the chasm between our species. Unfortunately, I had to head out and resume my galactic exploration. I gave Emily one last deeply emotional look, and we silently agreed always to remember our fantastic encounter. I returned to my ship and disappeared into space, profoundly impacted by my experience with an Earthling. Looking back, I’m constantly reminded of Emily and our incredible bond. Our interaction served as a reminder that, despite the vastness of the world, curiosity and the need to comprehend and connect are universal human emotions. I remember that fantastic day as I go through space, using it as a ray of hope for yet-to-be-found relationships and experiences.



“Betrayal Is Not”

x Phillip Simmons JR.

We never had much. I remember the conversations about money. I learned early that rent was due on the 15th so if I had any request they had to wait until at least the 21st. I clung to these routines amidst the uncertainty of my childhood. All the more reason that I should've mattered most. I was born on the 25th, four days after payday.

It wasn't a surprise, there was never much commotion surrounding my birthday. The day is ripe and awkward in its arrival. It sits restless in the heat of summer, only a little more than a week from the dreaded Back-to-School season. My mother was working, saving, begging, and borrowing to make ends meet. This was fine. Until she needed to borrow from me.

It was meant to be my special day. I don't remember exactly what I wanted but I knew what I would get. I knew she would arrive, sheet cake in hand, over a table with confetti sprinkled over it. Always the standard cake- the kind easily pulled from the freezer. The frosting ribbons were the worst. The interlocking red and blue, always smudged. My name sat smug, breezily swiped across its blank face. My siblings would sing to me and carve out slices for themselves.

I understood that the moment wasn't all mine.

For her, birthdays were battles. She was proving that against towering statistics and systems she could wring happiness from our trying lives. She would do her best to stretch any sunspot into a summer flux with laughter.

So there she was with a cake. A cake as a weapon, wielded fiercely against standards set long before her. A cake as surrender, a ticket to a night without worry. A cake as a symbol, sweet as any dream. Later though, she'd admit, a person's birthday should be theirs

“Y'all can have everything but the name. He should eat his name, it's his birthday,” my mom would say. She would stand back and smile and watch me eat for a few minutes then give me my money. Each year I'd received twenty dollars held gently by a card I'd pretend to read.

It became a routine, a ritual I was happy to subscribe to. Until eventually, I began to feel she owed me.

I couldn't understand the pressure she was under. I still don't.

So when she slunk off to her shower without slipping her hand into her purse or pockets my mood was soured. I didn't burst into tears or waste my supposed vanilla cake. However, a silent fear slithered up from the pit of my stomach and sat between my shoulders.

If life were a movie there would be no music in this scene. No wispy ballad to mark my marred existence. The silence would be deafening. But, for better or worse, I'm no main character.

I sat there and ate and laughed. My brother threw away the paper plates all soiled with icing. All tossed into a hanging white trash bag then pushed down until the printed balloons were suffocated and only the white backsides shone back at me. My head felt like pins and needles.

Suddenly, I was breathing helium, my voice high and whining. The cake that had slipped so begrudgingly past my tongue threatened a bitter birthday surprise. But I couldn't, I didn't want that kind of spectacle today. Vomiting my Sam's Club cake wasn't in the cards for me. I wouldn't burst with emotion today. It was still my birthday.

So I skipped off to bed, but I didn't turn on the TV and the light was on. It was all a signal; she knew I had to have it on to fall asleep. My sheets' wrinkles remained the same and the pillows were arranged in their usual disarray. The entire room, air now thick with emotion, seemed smaller than ever. I needed my mother to see my shadow flickering from the door frame as a beacon. I still had hope in her.

I wondered, “If she isn’t giving me money it must be something big, could be fifty dollars, or a Beyblade collection, or a brand-new book?”

There was a joyous silence and I was teeming with anticipation when I heard the steady patter of falling water come to a glorious halt. I did my best not to squeal when I heard the familiar squeak of the bathroom door down the hall.

Irrevocable and solemn, she stepped into my room. Her hands were empty. The hands that carried the cake every year. The hands that wrote many birthday notes, and prepared big breakfasts. The hands that held me.

Did she even sing out there? I hadn’t heard her voice among my siblings. Did she look at the list I left on her mirror?

I never wanted to be the child measuring their mother’s love in gifts. I only wanted the moments. Where the music swelled and the audience can see the character’s mouths moving and maybe even make out the words, “I love you.” I knew I didn’t have a movie, but I needed my Mom.

She had nothing for me. I saw her shut the stiff frame softly, trembling, and I wanted to erupt in laughter. Surely it was a joke, a dramatic introduction to evoke a reaction. My siblings would fall over each other to gawk at my gift soon.

I can’t say much has changed. I’m not waiting with my arms or hands outstretched for a hug or a handout. The change in my pocket is mine now. I’ve decided to celebrate myself at every opportunity. My young birthday wish was a movie, a mother, a moment. Now I have the power to create that for myself.

My mother didn’t betray me. She chose a happy family, full bellies. I will never know the weight she carried delivering four children into maturity alone. I know home in her. I exalt her always because if placed in the same situation I can’t say I wouldn’t do the same.

I grew to realize that my mother was all I had most of the time. I know now that even when I don’t have my best interest in mind, she does. She dotes as much as she can now, an endless stream of text messages with things she finds hilarious. The love I have for her doesn’t leave room in my heart for a grudge. I’ve learned not to judge; I don’t know enough to.

The best she could was not betrayal. It was survival, sacrifice, shame brought to me one fateful evening. I can’t remember how I reacted. I hope with all my being I wasn’t too harsh.

We had many conversations that bled until they were confessions. I knew she wished she could do more. I knew I couldn’t blame her, and that she kept a running list of people to blame rolling on a conveyor belt in her mind.

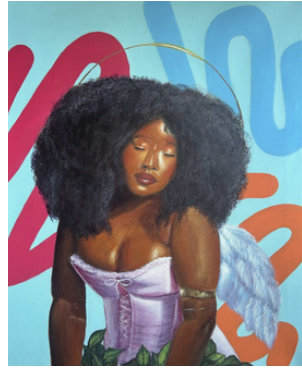
Innocence bandages bleeding hearts, or at least that’s what I wanted to believe. I feel guilty and ashamed that the possibility of shaming her lingers. I wondered as I wonder so often, am I wrong for expecting? Is accepting everything in levity the path I should have chosen?

She had nothing for me. She sat gently and explained; she had spent all of my birthday money on the tablecloth and the cake.

“The Learning of Loss”

x Rasheen Hill

In a small, weathered church, the atmosphere was thick with the scent of lilies, and dim light cast shadows on sad faces. The young boy walked hand in hand with his family, still grappling with the confusion of why everyone wore black, and tears flowed freely. As they approached the casket, his innocent inquiry hung in the air, “Why is Grandma lying there, and why is everyone so sad?” His mother, holding back tears, knelt to explain, “Sweetie, Grandma isn’t sleeping. She’s, um, she’s not going to wake up. People are sad because we won’t see her again.”



“Harmonious Chaos”

The little boy and his mother turn around, now seated among grieving family members. The boy observed his older brother and cousin, both visibly distraught. He turned to his mother, questioning, “Why are they crying so much?” His mother, wiping away a tear, gently replied, “People feel sadness in different ways. Your brother and cousin loved Grandma, so they’re expressing their feelings by crying. It’s okay to feel sad, too, sweetheart. If you want to cry, you can; it’s okay.”

A few minutes passed, and still unaware of the gravity of the situation, the boy innocently asked about Grandma waking up after noticing her Sunday best and knowing she wouldn’t want to sleep in that. His mother responded with a slight breaking, “Grandma is going to be taking a long nap, so we won’t get to see her again after this.”

As comprehension dawned, tears streamed down the young boy’s face. He looked up at his mother with watery eyes, “But I want to say goodbye. Can I, Mom?” With a reassuring smile, she nodded.

“Of course, sweetie. Take all the time you need. I’m right here with you.”

Throughout the remainder of the service, the young boy grappled with the concept of loss – at least his version.

The family headed to the back of the church for the rest of the service. The time then came to lower his grandmother into the ground; the young boy watched with a lump in his throat. The minister’s soothing voice became a distant hum as memories of warm cookies, laughter, and stories flooded his mind. Everything started to click in and hit him at once.

As the first shovel of dirt fell, the boy wiped his tears, seeking reassurance from his mother. Through her tears, she smiled, conveying that even though Grandma was gone, the love and memories would always be there. In that bittersweet moment, the young boy learned to navigate the complexities of saying “goodbye.”

“The Legend’s Test”

x Anonymous

Big Lizz was an enslaved woman who was said to be as big as she was strong. She was known by many as a “powerhouse” of a woman because of her stature and ability to do double (if not more) the work of others on the plantation. Her sly character, paired with her impressive physical prowess, made her one of the plantation’s most trusted slaves—little did her master know she was also a spy for the Union tracking down Confederate supporters who were in the business of smuggling money, drugs, and other items for the south during the Civil War. Lizz’s enslaver was an evil and paranoid man, often exploiting Lizz’s size and strength by making her physically and mentally taxing work day in and day out. One day, as his paranoia got the better of him, he decided to collect all of his treasure. He smuggled goods for the Confederacy and buried them out of fear that the Union would soon send people to come and seize his assets after he was set to leave to fight for the Confederacy.

After collecting all his things, he sought out Lizz and commanded that she carry everything. She followed him up to a high point of the swamp surrounding the plantation and instructed her to dig a hole to place the treasure in. Once she had finished digging and began putting the items in the hole, her master asked, “You think anyone’ll come looking for it?” he was nervous and kept his hand on the sword tucked away in his belt loop.

Lizz replied that she didn’t know if anyone would come looking for it, considering no one knew he had anything in his possession. At this, Lizz made a fatal mistake; she began to quicken the pace with which she loaded the treasure in the hole. Her master, paranoid and hyper-aware, noticed this. While her back was turned, he unsheathed his sword and cut her swiftly across the back, causing her to scream in pain as she fell flat over the hole. The cut was deep, but for safe measure, the man raised the sword again and with all the force he could muster, and brought it back down on Lizz’s neck over and over until her screams were swallowed by the gurgling of blood in her mouth as her head became severed from her body.

Making quick work of Lizz’s body, he stuffed her in the hole on top of the treasure and shoveled dirt over her body. Before making his way back to the plantation, he spat on what was now the woman’s grave and cursed her to guard his treasure until he returned from war.

Soon after, before he could even make it to war, his life began to take a turn for the worse as he lost everything: his health, money, family, and land. As legend would have it, this was all Lizz’s doing for being killed and left in the swamp; there are reports of people recalling seeing strange activity on the plantation and in the swamp every now and then around the time of the anniversary of Lizz’s death and her birthday. As locals would tell it, no man who answered Big Lizz’s call ever returned to tell the tale.

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As a kid, Hakeem was ever the adventurer; he was never afraid of anything, be it jumping off the highest point on the playground or trying his hand at parkour in the third grade, resulting in a broken arm that somehow never managed to stop him from doing everything to the fullest extent of his ability. Jabari, however, was a different story. While he wasn’t shy per se, he was ever cautious, never wanting to break the rules intentionally or upset the balance of things. He and Hakeem accidentally became friends in elementary school when he stopped Jabari from being bullied in class. Hakeem had held a sort of power over Jabari ever since, not that he minded much; he enjoyed Hakeem’s company, even if it meant that every now and then, the two of them would find themselves in some serious trouble—or rather, Jabari would find himself in a heap of trouble—like the time in 10th grade when Hakeem convinced him to go joy-riding his dad’s brand new truck on a school night, and they nearly totaled it getting onto the freeway. After being released from the hospital with minor injury, Jabari was grounded until junior year.

Both boys had heard the stories of Big Lizz all the time, having grown up in Maryland, and now that the two were legally adults, they were free to go out and test her tale for themselves. Jabari had always taken local myth very seriously and never thought he would find himself on DeCoursey bridge with his best friend in the middle of the night. Still, of course, with Hakeem's ability to command language as though it were as simple as training a pet, he found himself convinced and regretting every moment after he had agreed to go.

"Come on, man, you can swim, so if we get pulled off the bridge, we can find our way back to land and get out of there. Plus, we'll bring weapons just to be safe. Ya know, the salt, wrought iron bullets, supernatural handbook, the whole bit." Hakeem jostled with Jabari in an almost mocking tone as his friend sat on the edge of the couch, watching as he prepared a bag with everything he thought they would need to defend themselves if Big Lizz was real.

"So, what I'm hearing is—and correct me if I'm wrong—to protect ourselves from a ghost you think is real, you are one hundred percent confident that all we need is the ability to swim and follow the lore of a TV show, literally titled 'Supernatural?' Am I hearing you right?"

Hakeem laughed, "Look, I know this is questionable, but if you're right and it's just a myth, that means the worst that could happen is we waste gas going to the bridge and come home empty-handed."

"Actually, no, the worst that could happen is we get lost, never to be seen again—we could die."

"Just shut up and come on; you were all for it yesterday when I suggested we go. It's almost midnight anyway; I know you have nothing better to do. So get up, and let's go."

Jabari rolled his eyes. "I hope she is real; maybe that way she can take you with her, and I won't be wrapped up in your shit anymore," he spoke under his breath with a frustrated sigh as Hakeem laughed, tossing his keys in the air as they walked out of the house.

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The boys rode in silence with only the low sounds of the radio and Hakeem's shift in the driver's seat to spare an occasional glance at his friend, who sat in the passenger seat sweating bullets. In the quiet, Jabari felt as though he could hear everything individually, from the rustling leaves that whispered secrets of the night, the oddly syncopated croaks of bullfrogs coming from every direction to the nearly absent sound of the hoot of an owl as one sat perched up on a nearby tree, eyes glowing in the dark staring directly into his soul. Its head was turned completely around as the rest of its body faced the opposite direction.

I shoulda listened to my momma, Jabari thought to himself as he felt his heartrate trump an erratic rhythm in his chest. Just yesterday, his mother had asked him when he thought he'd outgrow Hakeem and his shenanigans, saying: "You're eighteen now, Jabari; you need to start being conscious about the company you keep. That boy is gon' get you in some shit we can't get you out of one day."

Jabari's fear began to turn into anger for a moment, but the closer they got to the bridge, the more uneasy Jabari became as he took in the world around him. Large trees covered in hanging moss that blew silently in the light wind that filled the cool air. The biggest trees framing the entrance to the bridge stood tall with their solid branches and dark rings at their trunks, indicating the water level from different phases of the tide.

Jabari took a breath and said a quick prayer as the car crept up on the bridge, the weight of the vehicle making an eerie crackling noise as it rolled across the old wood until it reached the highest point in the middle of the bridge. A thick fog swirled around in the air, and the boys watched as it rose up to meet the windows. Hakeem took a deep breath, pulling out a sheet of paper with notes scribbled all over it.

"Okay, legend says once we were on the bridge, to honk six times, flash the headlights another six times, and shout out her name three times."

Jabari felt a shiver run down his spine as he sat in the passenger seat, watching and listening to his friend honk the horn and flash his headlights before turning the car off. “And now we say her name. Ready?”

Hakeem looked at Jabari with excitement and mischief dancing in his eyes. “We?” Jabari’s eyes nearly popped out of his head as his hands began to clam up, and he could feel each bead of sweat trickle down his forehead.

“Yes, we. We’ve been over this man; no turning back now.” The weight of Hakeem’s words crushed Jabari, and the stifling air grew even thicker with the continuous rising of the dense fog. He was sure about one thing: there was no turning back now. With unwavering determination, Hakeem raised the scrap paper, his voice ringing out across the murky silence.

“Big Lizz, Big Lizz, Big Lizz.”

They waited. Every second that passed felt like an eternity as silence fell over the swamp. The wind stopped blowing, frogs stopped croaking, and the leaves ceased their whispers. Jabari turned to look out of the back window to find that the owl had also disappeared into the night, leaving him with a lump in his throat that he couldn’t rid himself of.

Just when the boy’s nerves began to settle in the silence, he saw the owl swoop down to rest on the car’s hood. His voice got stuck in his throat, a silent scream of warning clawing for release. In the distance, a figure emerged, shrouded in mist, steadily advancing toward them. Hakeem’s excitement was palpable as the figure grew nearer, holding a severed head with glowing red eyes in its hands. The two boys shared a desperate glance—Hakeem’s eyes glittering with fervor and adventure while Jabari’s widened in sheer horror, a silent plea for escape lingering on his lips.

“Holy shit,” Hakeem nearly shouted, ready to hop out of the car and race toward the figure.

“Hakeem, no—” Jabari was cut off before he could even start as the car door slammed shut, and he looked on to see his friend walking slowly, in a trance-like state, toward the woman on the other end of the bridge, who stood steady, holding out her right hand as if beckoning the boy toward her.

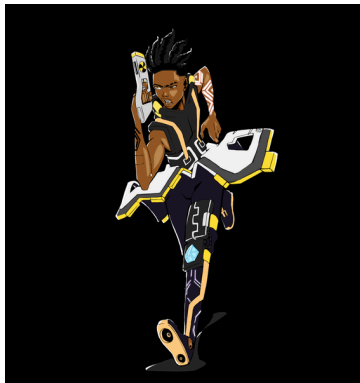
Jabari could see the mouth of the severed head begin to move as a voice that sounded like it was coming from everywhere said: “Come, child. If treasure is what you seek, come to me. Let me show you.”

The voice made Jabari tense up. As if at her command, the car began to flash its headlights and sound the horn six times. Quickly, Jabari got out of the car, slammed the door, and called for his friend, who seemed to be floating toward the figure.

“Hakeem! Hakeem! Hak—shit!”

As his friend and the haunting figure faded into the distance, the ground seemed to tilt beneath Jabari’s feet. Stumbling backward, he regained his balance and bolted, sprinting towards the bridge’s entrance, each stride a mixture of relief and guilt clawing at his insides. The taste of escape left a bittersweet taste, blending with the lingering fear gnawing at his conscience.

As he ran, he berated himself for the twinge of relief that coursed through him, the perverse wish that Hakeem might finally reap the consequence of his actions, a selfish desire now clouded by overwhelming remorse.



“Untitled”
x Aubrey Hough

His heart pounded with the terror of the moment and the weight of his conflicting emotions. As he got further and further away from the bridge, Jabari noticed his beating heart and quickened breath find a home in the steady revving of the car's engine and the six distinct honks that sounded over and over again:

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

“Where Evil Hides”

x Anonymous

On June 11th, 1955, a day as ordinary as any other, a dark chill began to creep over the serene dome of Saintsville, Michigan. It was a gloomy and cloudy Saturday morning. Lloyd Hampton and the entire Hampton family were perplexed by this sudden gloomy weather. On this fateful day he and his entire family were gathered at the vast and gothic Tolson Baptist Cathedral alongside the entire community for the funeral of sixteen year old Terrence Carver who had been murdered. Lloyd always dreaded going to church even if it wasn't for traditional service. Lloyd believed in a God but he wasn't exactly sure if God was who he'd been told he was. After all Terrence Carver was as devout a believer as anyone else in Tolson. Where was God when Terrence was hanging from a tree gasping for breath and pleading for the mercy of hateful white folk? It seemed that for all the praise and sacrifice that black people offered God he gave very little in return. He knew better than to voice these concerns though. “You not gon see evil if you don't know good.” his mother always said

She was a devout believer who read the bible and prayed every morning, noon and night. She was one of Pastor Woodward's favorite congregants. She instilled this ritual in his siblings, George and Davis. Though they were no more devout than he was. They certainly believed themselves to be true Christians, but there were more compelling reasons for them to join the church choir than devotion.

“Guaranteed honey magnets and panty droppers!” Davis had proclaimed to George with excitement the day they secured their spots on the Tolson Baptist Choir.

They were quite the lady killers at church and often talked to the prettiest girls. Maybe his mother was right because his brothers sure did find a lot of 'evil' chasing girls. Like when the Marshall sisters locked them out of the wooden shed they lured them into under a false promise of lewd touching. They were both stark naked and he had to cover for them and sneak them into the house sight unseen by their parents. Lloyd was a handsome boy too with his defined jaw and hazel brown eyes but he wasn't as smooth or as eager as George and Davis. George often joked he was some kind of queer. Those were insults he never took lying down, he'd always retaliate with a physical attack from a place of brotherly love. He noticed girls just like normal boys or at least he had noticed one girl in particular. Terrence's sister Patty Carver who was only a year younger than them. He'd long admired her saintly but cutesy and delicate Sunday dresses that fit her so well. The way she styled her permed hair with girlish innocent curls that somehow gave her an enticing mature appeal.

For the first time since he laid eyes on Patty at church he had a valid reason to speak to her. The lynching of her brother is an awful reason but a reason nonetheless. There had been no trail to follow his killer or likely killers.

But the colored folk of Tolson all whispered the same thing, the police had no interest in finding the killers. One less negro was a relief to whites all over Saintsville. The pianist hit a dramatic key on the organ, followed by triumphant notes blasted from trumpets. The procession music began and the family began marching into the church in a ceremonial manner. Lloyd swore he heard the first sound of the angry thunder outside the moment they walked into the church. The Carvers were a pristine family and all of them were beautiful and respected. Both Mr. and Mrs Carver entered with stoic expressions while Patty wore a look of grim burden.

"Guess even a dead son won't crack that stuck up icy broad." George snickered to Davis.

"Will you negroes show some respect?!" Lloyd urged quietly. Not that he disagreed with them. Mrs. Carver had long been a thorn in the side of many of Tolson Baptist members with her policing and piety. She often spoiled the youth's fun by arguing against any social events that included music, dancing or "secular" activities. Lloyd didn't want to judge her, perhaps the death of a child would soften her sanctimonious heart. The shocking violence of young Terrence's death had really stirred up the already tense racial conflict in Saintsville. And Mrs Carver had turned into one of the staunchest activists in the community.

At the end of the procession the casket was placed at the center of the church directly beneath the pulpit. The Carvers sat directly across from Lloyd and his family. Patty sat in the seat closest to the aisle, the same seat Lloyd occupied on his family's pew. It felt as though Lloyd was sitting next to Patty even though an aisle separated their pews. He kept stealing glances of Patty during the entire sermon. She caught him a few times and her reaction was warm and sincere. It was almost as if she welcomed his attention. Pastor Woodward took the stage to begin the ceremony and the thunder outside sounded angry and violent though there was no rain or lightning to accompany it. It was as if the heavens themselves were grieving or outraged at this tragedy. Lloyd and Patty continued to exchange light glances throughout the service. He began to feel guilty as if he was intruding on her grief. Pastor Woodward began competing with the boisterous thunder and every time he said Terrence's name the thunder roared. Up until he was finished speaking and announced Mr. Carver's delivery of the eulogy. Curiously the weather calmed enough to get through the remainder of the service gracefully enough.

The after service was also being held at the church since Terrence was being buried in the property graveyard; a grim thought since the hanging tree across from the graveyard is where he was found. Mr. Carver did all the greeting and speaking on behalf of the family, it seems Mrs. Carver was uninterested in putting on a show for the mob. Patty was notably absent and had taken no part in her brother's funeral either.

He needed to know why and he wanted to hear it from Patty herself.



Lloyd found her sitting on the swinging bench in the grass fields in the clearing where the old hanging tree stood.

"I'm real sorry for your loss." He stated plainly.

"I am too." She replied looking up at him dejectedly. He sat next to her gently as if she was a deer he was trying to capture.

"Terrence hated this church and he'd be sick knowin' this is where he spends eternity." Patty declared with no inkling of desiring a response. He decided to give one anyway.

"Well maybe in heaven he's in the forgivin' mood." That made her chuckle slightly.

"Heaven? I sure want to believe that." She said half-heartedly.

"Why doubt otherwise?" Lloyd inquired cautiously.

Patty began to explain that she had been seeing Terrence in her nightmares. She had spooky nightmares filled with faceless deities and horrific cryptic messages. Her parents tell her to ignore them and that it will stop when she's done mourning her brother. But it always felt like more to her.

Lloyd briefly wondered if Patty was insane. He noticed her staring at the huge hanging tree in the open field next to the church.

"What is it?"

"I keep seeing hanging trees in my dreams and evil things with it." She said despondently not breaking focus from the tree.

She began walking towards it with an empty but seduced expression on her face. Lloyd tried asking her what was happening but she didn't respond so he followed her. Patty began hearing distorted voices as she got closer to the tree.

"What's going on Patty?" He asked, growing increasingly nervous at her otherworldly observations. Then she took his hand and he began hearing them too.

It sounded like an angry mob yelling foul insults. Suddenly Lloyd and Patty looked around and it was the pitch black of night and no one was around. When they turned back around to face the hanging tree they were approaching, it was engulfed in a blazing fiery inferno and a young black boy was hanging from it untouched by the flames.

"Holy Mary!" Lloyd exclaimed in awe and terror.

The boy looked like he'd been dead for years. His flesh was rotted, worms and maggots falling from his mouth and squirming about on his teeth and gums. He was a living corpse. But his screams of agony were piercing and inhuman. The dead boy was screaming for help with black goo oozing from his eyes and streaming down his face as if they were his undead tears.

Patty stared directly up at him, though his face was a terrifying sight.

"How can I help you?" She pleaded. He screeched at her to free him.

Lloyd fell to the ground in horror and sat in the grass awe struck by the nightmare reality unfolding before him. Patty began to sob as she pleaded with the ghoully specter for answers on how to free him from his torment.

"I'm sorry Terrence!" She exclaimed.

Then the specter yelled into the black sky and the flames engulfed him and the entire tree. And the next thing they knew it was daylight again and the dreary sky of that Saturday morning was once again above them.

Lloyd got up with a look of horror on his face. Lloyd had witnessed Patty's vision and he had no idea what just happened to him. Patty looked as if she knew exactly what had just happened to her only she still couldn't believe it did.

"Are you ok?" She asked him.

"I-I don't know..." Lloyd replied wearily.

"He's mad at me."

"Why would he be mad at you?" Lloyd asked her.

A look of guilt crept across her face. Patty knew more about her brother's death than she was sharing it seems.

"Terrence had demons." Patty said.

"What demons?"

"He struggled with his...desires. It made him sad. I knew he was sad and I did nothing. The blood is on our parents hand not mine". Lloyd was confused and pressed for more.

"Later tonight... around seven sneak out and we'll meet back up here by the tree, I'll tell you everything." Patty assured him before walking away to reunite with her family. Lloyd headed back towards his family too but before he went home he needed to speak with Pastor Woodward. He found him in the conservatory of the church and begged for a moment.

"What brings you to me Mr. Hampton? You've never sought guidance before. I'm curious." He queried.



"I think I saw something, a message from God...or the devil I don't know."

"Go on." And so Lloyd painted the horrific picture as it had unfolded before him. He told Woodward everything, who seemed really disturbed by his shared vision with Patty.

"Has Patty shared these...visions of hers with her parents?" He asked, seemingly very invested. "Has she told anyone?"

"I don't know. I'll find out later when we get together."

"What do you make of this vision?" Pastor Woodward asked him.

"I don't know. I've never felt particularly close to God sir, so I guess I'm afraid it's a message from the devil." Lloyd confessed.

"I'm afraid that maybe it's something evil."

"Or maybe God is trying to get close to you. Maybe this is him getting your attention." The pastor said optimistically. "Maybe there's something about Terrence's death you're meant to learn from." He added.

"Maybe" Lloyd pondered.

"You say you and Ms Carver are meeting up again?"

"Yeah we are tonight at the hanging tree. Why?" Lloyd queried.

"No special reason, you must tell me how it goes." He said pensively

"I will. I should go Pastor, I'll see you tomorrow morning." And with that Lloyd made for his exit.

On the ride home George and Davis argued over which one of them Althea Gibson was flirting with and his mother was retelling the tale of how Mrs Carver reacted to the death of her son.

"It was as if it came as no surprise to the woman!" Mrs. Hampton declared. Lloyd heard his family members various discussions but his mind was consumed with visions of death and decay. And any possible horrors to come when he snuck out to meet up with Patty tonight.

The afternoon passed quietly enough as Mrs. Hampton prepared dinner for Mr. Hampton's arrival and the boys finished up their chores. Lloyd wondered if he should tell anyone but he knew that meant risking the meeting so he decided against it. Besides what could possibly go wrong he wondered. He bluffed his way through dinner and when everyone resigned themselves to their rooms for the evening he made a break for it. When he was inching out of his room into the hallway he spied his brother George creeping around the living room making way for the door. Guess that answers the question of who Althea was flirting with, Lloyd thought quietly to himself. He waited ten minutes and then followed his brother's escape.

Lloyd hopped on his little blue bike and paddled brusquely toward the church where this bewildering day had begun. The night sky was clear and the summer air was warm and the stars sparkled gently. A stark contrast to the stormy weather that commenced the day. A bad omen or good? Lloyd wondered. Finally the majestic gold cross at the peak of Tolson Baptist was in sight and he paddled faster. He pulled up in the yard of the cathedral and spun around the back to park his bike somewhere discreetly. He walked towards the hanging tree taking note of the fact that there was no sign of Patty yet. He waited for over twenty minutes and still no sign of his date. He began to wander in the church yard and noticed that Pastor Woodward's car was parked over by the old shed house. He heard a shriek inside the church and turned away from the shed. He headed towards the inside of the church surprised to find the entrance open. Things were growing more and more eerie as the church was somewhat of a mess as if there was some sort of struggle. He followed the trail of destruction to the pastor's office where he noticed an altar room door open. When he opened the door he saw someone bound and gagged strapped to a pillar trying to wriggle free. It was a girl. It was Patty. He ran to her aid and quickly tried to untie her and remove her gag.

"What the heck is going on?" Lloyd asked frantically, helping her to her feet.

"Oh my goodness we have to get out of here. Did you see him?" She asked, traumatized.

"See who? Patty, what's going on?" Before she could respond they heard a car door slam. She grabbed his hand and tugged him to follow as they sprinted down the long corridor glistening with the holy medieval art of saints and Christianic figures. They turned a corner and ran up some stairs to a dark attic that had a glass sun room allowing the ethereal blue light of the moon in. They stood quietly for a moment after locking themselves in hoping for a respite from the chase they believed was happening.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on now?" Lloyd demanded. Then Patty took his hand and the grim specter they encountered before reappeared bellowing an otherworldly announcement. This time the dead boy was a transparent black shadow, faceless and ancient.

"Saintsville must answer for its sin and you two have been chosen."

"Chosen by who? What are you?" Lloyd asked, hoping to receive the answer to questions he's been asking all his life.

"We are the unanswered questions." The specter said as its voice began to distort as if hundreds of its kind were speaking.

"We are justice delayed, we are secrets forgotten and you will be our deliverers." Then the shadow spirit engulfed them and a series of events began to replay as if it were television in the form of dark smoke.

It was a tearful Terrence confessing to his mother he'd been assaulted by the pastor. She slapped him and accused him of always having queer desires and projecting them onto Pastor Woodward. Then it was Terrence at the hanging tree getting ready to hang himself before being stopped by the pastor, a struggle ensues before the pastor hangs the boy himself. He then defiled Terrence's corpse. The visions began to move back further in time all showing the same thing. Pastor Woodward luring the lynched boys into a sense of security before raping them and murdering them and once again raping their corpses and then staging a lynching. Lloyd pulled away from Patty, breaking the sequence and trying to catch his breath.

"Oh my god." Lloyd exhaled.

"Quite the opposite if you ask me" she responded.

"There were never any lynchings, Saintsville is on the brink of civil war and its all based on a lie. There's a serial killer in Saintsville and he's the most trusted man in Tolson". Lloyd lamented. It was a dark and heavy epiphany. Lloyd knew the truth would tear this community apart even further. Suddenly there was a banging on the door. They scrambled immediately looking for something to defend themselves with.

"Come out! I know you're in there. I don't know what you think you're going to do but no one will ever believe you." Woodward yelled as he was violently trying to force his way in. Lloyd broke a broom handle and Patty grabbed a metal candle holder and positioned themselves in defensive positions. "When he gets in we just have to get him out of the way and run ok? Run and don't look back." Lloyd urged. Patty nodded wordlessly in desperate agreement. The door continued to rattle as the lock was beginning to shatter the wooden doorway letting in their would be killer. Eventually it gave way and he came crashing through and they charged at him with everything they had. Lloyd shoved the splintered broom handle right into his feet and Patty wailed on him with the candle holder and they bolted through the busted doorway without looking back. They held hands and sprinted down the stairs and down the corridor. They were breathing heavily and panting but they couldn't stop or look back knowing it could mean their life. They made it out of the church and went searching for Lloyd's bike but the tires were flat and so was Patty's. The pastor was obviously determined to tie up his loose ends. They decided hiding would be better and ran toward the old shed. Before they could reach it Lloyd heard a metal thud and a shriek. He turned around to see the pastor had clubbed Patty with a shovel. A mad bravery came over him and he grabbed a large rock amidst the grass and hurled at the pastor's head catching him in the temple and knocking him off his feet. He ran towards Patty to make sure she was ok.

"Patty! Patty!" He yelled desperately while slapping her face trying to get her to come to. Patty was out cold. He could wake her up and the Pastor was already making his way back to his feet. Lloyd didn't want to leave her but certain death was looking him in the face. The pastor picked up a thick straw rope he had with him and wrapped it around Lloyd's neck and began to drag him across



the grass field by the throat.

"You always were a bad Christian Lloyd, can't say I feel too guilty about this one." Then he stopped which allowed Lloyd to breathe again.

"I said Terrence was the last time but since we're already here." Woodward said standing over Lloyd as he began to unbuckle his pants. Lloyd was horrified but still too weak and disoriented to gather enough strength to fight back or run. And just as it seemed like all hope was lost a devastating metal thud cracked the pastor in the back of skull and he collapsed. Lloyd looked up from his haze of agony and saw his brother George and Althea Gibson.

"Why the heck is Pastor Woodward trying to hurt you?" George asked, helping his brother to his feet as Althea ran to go help Patty.

"Because he's a murderer" Lloyd said with a raspy voice as he stumbled to his feet in George's arms.

"Pastor Woodward? What's going on?"

"Justice." Lloyd declared, staring down at the bloody, unconscious pastor.

"What does that mean?"

"Not now George we have to tie him up and get to safety first." And so they did. An army of police cars and emergency medicine vehicles had gathered outside of Tolson Baptist Cathedral as the harrowing mystery of Terrence Carver's lynching came to a violent close.

The four teenagers all gave the same testimony to the authorities. A well-coordinated lie about how they had a secret double date rendezvous at the shed. How Lloyd ran into the pastor who tried to molest him when he thought he was alone and confessed to the rapes and slayings of all the lynched boys in Saintsville until George intervened and save the day. Given all the physical evidence to support the struggle the police believed them about the confession as well. Sadly though their parents had all come down and they weren't pleased with them, thankfully they caught a killer and were entitled to some understanding. Mrs Carver created a scene as Woodward was being handcuffed into the squad car.

"I sacrificed my baby boy believing in you!" She yelled with tears of hot white fury falling down her face. She collapsed to her knees and Mr. Carver and Patty comforted her on the ground as a family.

"Guess the broad isn't as icy as she seemed." George observed with the Hamptons just staring at him in mute disapproval.

"I sure am glad I was wrong about Althea flirting with me." Davis joked. Lloyd didn't join in everyone's amusement; he noticed Patty staring at him and went over to her.

"So will your visions stop now?" Lloyd asked her.

"I don't know but I do think our mutual friend has found some peace."

"What do you think he..I mean they?..well it was?" "I think it was something greater, something wiser." Patty mused.

"So I guess I'll be seeing you in service tomorrow, if we have any."

"I guess so." Then she moved in, kissed him lightly on the cheek and fluttered away. But a thought crossed his mind so he stopped her calling out her name. She turned and blinked at him in curiosity.

"Why could I see your visions? Was it because I was "chosen"?" He asked uncomfortably.

"No, I think you were chosen because you could see them. Knowing what I know now I think you could see them because you see more than most, Lloyd Hampton." She said, making her final exit.

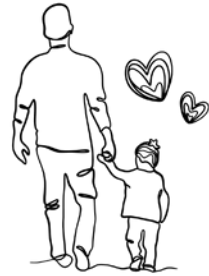
Lloyd left to return to his family pondering all that had happened. And it occurred to him that there might be a fine line between good and evil. If Pastor Woodward was a murderer then was anyone truly good? Maybe he'd never know. Maybe there was no point asking. God, Satan, heaven, hell and the truth of it all was probably too large to ever truly have a definitive answer. But then again maybe those questions answer themselves. Maybe they answered themselves on this grim day in Saintsville.

“Battling My Broken Heart”

x Sydney DeMar

The rays beat on my skin as my sunscreen sizzled away. I could feel the warmth touch my body, but it was unable to reach my soul. Even the sun was no longer capable of adding a glimmer of light to my day. I found peace as I gazed up at the powder blue canvas, decorated by you of course, with hopes that you were somewhat proud of me. The thought of being above the clouds with you runs rampant through my mind, so I lay here to do what I do best, daydream about you, my one and only son.

I've been trapped in a dark hole since you took your last breath. The thought of spending time with family makes me sick, so I let my fantasies consume my mind instead. Facing them meant facing the reality that you aren't here anymore, the reality that you, my son, will never come back, and the reality that family will never feel whole. Ty, I'm really worried about you; you should really get some help is all I hear from them. Maybe I should take their advice, or maybe I shouldn't because healing from this meant forgetting the love that we shared as father and son. I've kept you alive through my fantasies, and I cannot fathom losing sight of you, as I've already lost you in the physical realm.



I find comfort in knowing that you are always by my side, but I'm realizing that the constant reminders are paralyzing. It's been months since I've had an actual conversation with someone. The time I spend thinking about you is taking away from the time I spend with myself; the truth is I'm tired. I'm ready to snap back to reality and grow into the person you'd want me to be. I know that going on this trip to see my family will make you proud, so as your father, I'm going to do just that. Before I knew it, a tingling sensation ran through my body, and I was now on a plane.

Trembling bodies jerked from side to side as oxygen masks fell from the ceiling. Screams swarmed the air as the passengers reached for strangers and embraced their loved ones. A pounding rhythm pumped through my ears, and everyone's faces were frozen in terror.

The door to the cockpit burst open, sending a chill down my spine. The plane fell silent as I observed a dark figure standing in the doorway. Paralyzed in my seat, I gazed up into its empty eyes and watched a sinister grin grow on its face. The figure let out a deep sigh and headed back to the cockpit. I could finally breathe.

I looked out the window and saw clear blue skies; beneath us was a cushion of fluffy clouds. I felt a soft hand caress my hand. It was a boy, no more than 3 years old, observing me in admiration. I was moved by his presence, but I didn't know who he was. My body jolted to the right and the sounds of panic and prayers arose from the seats. The boy touched my hand again and his quivering brown eyes spoke to me, and in that moment, the lives of every soul on the plane filled my hands.

The dark figure emerged from the shadows of the cockpit and stared directly into my soul. It paraded down the aisle and chuckled at the sounds of fear that escaped from the lips of the passengers. It gripped onto the seats to keep from falling as a dark spirit trailed behind him. Each time he passed my seat, the boy touched my hand. His touch faded in and out, raising and lowering the warmth in my soul. For years, I've had an insatiable craving for this feeling. I rose from my seat and steadily followed the man. He paused and looked over his shoulder, and there I stood, quivering in my green camouflage.

Every punch vibrated through me from head to toe. My mind was swarmed with images of those big brown eyes that spoke to me in the absence of his words; all I can think of is you, my son. I was too afraid to let you down, so I fought until my tank went empty, until my fingers were numb, and until I felt your soft touch again. Here I was once again craving your touch, a touch that settled my soul.

“A Wicked Confrontation”

x Salena Cheeseboro

My mother, Ashanti, my little brother Caleb, and I exited the car. It's already a cold early winter day in Syracuse. I wore gloves and a Mackage coat, and my black earmuffs and snow adorned my body as soon as I stepped outside. It was so freezing cold that you could see my breath snow crunching under my feet as we walked wearily to the jail to visit my father. As I got closer to the dreary cement building with electrical wired gates adorning the perimeter, the reality of the situation finally hit me. My body felt cold, as if it were freezing into a block of ice, not just because it was cold outside. What is 32 degrees in Syracuse? Barely nothing that is considered warm.

I thought, “Why did you have to do this, Pops?” as my mother ushered my little brother and me into the building.

It was depressing as we went inside, something I never wanted my 8-year-old brother to see. I grab him and pull him closer to me while my mother speaks with the correction officer. After a few minutes of Ma talking to the officers, we were accompanied to the visitation room. It was a bleak room with ugly, gray, hard, circular lunch tables with benches connected. We sat down as directed at the table in the right center of the room. Ma and I kept looking at each other, shallow breaths. I could see that she was about to break down but was trying to be strong for us, but I saw right through her.

I smiled curtly, and she hugged and kissed me on my forehead. I turned my attention to Caleb; gradually, he became more excited after Ma told him we were here for our father. I couldn't take that joy away from him; he was so young, and I always did a good job hiding the truth, but he was a monster. Soon after, he was grotesque in that vibrant highlighter orange jumpsuit, hand in cuff in the front of his body.

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When we saw him, my mother took a sharp breath, trembling slightly out of fear. I think my father saw this as a smirk crept up his face. *I hated him; I saw everything he did to my mother.*

Caleb ran up to him excitedly. I didn't. I didn't even want to be here; I was the reason he was here in the first place. I called the cops. He put on a big smile as he spoke to Caleb. I sat there, staring at the grainy grey tables. My father walked up like he didn't do anything wrong, while the haunting memories of the domestic abuse towards my mother still linger and stifle in the air. He is speaking to me, but I feel as if I am underwater, feelings of harboring resentment and hurt, unwilling to easily forgive this man who caused me so much pain. Unwavering, my mother finally grabbed my arm and gently called out, "Samira, honey, it's okay." However, I couldn't accept her attempt to paint this man as anything other than a monster. At the age of seventeen, I had witnessed her enduring years of abuse, manipulation, and control, spanning over a decade. This was far from acceptable. My intense loathing for him had simmered beneath the surface for so long, and when he finally managed to capture my attention, I couldn't contain the rage any longer. Flashbacks to the day it all happened a month ago. I remember the date vividly because it was my 18th birthday. April 25. *"Sitting in our bright living room, I had just got home from school, and I waited in the living room as mom said she had a surprise for me. I remember buzzing with anticipation as Caleb kept laughing and smiling, telling me, "You're gonna love your surprise." I remember being so excited as I sat at our long wooden dining table, tapping excitedly, hoping it was the car I'd saved up for. Mom promised on my 16th birthday that if I saved half of what my dream car would cost, she would match, and I remember the day I hit the goal.*

He was yelling and screaming about an unknown car he saw in our back driveway. He accused my mother of cheating, and he yelled for me and Caleb to go to our rooms. I remember my parents arguing; my surprise was ruined as all the happy emotions drained from me. Couldn't even enjoy the day I was finally 18. I remember him yelling at my mother, telling her that if she continued, he would leave her on the street. She told him the car was for me, and then he got even angrier, asking where she got the money; he gave no chance to answer as a loud SMACK resonated in our silent house. I heard her cry. He told her to shut up, and then he continued to beat on her, calling her a liar. I peeked out of my room and saw him dragging her to the stairs, and I did what any kid would do. I grabbed the phone and called the police just as he kicked her down the steps. Fear stricken, I ran to Caleb's room to hold him; he was crying and scared. I felt so bad for him but even worse for myself, selfishly. Soon, the police sirens wailed through the neighborhood, kicking down our door. As they arrested him, my mother was still on the floor with tears and blood gushing from her body. I trembled in fear. How could my father do this?"

After reliving that moment of realization and terror, with the most venomous tone, I told him, "I hope you rot in here in this hell. I put you in here; you deserve no happiness, you deserve no freedom, and you will get what you deserve. I hate you." As I got up to walk away and leave the car to wait, I saw his smile drop. I saw the realization behind his once-cold eyes. He started to tremble, but it was too late. The damage he did was irreparable.

“Sunset Farewell”

x Makayla A. Turner

The sun hung low in the sky, casting a warm, golden glow over the small graveyard. The gentle rays of late afternoon sunlight danced through the leaves of the ancient oak trees, casting intricate, shifting patterns on the ground. A light breeze rustled the leaves, carrying with it the comforting scent of earth and flowers. I stood beside my father, our heads bowed in solemnity, as we watched the casket being slowly and reverently lowered into the freshly dug grave, the scent of moist soil filling the air. My grandmother's final resting place was now prepared, and the world seemed to hold its breath in respect.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I remembered the warm, comforting embrace of my grandma's arms. Her cheeks, soft and wrinkled like a well-worn blanket, used to flush with joy every time she saw me. She had been the one who baked the most delicious chocolate chip cookies, the kind that melted in your mouth and made your heart smile. She had a knack for telling the best bedtime stories, her voice a soothing lullaby that lulled me to sleep. Her wisdom was profound, and her eyes, the color of the clearest summer sky, twinkled with a knowing warmth that only came from a lifetime of experience.

As the priest spoke in soft, reassuring tones, my father, a strong and stoic figure with salt-and-pepper hair, reached down and gently squeezed my shoulder. I glanced up at him, my eyes searching for answers. The grown-up faces around me were all etched with sadness, but no one was saying the words I wanted to hear – that grandma was just sleeping, and she would wake up soon. My father's deep blue eyes were rimmed with unshed tears, and I knew that he too was struggling to come to terms with our loss.

A tear slipped down my cheek, and I wiped it away with the back of my hand. My father's grip on my shoulder tightened, offering comfort and reassurance, a silent acknowledgment that we were in this together, leaning on each other for support. Then, a soft voice broke through the hushed silence. It was Aunt Sarah, Grandma's sister, a woman with silver hair that shimmered like moonlight on water, and a kind smile that mirrored my grandmother's.

She bent down to my level, her voice soft and filled with warmth, and said, "You know, Jake, your grandma loved you very much. She used to say that you were the sunshine of her life."

I nodded, blinking away more tears. I'd heard Grandma say that many times. The sunshine of her life. But why was she gone now? I couldn't understand it, and my heart ached with the pain of loss.

Aunt Sarah continued, her voice soothing like a gentle breeze, "And you know, when the sun sets, it doesn't really disappear. It just goes to sleep for a while, and then it comes back in the morning, just like your grandma will live on in our hearts and in our memories."

I looked back at the casket as it slowly disappeared into the ground, the polished wood gleaming in the setting sun. The flowers that adorned it seemed to shimmer with their own life, a vibrant tapestry of color and fragrance. I realized that the sun would rise again, and so would the memories of my dear grandma. The weight in my chest began to lift, and I felt a strange mix of sadness and hope, like a delicate balance between the setting sun and the promise of a new dawn.



“Untitled” x *Anonymous*

The climax of the moment passed, and the ceremony continued. The priest finished his blessings, and people began to disperse, offering condolences and hugs. I took one last look at the grave, the mound of earth that covered my grandmother, and I whispered a silent goodbye, my voice a tiny whisper in the vastness of the world.

As my father and I walked away from the gravesite, I felt a sense of closure, a sense that my grandma was not truly gone, but a part of the world around me. The world was still beautiful, even without her, and the sun would rise again, just as it always did. My hand found my father's, and together, we faced the future with a mixture of grief and hope, just like the setting sun and the promise of a new day.

The End.

Cake: A Literary Journal is produced by the students and faculty of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University's Department of English and Modern Languages.



Issue #4

Spring 2024

Cake: A Literary Journal

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