



Spring 2023

CAKE

Issue #3

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CAKE

A Literary Journal

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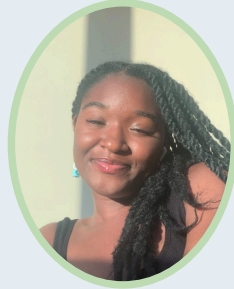


Creative
Non-fiction

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It is my belief that there is no person without a voice—it is either willfully ignored, or intentionally withheld. The importance of listening and recognizing the value of individual perspectives cannot be overstated; every person has their own unique experience to offer, and it is our responsibility to not only acknowledge but respect these differences.



Editor's Note

Although we set no precedent for what would be included in this journal—no focus, no motif—it has been amazing to see how common themes have emerged within this collection of work. In this issue, you will find an array of thought-provoking poetry, captivating short stories, provocative artwork, and insightful essays on topics not limited to identity, love, resistance, and resilience. The remarkable work featured within Issue #3 sheds light on a range of topics that are both timely and timeless. Through their insightful perspectives and powerful expressions, the artists featured in this Issue, including some of Cake's very own writers, have captured the essence of why creating spaces where all voices are heard and valued is of vital importance.

As always, our team of editors and designers have worked carefully to ensure that each piece is presented in the best possible light. At Cake, we are committed to sharing diverse perspectives and voices, and we strive to create a journal that is inclusive, reverent, and thought-provoking. We believe that every author and artist deserves to have their voice heard and their work appreciated, and we are honored to provide a platform for creatives from all backgrounds to share their talents.

I invite you to delve into the pages of this journal and immerse yourself in the world of our talented writers and artists. We hope that this Issue will inspire you, challenge you, and leave you with a greater appreciation for the complexity and beauty of the world around us.

Vehemently,

Xochitl Yanelis
Editor-in-Chief

Cake:
A Literary Journal

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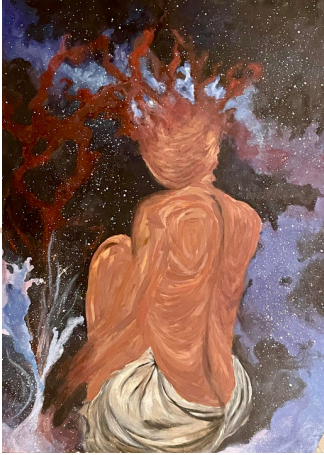


CAKE

A Literary Journal

Ambivalence x Nailah Bush

There was a time I felt soft
Soaked your love in like shea butter,
That moisturized our souls from root to tip
4c-ing a love that would last—
Even through the thick of it.
We used to glisten,
When I decided what you meant to me
I accepted that my world was about to—
Get a bit more slippery.
My mind went first,
Then my heart went willingly.
When I think of us,
I see a picture that we fight to maintain,
In a frame cracked by generations of—
Split houses, Phantom Fathers, and no one to blame.
I want this love to last longer than a Baptist Sunday service.
When you're working my nerve,
Sometimes it doesn't feel worth it.
But when I look into your eyes—
I realize,
You're everything I've prayed for.
This Love Will Be—
A New Edition to this life,
Stronger than the rain can withstand.
When our time comes to dust—
Let's reincarnate from the heavens,
Again and Again,
Until we find each other.
When you're the woman and I'm the man
It doesn't matter what this life takes us through
I find peace in knowing
That I could die 1000 times
and I would still—
Come back to this space with you.



I Don't Belong Here
x Ayanna Prince

Blame it on the Shea...

x Ivory S. Council

Don't get me wrong – I think I look pretty good in these clothes. But reality tries to hit me when I get home, snatch the Spanx off, and let the pieces fall where they may. I keep glancing in the mirror, trying to decide if what I see staring back at me each night is real, or if the mirror is broken. For some reason, there seems to be an odd amount of extra skin hanging under my arms. And there are these strange lumpy ripples on the backs of my thighs; some so deep I can hold a pencil in them (don't ask how I know this). And who ordered the muffin that has taken over the space where my high-waisted jeans once sat? This can't be real. I didn't look like this a few years ago. So, what happened? Nothing happened. We'll blame it on the mirror. Maybe Amazon accidentally sent me a Funhouse mirror instead of the one I ordered.

I hit the gym twice a week and run the streets daily in between. The extra weight on my front is such that even the most expensive sports bras can't effectively support the load. The sway and swing of my excess womanhood tugs at my heart harder than even the most sentimental romance flick ever could. These overpriced, sweat-shop-made undergarments aren't doing the job. We'll blame it on the quality of the fabrics. Cheap goods are causing me pain.

I wear my headphones when I jog, but they fail to drown out the heavy thuds of my feet on the ground, which resound like the beating of a leather-clad tribal drum.

Boom, thump, thump, thump. Boom, thump, thump, thump.

That right leg always comes down so hard. Nonetheless, I keep my head down on the trails. It's a habit I adopted to avoid making eye contact with the folks who undoubtedly turn around to look at me as I approach. I've grown tired of seeing the fear in their eyes that appears just before they realize I'm a human, not a bear or cougar coming to maul the life out of them. Maybe it's the bass of the Afrobeats in my ears making me thud like that. Yeah, **we'll blame the music**. The music makes me lose control.

And then there's the sweat, and the muscle cramps, and the chafing. Oh, the chafing. But I keep on going. I have to, just in case my mirror isn't broken (but I'm still pretty convinced it is). After an hour and a half of *boom-thumps*, scared glances, and chest tugs, I'll get home, strip, glance into that old lying mirror, shower, and slather my body with a blend of butters and oils I whipped up. The itching of the raw skin on my inner thighs subsides and the blisters trying to form under my breasts are appeased, but only for a while. So I grease myself down in homemade oleaginous balm over and over again. It's a minimum thrice daily habit. One that is crucial to my survival in these streets. I can't be in pain AND ashy. Oh, no sir! Not !! And that's how it goes every summer. **We'll blame it on the heat**. The sun makes me sweat, and dehydrate, and chafe like this.

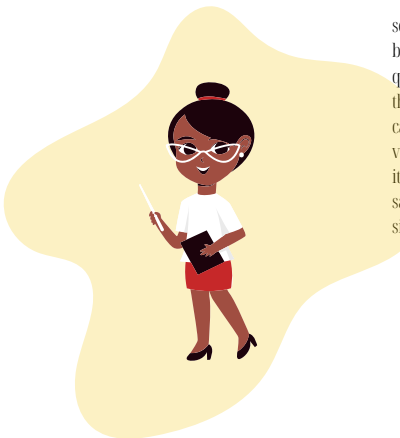
Don't even get me started on trying to shed pounds in the winter. Those crispy winds have me outside coughing like an asthmatic chain smoker with COPD. I do my best to keep up with my breathing the way my running coach taught me but I can't lie—it's a struggle. I usually end up just walking for the rest of my time. **We'll blame it on the cold**. The winter makes me feel like giving up.

Or how about the kind strangers who, from time to time, will smile and ask, "When are you due?" Last time that happened was two weeks ago. I half-smiled and gently answered, "six years ago," while pointing to the bright-eyed kindergartener beside me. I knew I should have worn the control-top panties that day. **We'll blame it on the laundry**. If I had washed clothes the night before like I had planned, that never would have happened!

And then there's the eager therapist who swears I'm dealing with PTSD, anxiety, and depression. I keep telling this lady there's nothing wrong with me and that I'm only here because my doctor said I should be. But she keeps hounding me about how I'm overeating to cope. Cope with what? Being raped? Being abused? Being estranged from my family because of the rape and abuse? That was like a decade ago! I am beyond over it all! Mom and I are cool again after I left the dude that kept me from her for all those years! But here this therapist lady is wanting me to blame it on the past! Naw, I don't believe in that. Besides, I'm a vegetarian. And everybody knows that vegetarians don't get fat.



There's the job, too. I spend like 8.5 of my 9-hour day glued to a chair in front of a screen. Gotta be something to that, right? Most days, I'm too busy even to take a bathroom break until lunchtime. Lunch! That usually consists of whatever is quickest and closest to work because most mornings, I'm running late from fighting that precocious kindergartner into submission (I don't know how someone so young can already hate school). I rarely have time to make myself a decent lunch. The vegan spot around the corner is great. Fried everything, but delicious. Afterward, it's back to my desk for another four hours of sedation. They—whoever they are—say that being still that long isn't good for you. So, **we'll blame it on the job**. Maybe sitting in this scantily-padded chair all day is causing the wrinkles on my butt.



Then there's the man at the house. For some strange reason, the Funhouse mirror antics don't work on him. This dude is insistent on telling me daily how good he thinks I look. In his words, "you're perfect..." Like sir... do you see what I see? Cuz ain't.no.way! I thought for a while that maybe he needed glasses, but his last eye exam results were fine. **We'll blame it on the love.** Turns out that he has on glasses, after all. They're just rose-colored.

So there's the mirror. The fabric. The music. The heat. The cold. The laundry. The past. The job. The love. All of the things I blame for keeping me looking like I'm three months away from ushering baby #2 into the world. But when I say them out loud, they really just sound like excuses.

All I know is that something is to blame, and it damn sure ain't me! But you know what? There's something here that I didn't consider before. Something big. Something real. Give me a second to work through this in my mind...

Okay. I just did the math, and this math ain't mathin'. There are 117 calories in every tablespoon of coconut oil. 40 per teaspoon of sweet almond oil. A half-ounce of cocoa butter contains 120 calories. And every ounce of shea butter comes in at right about 240. The way I figure it, my three grease-downs add an extra 1,551 calories to my composition every.single.day! They (and again, I don't know who the hell "*they*" are, but we'll roll with it) say that the skin is the largest organ in the body. And if my skin absorbs everything that goes onto it, then I'm essentially "eating" more through my skin than I am through my mouth! Damn. I think I **have to blame it on the shea.** And I refuse to walk around with crusty elbows, so maybe I'll just stop eating food instead...



Generational Crown

x Maya McWilliams

My hair, my hair,
Is a crown, is a crown,
That's been, that's been,
Passed down, passed down.

While the coconut oil drizzles down my scalp,
Every strand stands for an ancestor that is standing behind me,
My army of spirits.
The thousands of black kings and queens that make me possible,
Their blood has been in these veins since before King James spread his God to my people.

Back before our strands used to be illegal,
Stripped from us like we were not people,
Demons plucked our hair out one by one to make us forget,
Using our Godlike hair as sheep's wool.

The illusion that being naked made one unequal,
As if they were vanishing us from our promised land,
Like God did when Adam and Eve were revealed.
They wanted to feel like gods to my people,
Claiming lordship on any and all land in sight.

They made petting zoos out of my people,
As if melanin was not a dominant gene,
A spectacle to the medieval eyes of caucasity.
Bewildered that one can grow intimate with Mother Earth.
Our sun-kissed skin passed down like generational wealth,
It raised targets on our backs for culture vultures.

They ate mummies like a delicacy.
Peeling mummy wraps like candy bar wrappers.
Looking for the rotting flesh of our ancient people,
Devouring the remains of a society more remarkable than the one today.

The Tignon Law would not allow for our locs to be revealed,
As if our curls and coils were a secret to keep,
Demonizing the natural spring of my hair.

But we flipped the script to become a statement.
They continuously try to find our Kryptonite.
Wipe us out like the Black Plague did the dark age,
But like diamonds,
We don't crack under pressure.



Ro! (Headshot)

x Aubrey Hough



GoldenRoots

x Sharard "X"

Saddlers



Ro! (Full Body)
x Aubrey Hough

There is strength in our creativity.
We mold clay into cities.
We churn butter into gold.
We pray hatred into love.
Our brown skin is a gift that just keeps on giving.

Crafted in the image of the most high,
We shall not need nor want for anything.
For everything that we need, we already have,
And everything that we have, is all that we need.

Blessed by centuries of men and women before me,
The history they tried to keep hidden.
My crown shall never tilt.
For I know of the people that granted me the present of the present.

I am so blessed and grateful,
For the generations past, now, and to come.
I thank them for all their power,
Mastering in ancient grace.
Never will they die,
And may the fruits of their labor,
Always multiply.

Giving Tree **x Grace Stanley**

I got so sick and tired of being your giving tree
For so long
You came to me arms out
I mistook it as an embrace and not an entreaty
You kept leaving me
After I waiting all day for you to swing in my arms
I missed the sound of your laughter
I missed the feeling of you falling asleep on me
I promised to keep you safe from the harsh reality of this world's sun
But you kept coming back
Asking for more
Unaware of your greed and how it served as incentive in my desire to please you
Tattooed our initials into my skin
Made it impossible for me to forget your name
Asked for my leaves to crown yourself queen
Asked for my lumber to help you write love letters to your lover
Asked for my seeds to make supplemental versions of me to help feed your future children

You don't know how much of my wood I would've burned to keep you warm

How I was fine with you taking the most of me and leaving the rest
I sat on my stump stumped wondering how I gave away so much of me so soon

But finally
Time passed and while you got wrinkles I got rings
Age can be the best professor sometimes

Jesus called me and told me that I needed to get off the cross,
Someone else needed the wood
The complexities of my savior complex had shaded my eyes from the truth

You needed me
I never needed you.

Cadaverous ***x Adiyah Thomas***

Looking up at you
Elegant
Exquisite
Emission of light
Your Christian crossed cap glistens.
Your center,
It consists of a flower.
Started to crack over the years like
I've started to notice what's going on inside.
Like it knows you sit in the back, ignorant to the message
Like it knows as soon as you enter the temple it brings the fantasies in and
tunes the real out

The intake is corrupt.
Inside demons sit the in pews....
Inside—
I sit alongside them.
Remembering the black and white poles under the center like
Equality holding up an alternate universe's core.
We're not right.
We are so left we come back to the right and barely recognize the truth
Then I look back at the church
Something I could never be.



Something About Fate ***x Angene Bien-Aime***

Déjà vu.

An action believed to have happened before. Goosebumps would ride up your arms as you think about the words that may have been spoken before, but you don't quite have a finger on them.

"Please, just go talk to her."

I turned, and there stood my manager Joey. He was leaning up on the counter with his hands crossed with a smirk that was so loud it screamed mischief.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I lied. Clearly, I wasn't discrete enough with my wondering eyes. I mean, how could I keep myself from not admiring the girl who sat alone at the table in the middle of the restaurant? Whose wits I had fallen for. Her skin was as rich as chocolate. The plumpness of her lips and the light bush of her eyebrows complimented her face. The freckles crowded her high cheeks and brought attention to her beautiful brown eyes. Of all the many times I had the pleasure of admiring the parting of her lips, this time was different. I could not change the outcome if I made a mistake.

My native name was Dian Yolika Lik Anomin Nu, and I was what is known as a Groyan. A long descendant of the Angels evolved for a different purpose.

I found myself unable to complete the task given to me concerning her. I was supposed to let it be and allow the course of action to flow naturally, but my feelings wouldn't let me.

"Let's pretend you weren't over here burning holes in her face. Why don't you take this pitcher and offer her some water? See if she's ready to eat anything."

"Joey?"

"Dylan. Stop trying to play dumb. This is your way in, and I'm trying to help you, so take it. Once you take a seat, I'll take it as the sign and send Rich over. Give him work."

I watched her play with the cup of lemonade for a while. She stroked the sides of the cup, pushing the condensation to the napkin below it. I watched her pick at the complimentary bread before I finally moved.

"Would you like some water?" I asked, standing beside her.

She came in about an hour ago, all jittery, with the corner of her lips to her ears. First date, and I'm nervous she told the waiter when he seated her. The entrance chime would sing, and a light would shine in her eyes as she looked with the hope that it was the one she was waiting for. After the hour passed, the excitement settled down from her cheeks as she grew visibly hopeless.

"No, Thank you," she softly said. **but** thank you." then she released a hiccup and placed her hand on her chest.

Without a word, I replaced the glass in front of her with the empty one I held. She watched the switch without protest as I poured her a cup of cool water.

"Thanks," she said then there came another hiccup.

"Drink up," I told her. "You'll want to get rid of that."

"New waiter, huh? I know the other one is probably annoyed." She said. "I kept sending him off with another 10 minutes, please."

"I doubt it. Rich is probably in the back stuffing his face with all the 10-minute breaks you gave him." I assured her. She didn't know that Rich was really, as I said, back there eating as usual. Joey kept him on a one-table limit because he was prone to messing up orders, so he had to close out this table before moving on.

She shook her head at my comment, and then another hiccup escaped. She raised the glass and began to take huge gulps. After the 3rd gulp, I watched her place the glass down.



"It doesn't look like he's coming," I said, glancing at the front of the restaurant.

"It's that obvious, huh," she said, looking around. "Then again, who am I kidding? I'm the only one in here by myself. You know, I never flat iron my hair; I prefer it on the wild curly side. I get up, fluff out, and go." She said with a quick flip of her flat-ironed hair. "Also, I don't usually wear things like this," she said as she lightly pulled at her dress. "My Mom was happy that I stepped out, and it's my weakness to see her happy and..." She paused mid-sentence and realized my attention was attached to her. "Why am I telling you this? I'm sorry if I'm blabbering. Sorry for keeping you from whatever you got to do." And with that, she finished her water. "No, don't apologize. You're perfectly fine," I said, and that was the truth. I enjoyed Solemn's blabbering. "I can join you if you'd like."

"Yeah. No, I think it's time for me to go home. I don't have any date energy left in me." Solemn said with a stretch.

"It's not a date, just two strangers getting a meal."

"But you're working?" She said. "I don't..."

"I just got off, I'm starving, and you haven't eaten. So, give me a chance?" I had to cut her off because I wanted to avoid any excuse that would give her a reason to leave. "Please."

She sighed, saying, "Whoever you are, join me." She gestured to the seat

"I'm Dylan,"

"To hell with them!" I said as I flared my arms in the air as if to let doves fly.

"Dylan," Solemn said with her fingers to her temple. She was flushed from all the stares we were getting. Honestly, she was too worried about the people around us, but I knew this part about her, yet I could not contain myself. "I get it, but keep your voice down. People are starting to stare."

"And? Let them stare. They'll leave here today and not even remember this boy who stomped his legs when he laughed or the girl that was giggling too loud and snorted occasionally."

"I don't," She tried to express in a convincing tone. "I definitely don't snort."

"You do," I told her. "and it's okay because it's cute."

The tight smile I observed on her lips as she tried to get her blush under control proved that this was going in a great direction.

"My mom said she would have posted a little bit of something she knew everywhere to teach those kids a lesson,"

"And I'm with her," I said.

"You guys are cruel. I can cause a great deal of pain with what I know." She said. "On this journey of mine, you come to terms with the fact that all of that wouldn't solve anything. If you're truly a good person, you must do good, no matter what."

"Nah. You should leave all those kids to deal with their problems since they are nasty to you and others. I don't see why you do what you do."

"It's not that hard," she told me. "you'd feel differently knowing what their life is like and the freedom and space my podcase gives them. That's what some of them say."

Solemn was truly intriguing and so very pure in the heart. "You do for others and don't require anything in return."

"Yup." She said, popping the p. "To require something in return would mean you don't do it out of pure intentions."

She told me about the kids who logged on to her podcast daily for encouragement and support. They wrote to her frequently, but at face value, most of them were bullies at her school, and some even bullied her daily. There was the main one, and Petunia was the alias that Solemn gave her.

"Petunia was always high on the popularity chain, and her lie made me a nuisance."

Petunia started rumors about Solemn in the 7th grade after the boy she had a crush on began to show interest in Solemn. In the 6th grade, she and Solemn were friends, and the two were inseparable the whole year; then Jameson happened.

In the 2nd week of school, 7th grade, Petunia finally showed her true self. It all started with a fight, and with Solemn not being a fighter, she was dubbed a weakling after Petunia was done pouncing on her.

"Often, I was forced to salvage clothes from the lost and found due to my clothes being stolen. I hated having P.E. at the start of my day and being surrounded by kids who were loyal followers of the cool and popular."

"Oh. Not just because you ended up sweaty early in the morning?" I said to lighten up the moment.

"That also played a part because who wants to be of the smell of sweat for 7 hours straight? Nobody. Over time with help, I learned to encompass myself in other activities, so I saw those kids less."

She sipped her Sprite and looked around the room in an apparent attempt to avoid my eyes. Embarrassingly, I was staring.

"Dylan, I don't know how you do it. Your demeanor and being yourself seem to come off so naturally."

"If you think about it, Solemn, why should I care about anyone's opinions but my own? The time given to us is too short to dwell on thoughts that don't positively impact our future." I said.

"How old are you?" She laughed.

"18. What? How old do I look? Older?" I asked without realization of what she meant. "I think we're the same age, aren't we?"

"No, I'm 17 until November, but it's not that. You seem to know a lot; some may say you have an old soul."

"I see," I said with a chuckle at my slowness. "I read, and I read a lot of forbidden books and observe a lot."

"Forbidden? Books are the lifeline to life. I don't see how that source of knowledge can be forbidden?"

"Exactly," I said. "To those who want to keep certain knowledge a secret, they keep curious minds far away from it."

"Obviously, not you."

"I'm, unfortunately, stubborn," I told her.

"Not unfortunate, and it sounds like your stubbornness is a positive thing."

"Never looked at it that way," I said.

"You seem to look at a lot of things differently." She said with a squint. "Where did you come from?"

"Uhh."

"Dylan, it's a rhetorical question." She said with a nonjudgmental and very embracing laugh. "I hope to be like you when I grow up." She said. "Lord knows I spend too much time caring about what others think. If I could just go one day without the negative thoughts I fight, I would be the happiest girl on Earth."

"You just need someone to help you with the fight."

"Yeah, no one is really here to help," she said. "But at least I have my podcast, which helps me through the times."

Solemn has a podcast called Lavi. She says the word is from the Haitian Creole language, and it means life. She goes by the name Saneec, but people have yet to learn who Saneec is. In a way, it's convenient for her because she can share her story and speak freely without anyone judging her in the real world.

I always wanted to hear about Solemn's journey. I could listen to her story 1 million times over and admire her strength and capabilities. Only if she could see that there was more to her.

She continued, "I should have been in church, but those holy women would carry such deprecating eyes. Thank God my mother didn't care about them burning holes in her back and whispering about her misfortunes. They didn't divert her from going there and praying for me." She said with a slight shrug.

"What'd you use?"

"Sleeping pills and alcohol." She said. "Sip by sip," the feeling was becoming too soothing; I was soon staring up at the ceiling, my eyes wary and my body limp. I didn't fight the draining feeling; I settled for the inevitable."

"Your thoughts at that moment?"

"There was a wave of freedom washing over my body. I didn't have to force a smile and act like I was okay anymore. My mother was good at that, and I wanted her to think I was too."

"But didn't you think that you deserved to live?"

"I didn't, but I felt worse for trying to end it."

"So..." I said, carefully pausing to choose my following words. "How..."

She read my mind. "My mother came home a little too soon, but maybe it was for that reason." She played with her thumbs. I didn't want her to stop. She seemed so free and open in this space. This drove me to place my hand on hers to remind her that I was here with her. "I shouldn't." She said as she pulled her hand back. "I shouldn't bombard you with any of this. We should be learning about each other favorite colors or something."

"Solemn, please talk to me," I begged. "You're there for everyone, but no one is there for you. Just pretend as if... I'm like your best friend or something."

"You know just what to say, don't you?"

"That's what best friends are for." We both found ourselves chuckling at my corniness.

When I first became a full fledge Groyan, I was a watcher of the machine, Zion. A device that could rewind time, and my job was to record and report anything outside of normal. It got boring, of course, and I started pressing buttons and wandering off the primary watch, and that's how I discovered her life.

It was rare for a Groyan to leave Pacific Hall, our home in the clouds, and walk among the humans. But one day, I did. I went down to where the humans roamed, Earth's land, to see the girl I'd become enamored with. I would watch from the corners as my curiosity took over. I never knew what to say, so I settled with watching and then would return to my post before anyone noticed I was gone.

This went on for a while, and then we met. When I messed up, I used Zion to reverse certain moments of our meeting. The moment that changed my life was the last time I aligned the Zion and turned back the clock.

I had gotten to know her, but I should have opened the red folder before diving deep into her life. Inside that folder was the story of a girl who was being bullied daily, who washed her face in smiles but in the deep corner of her mind hid in her despair. If I had opened the folder, I would have known the ending.

That day was like any usual day for us. Solemn would order this loaded Frappuccino thing, and I would pick it up from Starbucks and meet her. I remember picking up the order and beginning my walk. Curiosity took the best of me, and I found myself standing in front of a tv store, fascinated by the different screens. I almost wish I didn't stop.

"Today, a family grieves. A mother has lost a daughter. 18-year-old Solemn Monasae was found in her home. Solemn took her own life this evening..." The lady on the screen said. Her mother says severe bullying and online harassment have claimed her daughter's life."



I couldn't believe what I saw then. I remember the drinks crashing to the ground, and despite becoming weak in the knees, I ran to Solemn's home. I still remember the cry of her mother and standing among the crowd. The dips in the black bag they carried out created a knot in my throat and an awful ache in the bottom of my stomach.

I remember leaving the area and hearing her mother cry and scream, *"My baby. My child is gone because of them. You all did this, and your children are to blame."*

A mix of emotions swirled inside me. I didn't think feelings and emotions were this dangerous, but the thought I had in my blurred vision moment proved that.

"Can I get you guys anything else?" Rich asked as he came to clear the table.

"Some more of these sweet rolls, please. And some iced water," Solemn asked.

Simultaneously Rich and Solemn turned to see what I wanted, but I was still away from the table, and the world shut out. My hand rested against my chin as I wistfully imagined. She is worth it. Worth me losing everything because nothing would matter without her. I snapped out of my trance, "Just put enough rolls for 2, and I'll do an ice water also."

"Coming up," Rich said, and he was off.

"I want to meet you a thousand times over." To hear her speak, break her shell, and watch her get comfortable all over again.

"Mhmm, let's pretend I know what you mean. Meeting a weird girl like me over and over again, I don't see it. I'm grateful, but let's face it, I don't fit in your world, and a guy like you would never converse with me. Outside of those doors is where this here ends." She said, motioning between us.

"Hey," I said amid her blunders. "Stop thinking so much," I grabbed a sweet roll, ripped it apart, and handed her the other half, and together we enjoyed this sweet sensation.

"Thank you," she said.

"You know, you don't give yourself enough credit. You need to vacate your head; it's unhealthy." She said nothing as she thought about the words I had just expressed.

Another silence washed over us then I spoke up and said, "We should hang out more. I think out there, we can get to know each other better. Who knows what adventures might lie ahead?"

As she was about to speak, time had frozen, so I knew not of her next words. Every step was unfinished, the conversations that filled the air seconds ago had been silenced, and a bird by the window was still like those abstract paintings. This happened when Alphas came down to Earth's land.

Roddy was coming. "This guy," I heard his roar. The thunderous movement of his feet meant he was running in the sky, dashing through the clouds, like literally, he was the most dramatic. To close off his childish show, he winged a powerful gust of wind that slammed open the doors. I looked to the doors, and he stood there with his hands at his sides and his head shot up, looking to the sky. He was hitting a pose as if there was an audience to see his magnificent stature.

"Roddy," I calmly called.

He shot me a piercing glance; if his eyes were lasers, I would have lost my vision. He began to glide towards me without batting an eye. He was aggravated. He reached the table, looked between Solemn and me, and shook his head. He pulled a chair, and I prepared for the worst.

"Hers?" He asked, eyeing Solemn's glass of water.

"Have mines," I said while pushing my glass to him.

He evil-eyed me, placed his hand on the Solemn glass, suspended the freeze-on-time on the liquid, and downed the cool water. Ice and all, I preferred hers."

"I know why you're here." I finally said.

"Do you know of the chaos you have caused? The council is making threats to resolve the problem you started." He said. "Since you know why I'm here, I'm guessing you have something to do with the missing boy."

"He's not missing," I said. "Just elsewhere."

I opened my mouth to say something, but Roddy cut me off. "I'm not trying to hear it." He said with authority. "You are a disgrace to the Groyan race. A coward for letting this mere human distract you and manipulate you. A simple task to prove yourself, and you did otherwise."

"Listen, Rosao," I said as I raised myself from the table.

I never used Roddy's real name, but this guy was not a friend because my friend would never talk to me like this. As my best friend, he knew how I felt.

"Keep her out of it," I told him. "She did nothing wrong and doesn't deserve any of this. Tell them to punish me and be done with it. Let her find a reason to live. I know she can do it."

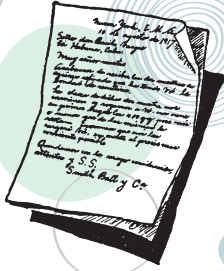
If it passes, don't go back to the past.

It was forbidden to use Zion after someone's life had passed on, but I broke that very rule. I returned to Pacific Hall the day I lost her, and Zion was the only solution.

I remember packing a bag and preparing to run because I knew bringing Solemn back would send a high alert, and I would be Transcended if caught. This was where the Higher-ups erased an existence and sent the ex-Groyen to Earth's land. Ferri, top of the chain of command, always took the first lead in executing the process. After the process, the Groyen would have no recollection of their life before and would be forced to survive on their own, but most didn't because they didn't know how to live down there.

I just had to see Solemn one last time before disappearing. I was waiting at Solemn's favorite coffee shop. Right on time, she came in smiling, and I felt my core heat up like a furnace at the sight of her again.





I had written a letter to her. I hoped it would help her live. Before I could give it to her, they found me.

Roddy had a good name, and so I escaped punishment. They had one condition, and that was that I did not interfere. Their solution was heartbreak, but it was cruel to be done to Solemn due to her already fragile nature. They had set a course of action that would jump-start the previous timeline.

He stood at my level and spoke. "You should have never been given a chance to join us again. You don't belong with us."

I was supposed to witness Solemn's humiliation, and my loyalty would be proven if it did not interfere.

"We're going to turn back time, and you will watch it unfold and do nothing as advised." He spat with a finger on my chest.

Anger was building up in me with every word he spoke, "I don't know what kind of hold they have on you, but this isn't you."

"It is Dian. It's all me." I still didn't believe it, even though he used my native name. A beam appeared beyond the doors intended to take me to the council caught my attention; then, I heard Roddy say, "She'll die."

I tackled him to the floor, and my fist connected with his face.

Instantly, a huge protection bubble emerged around us to prevent the ripple of our actions. It is said that a surge can affect time, especially in a frozen state, and affect reality.

I took a step back to refrain from hitting him again. He looked at me and felt his nose which was currently bleeding. I prepared myself for a counterattack, but that wasn't the case.

"GODDAMNN!" He said, putting his shirt to his nose. "I don't think anyone should take punches like that in an act, but it took you long enough. What did I have to say next for a reaction from you?"

"What?" Confusion took over my face.

"Thank God for this bubble, huh?" He ignored my state and paced around the allotted space. "I wanted the bubble because I can talk freely without Ferri and his command hearing what we're saying. That's one of the best features of these things, but it doesn't last long. They just don't know what I have planned and will never know." He said to the sky in a menacing tone.

"Plan?" He was talking about everything but nothing at the same time, and I was lost by all of this.

"You switched the restaurants that they were supposed to meet at. That was clever. Calling moms all gentlemanly and informing her of the change of plans. It worked. I could never imagine being like you. So free." He looked at me. "I can't watch them do this." He said, glancing at Solemn. "No life should be taken once given a second chance."

"What are you saying?"

"Just listen because we don't have long in this bubble, and they've sent for you." He referred to the beam and then placed a hand on my shoulder.

"I gave Joey a nudge to help you. You brought her here, proving how much she meant to you." He expressed. "You know a Roshla doesn't belong among us. Your mind wasn't born for a single-minded system, and I've always known this about you, but I never wanted my best friend to leave me."

"I'm not a Roshla," I said to him. "They're made up and exist only in books."

They didn't teach us about being different in the academy or the phenomenon of emotions but that they don't exist for us. I read about the ones they call Roshla, who openly expressed and thought for themselves and not as a colony. To say their name out loud was forbidden.

"There haven't been one in a long time, and they want to erase that." He said. "You must go on and live."

"Roddy, you can too," I said, and admittedly, this brought a stinging sensation to my eyes. I didn't want to leave my best friend behind, and Roddy was always there for me, and I didn't think I would ever see our friendship end.

"I can't survive here; you can." He said. "I told Ferri that I would inform his boss of his actions. He knew they wouldn't accept his decision, but we made a deal."

"What deal?"

"You'll have to get Transcended," Roddy said.

"And be left with nothing. Not even a name for myself." I told him. "You cannot expect me to accept that deal."

"You'll have a name because I will conduct your Transcendence. It was part of the deal that I give my friend the proper farewell." He began to explain. "You'll have a chance at a future, and I'll plant some memories where they are needed for a swift transition. I plan to give you a good job in your new life unless you love this one. You're already 18, so you won't need your parents, so you'll bear in mind they passed and loved you so much they left you a great deal of money to live with. You will find your way; I believe you will. You don't need lessons on how to be yourself because it is in you."

"Solemn?"

"If it is meant to be, you'll find each other. You'll save Solemn and, like they say at the end of fairytales... live happily ever after." He said. "And I am so sorry, Dylan. I didn't mean what I was saying, and I hate that I let those words come out. I just needed you to bring this." He referred to the bubble.

The bubble burst. "Time for Transcendence."

We walked into the bean in front of Ferci and his council.

"We have agreed to cease all actions against Solemn Monasae, given that you go through complete Transcendence immediately. This is irreversible, and after, you will be lost to us. We cannot have you affect the timelines more than you already have, and you will live the rest of your life as a human."

"I understand," I said.

"I wish you well in your new life Dylan."

"We wish you well." The rest of the council said.

"Hey, Dylan. What are you doing out here?"

"You ever wonder what's beyond those clouds?" The sky was something I watched sometimes, and I couldn't put my finger on why. You do a lot of wondering, but I reckon it's more clouds." He said. For some reason, I expected that answer from Rich. "Anyways, you said you would help me with my last table before you leave. It's been an hour, and I can't get her to order anything."

"So you're saying you don't like the breaks?"

"Dyl, please."

He pulled me inside and pushed me to her table, causing me to stumble in front of her. What an awkward start this was. She took a napkin and stuck it in her book. "Hey." She said with a genuine smile.

I found myself just staring at her. At her light brown eyes, taking in her glowing warmth, her freckled face, lightly glossed plump lips and that smile.

"I'm guessing you're taking over for that guy." She said, looking over at Rich, who then pretended to arrange placemats.

"No. You've been here a while, nobody has joined you, and you haven't eaten." I said. "Just wanted to make sure everything was alright."

"Yeah, nobody coming. Since it is Friday, Mom thought I should get out and have some fun with friends... that I don't have." She said with a small laugh. "I like this place, and your manager usually lets me occupy this table to pass the time."

"It's not too noisy?" I asked, gesturing to the book.

"It's not. Great training for blocking out the noise." She joked.

"Well, I just got off. I can join you if you'd like."

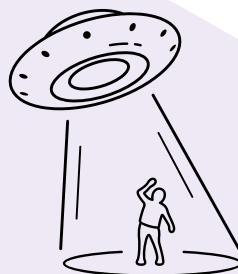
"No, I wouldn't want to inconvenience you," She said. "or mess up any plans you probably have."

"Lucky for you. I have none. So, how about we get a waiter and get something to eat? I don't know about you, but I'm... starving." For some reason, the last word in that sentence attacked my arm with goosebumps.

She gestured to the seat, "Join me, whoever you are."

"Dylan," I said with my hand extended.

"Solemn." She said, grasping my hand.



I don't know why
x Patrice Joseph

Noise canceling,
Attention grasping.
A balancing act of not knowing and choosing the flow of the universe—
But I'm tracing familiar lines,
And not trusting the divine.
My body drifts out of alignment—
Merely kept on this twine's loop,
Intertwined with both me and you.
Amused by your presence, I don't know why.
I don't know why my stomach ties itself when you come around.
I lose feelings in my fingers—
Amused and Confused by your power,
While picturing the shower before the hours of our union.
To think and only think—
This state proceeds to feed into this fairytale,
Telling me "this is how it happens".
Happily Ever After, but I don't know how we got here.
This ceremony means nothing if my heart isn't here,
Hearing "til death do us part" doesn't heal my heart.



Portrait 1 (Faces Collection)
x Maci Fulton

MIA
x Cassandra Wilson

Elaine studied the four apples nestled in a small wicker basket resting on the solid oak kitchen table where she sat. She propped her elbows on the table and tented her nose and mouth with her hands. Closing her eyes, Elaine murmured a brief, fervent prayer. She opened her eyes and allowed them to settle once more on the basket of apples. Taking one of the apples from the basket, she examined its firm, red and yellow-streaked exterior. She took a bite. The juicy, sweet flesh conjured up the memory of her third date with Mitchell during their senior year of college.

"You're eating that apple like it's filet mignon."

"It is." Mitchell took another bite. "Mmmm. Honeycrisp. The filet mignon of apples. Try it."

Elaine extended her neck, inching forward to take a bite of the seductive fruit looming before her between Mitchell's long fingers. Just as her lips touched it, Mitchell yanked it away and pressed his mouth against hers. The sweet, slightly tart nectar, mingled with Mitchell's own unique flavor, produced an aphrodisiacal elixir in Elaine's mouth, unlike anything she'd ever tasted before.

Heavy tears coursed from the corners of Elaine's eyes. Her chest ached with a chasmic longing. Last night she had the dream again. She and Mitch were laughing and holding hands as they danced to a wondrous, dream-conceived melody that slipped from her memory the moment the dream ended. They were happy.

Drying her tears with the back of her hand, she pushed her chair away from the table and tossed the half-eaten apple into the garbage. She grabbed her car keys from a wall hook and picked up the basket of remaining apples.

Elaine drove the twelve and three-quarters miles without conscious effort. She'd driven this road daily for the past two months. Each bump, curve, and dip in the road was well-known to her jaded senses. Freed from navigational worries, her thoughts traveled their own route.

"I don't understand why you have to go back again, Mitchell. You've already done two tours," she said.

Mitchell responded with a long intake of air followed by a slow release, a faint whisper of a sigh that only registered with Elaine because her ear was pressed against his bare chest as they lay in bed the night before his deployment. Words were unnecessary. Whether he wanted to or not did not matter. Mitchell was one of the few, the proud...a marine. Semper Fidelis. Always faithful. Elaine had long ago accepted the double-edged irony of his oath to duty.

Mitchell nuzzled her forehead with his lips before planting a lingering, gentle kiss. "This time I'll only be gone for six months. As soon as I come back home, we'll start those adoption proceedings."

Elaine's stomach clenched. They'd just begun to consider adoption following her last miscarriage—their fourth failed attempt in fourteen years of marriage to start a family.

She slowed the car to a stop in one of the plentiful parking spaces surrounding a large, one-story, L-shaped building. Its white, Spanish tile roof and peach stucco exterior with white, faux shutters at the windows gave the impression of a palatial Caribbean home instead of a government medical facility.

Home. Elaine released a dry, mirthless chuckle, remembering the familiar adage, "home is where the heart is." She had come to learn over the past two months, however, that home is where the mind is. In spite of their unfulfilled desire for a child, she and Mitchell's home had once been a place of comfort and security, a fortress against the uncertainties of a capricious world. That fortress was breached three months ago by unwitting messengers.

"Mrs. Grantham, we regret to inform you that the MARSOC reconnaissance team led by your husband, Sergeant Major Mitchell Grantham, encountered enemy combatants... Some of the team is still MIA, including Sergeant Major Grantham."

MIA. Missing in action. For days she was tormented by thoughts of Mitchell being held prisoner in some sparse, rock-strewn, hillside stronghold with harsh-faced, bearded men in turbans torturing him until his last despised American breath fled his body. After six excruciatingly anxious days, the call came that Mitchell and his team were found poorly mistreated but alive and being flown stateside. "Hello, Mrs. Grantham."

Elaine walked past the nurses' station, returning their polite, friendly greetings. She knew each of the nurses well enough to stop and exchange social pleasantries, but she only smiled, waved, and continued with propose-driven steps down the long, polished, linoleum hallway. Mitchell's door was slightly ajar. She paused, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth to quiet her rising apprehension. Each visit was more difficult than the previous, a frustrating lesson in disappointment as anticipatory joy went unsatisfied.

Nervous panic ripped through her, leaving her tremulous and short of breath. She raised an unsteady hand to her head and tugged splayed fingers through her soft bunch of curly hair. She drew in several deep breaths to quell the nauseating fear threatening to overwhelm her. Pacified, she turned her lips upward into the trained smile she donned for her visits. Two knocks on the door and a practiced instinct widened her smile.

"Come in."

Elaine was greeted by Mitchell's inviting smile, a welcoming treat of white teeth. This was the favorite part of her visits. For a fleeting moment, she pretended his smile and the light of familiarity in his eyes was the result of sixteen years of intimacy rather than eight weeks of painstaking visits. Mitchell was perched on the edge of the bed. The open photo album she'd left with him during her last visit rested across his jean-clad lap. Hope tickled Elaine's heart, softening the rigid lines of her forced smile. She placed the basket of apples on a nearby rolling food tray and sat on the bed beside him.

"You were a beautiful bride."

"My groom wasn't half bad either," she replied.

Another smile sprang to Mitchell's full lips. Elaine studied his face like a seasoned detective, desperate to piece together meager but valuable clues that formed viable evidence. His smile vanished, disappearing like a drop of water on parched ground. His eyes brimmed with tears.

With a cracked voice, he let out a quiet, "I-I tried."

Elaine's smile faltered, but she quickly reclaimed it. She trailed a finger along the raised, ragged scar on his forehead just above his left eyebrow. She swallowed her disappointment as she caressed the scar, a souvenir from the head injury that precipitated his memory loss. Melancholic bewilderment softened her smile as silent, unanswerable questions afflicted her thoughts like the howling winds of a storm.

Where is my Mitchell? Where is the man who, sixteen years ago, seduced me with an apple and laid claim to my affections with a sweet kiss?



A Twisted Tale
x Skylar Evans

Her Mitchell was still MIA. Time and patience were not the divine remedies they were given credit for being. Acceptance made her throat burn from the anguish.

Mitchell dropped his head. A tear splashed a plastic sleeve-covered picture of Elaine and him bound in each other's arms as they stood before a vibrant orange and green trolleybus. Elaine's heart lurched. Key West. Their honeymoon. Mitchell brushed the tear away with a quick sweep of one long, caramel-hued index finger. He raised apologetic eyes to meet Elaine's loving gaze.

"My heart wants to love you, Elaine. Your visits, these pictures, your acceptance despite my..." His hand slid down his left thigh to his knee and stopped at the knotted end of his jean pant leg, the beginning of where a leg once hung. "Everything tells me you're an easy woman to love."

Elaine rose and retrieved one of the apples from the basket. She returned to her seat beside him. She bit into the apple and took her time chewing, inviting Mitchell with her eyes to join her humble feast. A lop-sided grin formed on his lips with her third bite.

"Is it good?"

She nodded. "Honeycrisp. Someone once told me it's the filet mignon of apples." She moved closer to him, closing the short gap between them. She placed the apple near his lips. "Try it."

Mitchell leaned over to take a bite. Elaine snatched the apple away. Her lips fell against his. He stiffened for a moment, then relaxed. He explored her mouth with the curious yet restrained passion of a first kiss as he drank from the sweetness in her mouth. Full, he eased away.

Elaine explored his steady gaze for reassurance. A glimmer of promise flirted around the edges of his clear, brown irises, igniting the dying embers of her hope into a weak flame. Mitchell licked his lips, drawing them inward as his tongue receded.

"Yum. It is good."

Elaine grinned.

Mitchell placed his arm around her waist and turned a page of the photo album with his free hand. "Tell me about these pictures. Where were we?"

Elaine swallowed the lump in her throat and snuggled closer to him. She leaned her head against his shoulder and sighed. It was time to bring her missing soldier home.

Oorah!

The Last Judgement

x Jakaila Scaife

Walk like this

Talk like this

Stop

Smell like this

Laugh like this

Stop

Push like this

Heal like this

Stop.

Even if this

Causes people to miss

The core of their soul

Far too many are told

To abandon themselves



Boston and Crew

x Ordinary M.A



Eternal Love
x Ordinary M.A



Lil Murda
x Ordinary M.A

In the name of someone
 Else's insecurities
 Disguised as love
 Told to hold back
 The passion pouring
 From within
 As if desire and sin be the same
 As if there was truly
 A way to tame a lion
 Or as if flying
 Ascending to greatness
 Mean you forget
 Where you come from?
 When you really da one called
 To leave a legacy
 Break through barriers
 Create beauty
 And serve as a carrier of truth
 For youth who truly count on us
 To lead the way
 So sway
 In the flicker of your smile
 Let each and every step forward
 Every poem
 Every film
 Every song
 Every class
 Be a testament
 Firmament
 To your love
 Baby, it's unconditional
 To your strength
 Baby, it's insurmountable
 To your softness
 Baby, it's unforgettable
 To your flaws
 Inevitable
 But don't forget your gifts
 Baby, they unmistakable
 Let us take a collective
 Sigh of relief
 Relieving the weight of judgement
 Embracing
 The tender validation
 That this world will never give ya'
 We choose to love on ourselves
 Never mind the games
 And live the best life one can
 To stay sane
 Singing in the rain
 That ushers in the light.

Tanka 1
x Zipporah Reeds

I woke up to rain
Heavy rain that poured down hard
It beat the concrete
It flooded my home and heart
Washing who I was away



Alley in the Art District
x Taryn Mangram

Arcadia College of the Amhara was a paragon of gothic architecture with pointed arches, flying buttresses, and a constant overcast courtesy of Belle Harbor's prolonged rainy season. It wasn't what you would expect from a small boarding college nestled on the northernmost parts of Maine's coast (which was part of why Damien decided to enroll at the institution), but he appreciated his time here nonetheless.

He walked into his class just a few minutes before the start time and made a beeline for his usual seat in the back of the class. All his life, his parents told him never to draw too much attention to himself. It was unfortunate because his aspirations were big, and for a while, he hated his parents for seemingly trying to snuff out his ambition. It was only because they cared about him, but Damien didn't figure that out until his sophomore year of high school.



DBO (Dee Black One)
x Ordinary M.A

Together We'll Go into the Night
x Aliyah Knight

Over the past four years, Damien Carter had grown accustomed to the mundane and routine of college life in Belle Harbor, Maine. There were minor variations in his schedule with each passing semester, but he always registered early enough to keep the same, consistent schedule as he matriculated. His days often started with a loud ringing of his alarm, and today was no different; he roused from his sleep at about 5 am, ready to start his day with a morning workout. Once finished, his workout was succeeded by a brisk, cleansing shower followed by getting himself dressed in his college's required uniform, accompanied by adding his own personal taste in accessories. He checked his waves in the mirror to ensure no hair (or clothing) was out of place.

The walk from the dorms to his first class took about twenty minutes at a leisurely pace, but he often used this time to reflect and introspect. Besides, the campus grounds were best admired when it was early in the morning, and there wasn't a crowd of students.

He could still vividly recall the moment he eavesdropped on a discussion between his parents. His mother was in the midst of a silent panic attack, and there was nothing his father could do other than comfort her through her wave of panic.

"I don't understand; why him?! Out of everyone, he hasn't had a drop of human blood since Reconstruction!" His Mother, Moremi Carter, cried. Moremi had always been a lively, optimistic woman, so seeing her in anguish was the first sign that something very bad had happened.

"My love, I know. I'm hurting too." He heard the baritone voice of his father. "We'll have to notify the others to carry on with caution... And we'll have to sort everything out with Delia... We'll have to lend her all of our support when we tell her the news about Antoni." At that moment, Damien chose to reveal himself to his parents; If not for their distress, he was sure they would've picked up on his presence a while ago.



COLAC
x Sharard "X" Saddlers

"What's wrong with Uncle Tone and Aunt Delia?" The look on his Mother's face almost made him regret asking, but the attentive calm of his Dad assured him that he wasn't in trouble. Ephraim Carter had always been sort of a reserved man. At well over 6 feet, his tall and dark demeanor could come off as intimidating. Damien, though, saw his Dad as a beacon of peace and safety, and he was someone he aspired to be like.

"Well," His Dad said, "... Damien, let's sit down and talk."

And since then, Damien has vowed to honor his parents' wishes to keep a low profile. Uncle Tone, like Damien and his parents, was a vampire. Humans mainly considered vampires to be nothing but made-up myths, but the truth was that they were real, and a number of secret organizations knew about their existence and made it their mission to hunt vampires down. Uncle Tone wasn't related to Damien by blood, but he'd known Damien's parents since at least since the late 1600s. The three of them were arguably some of the most powerful and influential vampires in recorded history. Despite this, Antoni was now gone.

Truth be told, it scared Damien to think about what happened to his uncle. Damien did his best to keep up his academics but still shied away from reaching his full potential. Besides, being in the back of the class wasn't as bad as it sounded. There was a horrible draft in the front half of the room, and more importantly, he could admire Nia Campbell's beauty from a safe distance.

"Nia Campbell." His professor called, almost on cue from Damien's musings.

"Present." She responded with a raise of her hand.

Damien was already prepared for when their professor next called his name, and he responded with a crisp, "Present." Like his morning routine, he'd become used to hearing her name called before his after all this time. Since freshman year, he'd had her in at least one of his classes. Damien could even recount the moment he first realized his crush on her. In their Intro to Poetry class, their professor tasked them with writing and reading aloud their poems every week. It was an easy feat for Damien, but Nia was so visibly nervous. But one had to be a fool to not see just how passionate she was about her craft. The more he heard her speak, the more he became interested in her poems. One week she set the stage for a dreary world with dark and dystopian themes. The following week, she was professing a sonnet to the class. She stuttered and stumbled over some of the words, but he could feel the emotions in them.

He knew he couldn't express his interest in her outright, so instead, he used his elective obligations to enroll in the upper-level English courses. It was entertaining to see the confused faces as he stated that he was a Pre-Law major during the introductions at the start of each semester.

Damien inwardly sighed as he opened his ebook on Comparative Cultural Literature. This was his last semester at Arcadia. Upon graduating, he would disappear back into the world to attend law school at an unremarkable institution far away from here. He would never see her again nor have a chance to get to know her, and the thought depressed him.

He was only halfway present as their professor droned on about the geographical contrasts of European literature. The class ended after an hour, and Damien was free for the rest of the day. Rather than returning to his dorm, he trekked over to the college's library, a six-storied building that was a newer addition to the school, where he reserved a study room. Being in his last year of Pre-Law, there was a lot that he had to do regularly. Additionally, because he was interning for one of Arcadia's Law professors, homework-like assignments needed to be done even when he was off the clock. Two hours had gone by without him so much as looking up from his laptop until a soft tap at the door started him.

Damien looked up and emitted a small gasp. Nia Campbell had peeked her head into the study room and was talking to him.

"W-what?" He said, hoping that it didn't sound too harsh.

She repeated herself, "Sorry to bother you, but I think I have this room reserved." She smiled at him apologetically, her pearly teeth beaming against flawless, dark-brown skin.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He scrambled to gather his supplies as she tiptoed lightly into the room and gently placed her belongings on a chair.

"It's okay," she gushed, "You don't have to rush."

Oh, if only she knew that he didn't want to.

Four years were spent at this institution, and Damien had only ever looked at Nia from a distance. Never had he been so close to her before. He wanted more than anything to look at her and take his time to analyze her features. He especially wanted to pick out the nuances of her face and find reasons to like her more—to gaze into her eyes, see the different kinds of patterns and specks in her unique irises, and categorize them in his head. He was self-aware enough to admit that his fondness bordered on obsession. Hell, he barely even knew her, if he were honest. But he loved her humanness, and he loved how her poems had stirred mortal feelings within his heart. They made him yearn for a life where he was normal and could actually engage with her in the proper, respectable way that she deserved. Maybe if they dated during their first years of college, they would even be planning a life together upon graduating. The possibilities would be endless if only he were human.

Damien chased those thoughts away. Thinking like that only made the realities of his life harder to bear.

Once he'd gathered all his things, he worked his way over to the door. "All yours." He was reaching for the doorknob when her next words stopped him.

"You're Damien Carter, right?"

He turned back to face her. "...Yeah... You know my name?" She knew his name!

"Yeah, umm, I work for the school's paper, and over the summer, I remember you submitted an opinion piece on a current event. Plus, I always see you in my classes. You don't say much, but your poetry is good."

Damien appreciated her praise, but he wanted so badly to joke about how his poetry was mostly just him bemoaning his immortal, boring life.

"Thank you," He smiled, "But you're way better of a writer than me. The nonfiction piece you wrote on Afrofuturism was definitely Pulitzer worthy."

Damien wanted to laugh at how wide her eyes went.

"You remember me from that class?"

Damien nodded.

Nia went silent, seemingly thinking of what to say next as she twirled a finger around one of her goddess locks. "How have we never talked before?"

He shrugged, "I'm not the most extroverted person."

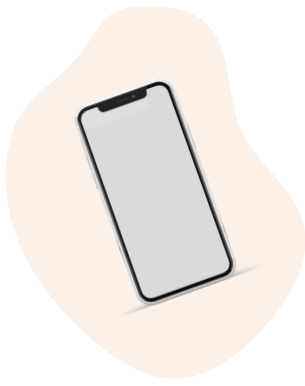
A moment passed when they both just stared at each other. The silence came to a crescendo when Damien remembered it was way past his reservation time. "Well, I'll see you around, Ms. Nia."

He was going to leave. He really was. But Nia pulling him by his sleeve and asking him to wait a sec brought him to a halt.

She pulled out her phone and passed it to him.

"Can I follow your social media? I feel bad that we've never talked, but you remember my writing." That piece that she wrote for her class had won her a few competitions. It was her best work to name so far, but no one on campus had ever mentioned reading it, let alone expressed that they liked it.

Damien was hesitant. He didn't have much of a social life, and his only other friends were from the soccer team—one of which was his best friend and a vampire like Damien, but other than that, he wasn't sociable in the slightest.



"How about," he said, exiting the Instagram app and pulling up her phone's keypad, "This." He typed in his number and called it, letting his phone ring once before tapping on the red call button. Because truth be told, he didn't have any form of social media, save for an anonymous Pinterest account, and he wasn't about to embarrass himself in front of THE Nia Campbell because of his aversion to attention. "Let's study together sometime." He smiled once more at Nia before excusing himself. Once he was out of the room, he finally had a chance to process what had just happened. "How about," he said, exiting the Instagram app and pulling up her phone's keypad, "This." He typed in his number and called it, letting his phone ring once before tapping on the red call button. Because truth be told, he didn't have any form of social media, save for an anonymous Pinterest account, and he wasn't about to embarrass himself in front of THE Nia Campbell because of his aversion to attention. "Let's study together sometime." He smiled once more at Nia before excusing himself. Once he was out of the room, he finally had a chance to process what had just happened.

"Damn." He thought. Damien was equal parts ecstatic and dismayed. His crush had talked to him, and she was interested in him (at least enough to want to befriend him). He tried to only feel the excitement, but there was no good ending to this situation. In fact, Damien had so much time to think about what had just happened that by the time he'd made it back to his dorm, he'd resigned himself to stopping things before they got too deep. He would wait a week or two and then slowly stop communicating with her (granted, if they were still communicating by then).

"Getting mixed up with me, even as a friend, would hurt her more in the long run."

Damien was resolute in his thinking. Even as Nia texted him that night, he reminded himself that this would be done in a week.

A week passed, and Damien relented. "I'll give it two more weeks and then cut it off."

Well, weeks turned into months which turned into the approaching end of the semester, and Damien could only look at the past with regret and the future with dread.

"You know what mermaids are, right?" It was nighttime when Nia posed this question to him. Throughout their blossoming friendship, they'd made it a habit to sneak out past curfew and drive to the coast to lay on the beach. Of the many things that he'd come to adore about Nia, it was her mind that he loved the most. She was so unlike him in that her brain seemed to always be problem-solving. She was imaginative and always pondered on the "What ifs" and the "Whys" of the world. Damien didn't normally think too deeply about these "What ifs", but Nia's creativity had made him ask more questions about himself and his worldview.

He chuckled. "Yes, Nia, I do know what mermaids are."

She rolled her eyes. "I know this sounds dumb, but have you ever thought about if they're real? Being out here got me thinking about it, and I don't know... I feel like everyone has that one myth they believe but wouldn't say out loud."

"It sounds like you believe in mermaids and want me to say I do, too, so that you don't feel childish."

She laughed and slapped him lightly on his arm. "You're annoying! And yes, I think I do." She settled into a position with her head resting gingerly on his shoulder. "But it wasn't something I've always believed. I grew up in sunshiney Alabama and lived there all my life before coming to Arcadia. The beaches there are so different compared to the beaches here. Here, they're mythical. Like something right out of a fairytale...."

Damien agreed. Sirens often passed through these waters as they migrated through the seas—though he couldn't tell her that. "It's not dumb," he replied, this time with a gentler tone, "and it's not childish either. At some point, they were considered real, and people usually say that art imitates life... or is it that life imitates art?"

"It's the latter, but I think both can apply."

A quiet stillness settled over them as they looked up into the night sky. Now though, every fiber in his body was urging him to tell her that she was right. There were so many mythical creatures all over the world that humans didn't know about. He could tell her about himself and then introduce her to all the others to satisfy her curiosity.

"Nia, I—" he choked up. He had to remind himself that revealing the truth to her would bring consequences for both of them. "We should probably head back."

"Right now?" She was confused. They'd been out here for less than an hour when usually they stayed for about two.

"Yeah, I'm actually not feeling too good." It wasn't a complete lie. He felt like an asshole for having to cut their excursion short.

"Oh, well, are you going to be okay to drive? If you want, I can-?"

"Yes, it's fine." Except his words came out harder than he meant, and he didn't need to see her face to know that she was stung by them.

Damien grabbed Nia's hand to lead her back to his parked BMW.

The ride back was just as awkward, and after sneaking her back to her dorm, he mentally kicked himself the whole way back to his. He lay in his bed, trying to figure out how to text some semblance of the apology that she was owed when he received a text from her asking if he made it. He instantly responded, and she just as quickly texted back her usual good night message.

Damien tossed and turned all night, trying to figure out how to go about perfectly apologizing to her. By the morning, however, Damien had had enough time to go through scenarios in his head. They weren't even supposed to be as close as they were now. His apologizing would only mean that they would continue being friends and that friendship would lead to more baseless apologies after hurting her feelings, all in the name of "protecting" her from getting involved in his life.

He couldn't bring himself to cut things off with her in person (because if he saw her, there was no way he'd be able to commit), so he resorted to ghosting. He wasn't proud of it. He was embarrassed, in fact. Nia tried reaching out to him, but Damien rebuffed all of her attempts; even the ones where she tried talking to him in class, he blatantly ignored her.

Three weeks had gone by, and he was kind of managing (which was far from the truth because, on the inside, he was a wreck). Then, on the first day of the fourth week, Elijah, the only other vampire on campus and his best friend, called him.

It wasn't too abnormal for Elijah to call, so Damien suspected nothing. They were brothers in every way but blood, so of course, he would answer the call without a second thought.

Yet, Damien could barely get out a, "What's up", when Eli cut him off, saying, "Nia is in the hospital!"

"Huh? What?" There was no way that Elijah was talking about his Nia

"Nia Campbell is in the hospital. They're saying she's in critical condition; I'll send you the link."

Within less than a second, Damien was getting a notification from Eli. He clicked on it, and he was taken to a news article from the local news station, and his heart sank.

"Two Arcadia College Students in Critical Condition After Hit and Run."

Damien's blood began to boil as he skimmed through the article.

According to law enforcement, one of the locals who was driving drunk had hit Nia and one of her friends while they were in town. It seemed that law enforcement already knew the perpetrator since it was a small town, but Damien was so close to going after the loser himself. Right now, though, Nia needed him.

"Thanks, man. I'm going to the hospital now."

"Okay, keep me posted, and let me know if you need anything."

He ended the call with Elijah and ran at an almost vampiric speed to the parking lot where his BMW was parked. An hour later, he was pulling up to the closest hospital in the next town over.



Damien wasted no time in trying to pry answers out of the staff and instead used his powers to compel them to tell him where Nia was. He hated using these powers, but this was a desperate time.

When he found Nia in her room, he was mortified. There were all kinds of tubes and machines that she was hooked up to. Parts of her body were wrapped in bandages, and the top half of her head was also dressed in bandages.

"Nia?" His voice was hoarse from trying to hold himself from breaking down. Damien nearly collapsed at the side of her bed, holding one of her hands in his. There was no response.

"Hi, are you Ms. Campbell's family?" A nurse asked as she came in.

"I'm not. I'm one of her classmates."

"Well, I apologize, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave for right now."

She tried shooing him out of the room, but Damien just barely budged. "Why? What's wrong? Is she going to be okay? Please tell me something!"

The nurse was either moved by Damien's worry or eager to get him out. "She's stable right now, but we need to get in touch with the family immediately because she's in such a critical state."

He frowned. "What about our other classmate? Is she okay?"

The nurse shook her head. "I can't say for certain, but the doctors are treating her right now."

Damien allowed the nurse to walk him to the chair outside the room. He hung his head in his hands, unable to stop himself from feeling like he was to blame. If he hadn't ghosted her, maybe the opportunity to go into town would've never even come up. At least if they went into town together, he could've been there to protect her or save her.

The beeping sounds brought him from his thoughts, and he got up to check on her.

"Damien?" Nia's voice was so scratchy and rough that it barely sounded like her.

"It's me." He said, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. Something about her expression set off alarms in his head. The beeping was still going. He looked up at the vital sign monitor and felt a rush of dread as it began to drop. Where were the doctors, and why was no one coming?

"This is going to sound crazy, Nia, but... All that stuff you said about mermaids, it's true. I'm not one, but I'm something else." His skin rippled, and the veins around his eyes popped out while fangs grew in his mouth. "I'm a vampire. I know it sounds unbelievable, but I really am. And Nia, I can save you."

Damien decided to say "eff it" to not wanting to get involved. He had something worth fighting for, so he chose to follow his heart.

"I've enjoyed these last few months with you, and I don't want them to end. I want you to keep living, whether with me or with someone else or with no one. I'll support whatever you decide." It pained him to say it, but it was a choice he shouldn't influence or make for her. Nia had to decide on her own.

It didn't take long for her to come to a decision. Even in this lucid state, she had enough sense to know that she wasn't ready to go quite yet, but also that by making this decision to stay, her life after that would be unnaturally long.

With what little energy she had, Nia turned her wrist and lifted it up to Damien's mouth.

She nodded her head. "Do it."

Her lips were upturned into a weak smile while tears streamed down her face. He couldn't even begin to imagine what emotions she was experiencing right now since she ultimately had to decide between death and immortality.

Damien eyed her wrist, hesitant to even take a bite, but the tiniest sounds of her pulse drummed in his ears, and the vein in her wrist thumped to life under her dark brown skin.

"Don't worry," he whispered as he lowered his lips to her arm, "I'll make sure you're okay. You'll be alright."

A flurry of visions and hallucinations raced through Damien's mind as he sucked the life out of Nia Campbell. It wasn't raining, but he swore he smelled it coming—he could even hear the distant sounds of thunder as if a storm was rolling in across a savanna. As he took her blood, his blood started to flow back into her, pouring life and immortality into her being.

He wiped his mouth and cleaned up the bite mark when it was done.

"Is it finished?"

He confirmed. "Yes. The process will take a couple of hours, but you should already be feeling better."

Now that he mentioned it, she felt like she could get up and walk right out of the hospital. The only thing stopping her was the tubes still fastened to her body.

"I'll get the doctor."

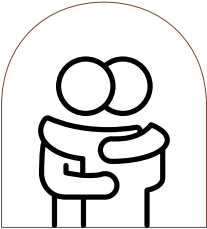
Of course, the nurses and doctors were shocked to see such a miracle happen. She went from critical condition to almost perfect health in an hour, and if not for Damien compelling the doctors to release her, they would've faced an onslaught of questioning.

The two of them waited until her friend's parents arrived on a flight from Boston a few hours later. By that time, she was in stable condition, and so Nia rode with Damien to Arcadia.

Back in his dorm room, Damien could finally tell her everything in detail.

"And that's why I've avoided people for so long. Besides Elijah, I really don't have anyone else. I'm really sorry for going ghost on you like that. I'm excited that you'll get to be more of a part of my life now, but I don't feel deserving of this. I was glad when you made the decision because I didn't want you to die, but I'm afraid that you'll grow to hate being immortal and end up hating me because of it."

Nia brought him into a hug. She was undeniably scared about what was to come, but she was optimistic about having a second chance at life.



"Damien, I would not be here now if not for you. Yeah, a part of me is terrified about what's to come, but now I know there's a whole underbelly to what's real. A secret society of things that I'd only ever read or written about. And now that I'm here, maybe we can explore it together... Well, after graduation." She laughed, "And Damien... I'm still pissed off about the ghosting, but fortunately for you, you now have an eternity to compensate for it." Nia smiled a smile that lit up Damien's whole world.

Just like that, being a vampire now didn't seem so bad to Damien Carter. There was still the issue of telling his parents everything that transpired over the last few months, and then there were some other major problems to figure out.

But they were things that could be figured out in the morning. Night had fallen over Belle Harbor, and soon, so would Nia's transformation into a vampire.

Ball of Clay

x Shamoria Johnson

Pick me up and toss me around,
press me in between your palms, throw me on the ground

Cover my surface with dirt and debris
then pull me apart, piece by piece

For all the distinct ways my identity is split
'cause trauma and despair are the prices to exist

Mold me into a mule, my back sagged with the weight
of baggage that claims to be a predestined fate

For all I knew were the tales of my mother and her mother before
who only held hopes and dreams when they became no more

The hands tell me I'm doomed to do the same,
return to the land with nothing to my name
But from my father's love emerged another reason to be,
for he plucked a piece of his will and rolled it into me

"Take this and become something never before seen,
a product of your people in a world so mean"

~0~



Everything I Need

x Ayanna Prince

Hey, Look at Me

x Nyla Scott

Hey,
What the fuck!?
What the actual fuck!?
Didn't expect that, right?
Nah,
See everyone,
And I mean everyone,
Looks at me.
They see
A sweet little girl.
Do I have pigtails and curls?
Classified as a child.
Held back.
Looking up, you look down at me.
The things you perceive,
I cannot help.
My cuteness,
I cannot help.



Untitled #1

x Jayden Patterson

My Smile.
And I smile as often as I please,
But please don't mistake my smile for peace.
I am not at peace.
I am not at rest.
I try my best to speak the thoughts on my mind,
But they pull at the butterflies
In my stomach, sinking down.
I look around and wonder,
What is wrong with me?
The people I see
With friends,
Lovers,
Frenemies,
Look so content.
So in place.
So belonging.
The thought fades fast because I know
From my own past,
A perfect picture is not a perfect person.
Though I can't help the way you perceive,
And judge me with ease like you were made without sin.
Like your rules must be mine.
Cause I'm living so well.
Like I can take a shove off my high, high pedestal.
When you thought to laugh at me,
Because that bitch needed to see who they really are.
I won't give you the satisfaction of watching your words take action in my mind.
Changing my course.
Infecting my soul,
But inside you don't know the trouble I hold.
The shaking that takes,
Like mini earthquakes.
I don't really care what you see.
I am who I am.
A nonbinary,
They/them having pronouns mother fucking bitch.
But remember this.
You can say what you see,
But you will never know the real me.
And I won't ever give you the satisfaction



REMOVE THE FAKE

x Joshua Brown

Once my pen hit the paper I'm in a trance, hypnotic
When I speak they listen I got them feeling erotic

I hate it when I think of something prolific, futuristic and as soon as I'm ready to spit it, I forget it

They say ooh, I guess you lost it
You really not it
This isn't talent but what I have I never bought it
I never could be cohesive and have my syllables be adhesive
I guess it was my belief of
The most high

I woke up one day phrases coming to my mind faster than an old man who's seen his life gone by

Maybe I reached my breaking point
Rather a boiling point
Most people never reach their spoiling point and continue to give themselves instant gratification

I used to search for validation from the general population
But now I stay to myself, for my health and future wealth

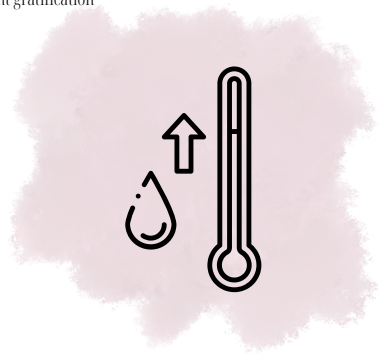
My pops always taught me to be aware of my surroundings
I listened for so long I acquired spiritual echolocation
It's astounding

Got away from people who's vibes, gave me hives
I just now started to feel alive

A breath of fresh air in solitude
My chest gets so tight its hard to breathe,
And no I don't have covid I just got — SICK of the fake and had to get rid of demons

Into the spiritual plane I see
My inner child we recently reconnected
He is so carefree I'll never correct it
To him I'm forever indebted
I lost him for a while,
I regret it

I look to the future,
I see a figure his silhouette similar but unclear
I feel a momentous occasion coming near
Always feel like I'm being watched
So I constantly check my rear





Golden Path
x Sharard Saddler

I hate sitting still
being complacent makes me physically ill

The small drop of white tainted my bloodline,
So everyday it's a struggle
The inner fight makes my skin boil

Me and you are not the same
You are my foil
Me and the fake were never meant to be one,
We don't mix,
I'm talking water and oil

Got hurt so many times, feels like my heart is made of tin foil

You can be by my side and leave me
You could leave me
You could leave me too
But that still won't stop me from doing what I gotta do

There's a viral pandemic of fakeness out here
And if you a real one like me,
Then you are the cure
And we're the vaccine
For the constant relaxing,
Never trauma unpacking,

My shadow is composed of alternate decisions
From myself in a different dimension,
With different missions, goals, and objectives I never sought after
I fused with him
Now I have more wisdom
That's why I'm so serious,
You don't hear no laughter

I FEEL LOST constantly phasing in and out of existence
When I step,
I create new timelines so it's a struggle to keep it together
I'm split between alternate versions of myself wanting control,
I don't know if I can weather the storm,

I apologize for my lack of decorum

Almost like I created my own flashpoint,
I must've missed it
Most of them the same
I go to — speak,
but no sound comes out so they never hear me
They fear me, because they don't understand



Destiny lacking,
Brothers and sisters
Oh by the way you thought you hurt me when you left me for your mister
Your presence left a sore blister
Had my heart playing twister
Had me feeling like,
Man I should've never kissed her
I look to the horizon,
I sprint towards it faster than 5G Verizon
My goals are higher than anything my enemies would have imagined
And to all my haters and misery curators

YOU ALL ARE just tertiary adversaries
Step to me
And I will rip out your coronary
Leave it in a pool of blood
For the doctor who's cardiopulmonary

Funeral Home ***x Grace Stanley***

I've been
Spending a lot of time in funeral homes recently
Wandering around graveyards looking lost
And for plots
To put both of our bodies beside each other

Mourning something that hasn't officially died yet

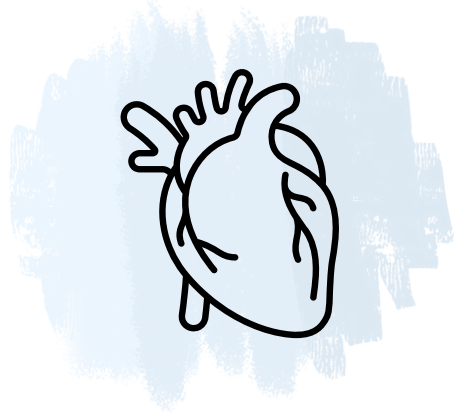
Kinda like pharaoh,
but his was only 70 days before his baby passed away
I'm around day 477
Looking for 777 signs that you won't leave anytime soon
Picking out caskets just in case

I think your mahogany would look good in walnut
I think my complexion calls more for chestnut
Even though my stature always gave redwood

I'm trying
to make this easier for myself

Decided that if I can miss you while you're still here
by the time you leave
it won't hurt anymore

Black was always my favorite color
I wore it constantly but now I'm trying to practice remaining neutral and save black for the special day



Morning was never my favorite part of the universal cycle of life
I understand the grand risers now

She told me it's crazy
To look at her and see a ghost
An apparition about to evaporate and emancipate herself from the confinement of my commitment and claws
I told her it's not

I see the sun in her even when I prefer the moon
She's gonna take the sunsets with her
That's what comes with the sun leaving in the morning
This unpropitious portrayal of self preservation has paralyzed me from pursuing any potential prosperity

Screaming free me from my grave of 6 ft
Left just enough space for the top of my head
Filled with the mortality of my muse

So let me know
Before you go
What you want
On your headstone.

A Dead Man ***x Nike Eaton***

A dead man walking
Present but empty
Whole but hollow
Strong but weak
Through all his contradictions he was able to disguise his stab wounds with a fading smile
Though inside the frowning clown prevailed in his heart
His soul frequently questioned "was anyone going to try and save me from my wounds?"
Was anyone going to hold me and love me?
Was anyone going to see me?
Was anyone going to address my first tears that I shed as a 5-year-old boy who couldn't understand?
Who was confused about what and why things happened to me
Through all his hurt he didn't know that he would soon be adopting the burdens of his father
As he morphed into the devil
He was bitter
He was angry
He was mad at his own choices
He became this man who he couldn't recognize
He was held by his secret ghosts who inhibited him from his own success
He was so great, that he was a detriment to himself
As he could only go as far as his own personal traumas would allow him
So he surrendered to his demons and was kept captive by his ego, pride, and selfishness
Until he wasn't
Until he freed himself using the keys that were already in his hands
Because some part of him was afraid of being free



Of what that could mean
I can certainly understand this dead man
Because that dead man is me
That dead man is you
That dead man lives in all of us
Because somewhere deep inside we know that we're afraid of the shadows that lurk within us
But at least that dead man finally died free from his shadows
And that is more than enough

Red Room ***x Shamoria Johnson***



Mak's eyes glared at the insidious numbers blinking atop the grand wood-burning fireplace. The digital clock cast the quiet living room in a sinister, red hue that made sense. It matched the red polyester of the sofa set covered in scratches and the elegant, intricately patterned curtains that lined the bay window. It matched the warm splatter caked on Makayla Wilman's brown face and the soiled wool rug her roommate wrapped up in. It even matched her roommate's name.

Mak watched as globs of salty water plopped onto her hands, unveiling trails of brown skin underneath the red mess she had created. She was frozen in place, unable to move since wrapping Red up in the rug to hide his form from her sight. Fat tears rolled down her face as she realized she had never learned the name of the companion that made their 30 days of containment fly by. Her mind flooded with memories of every time she ever looked at him.

"What's your name?" Mak asked the olive-toned, scruffy-haired man on Day 12 of the Red Room.

His almond-shaped eyes drifted over lazily, "Red."

"No," she groaned, "Your real name!"

"Why do you want to know? So you can track me down and stalk me when we finally get out of this nightmare?" Red's eyes crinkled on the sides when he was being sarcastic. She remembered staring at his guarded stature in fascination from across the room. It was the first time she'd been in the presence of another person in six months.

Mak scribbled in her journal at the red island separating the kitchen and living room. The island sat directly across from where Red sharpened a heavy butcher's knife, waiting for a single utterance from his full lips. He refused to make eye contact and only stopped sharpening his knife to eat or use the toilet.

"Maybe so," Mak shrugged with a loose smile. She felt drawn to Red in the same peculiar way that the swift sparking of a flame caught her breath in her chest. Beautiful yet cautionary. She lowered her head and quickly scribbled in her journal.

Red stared at her blankly for a moment before responding lowly, "I don't give my name to roommates. Last month I was Orange; the month before, Yellow. Now I'm Red."



Mak brought her knees to her chest and buried her head against them, tightly gripping her matted curls. The clock ticked past another minute, and the fireplace roared angrily, matching the internal agony of the woman sitting in front of it. She covered her eyes, hoping to block out not only the vicious blinking but the memories, as well. She didn't want to remember, for then, she would mourn, and she didn't have time for that.

There were only nine minutes left to get rid of Red's body before their time was up in the Red Room. At least, that's what Red seemed to think before he... Anyway, she was inclined to believe him; Mak had gone through every color room, just as Red had, but she never had a roommate. So when Mak awoke from her drug-induced sleep, she was relieved to see a red hue and a young man sleeping peacefully two feet away. This view was better than the sickening yellow wallpaper of the Yellow Room. This would be the last of the 6-month experimental treatment she voluntarily entered, but no room had been worse than the yellow one she had just left.

The experiment began with the Violet Room, a deep purple-themed bedroom with a walk-in pantry and ensuite. Mak didn't mind the solitude in this magical space and was disappointed to awake in a cold, dark indigo bathroom on the 31st day of her stay. The initially unpleasant setting grew on her as she discovered the boundless closet tucked away in the corner of the room, full of luxurious toiletries and freshly prepared meals.

Next came the Blue Room, at which point Mak realized the rainbow pattern as she examined the half-decorated nursery that only contained items of the exact same light blue shade. There was no fancy bathtub or magical pantry in this room, just an overwhelming feeling of loss and a limited supply of children's snacks stuffed into a small, soft-close cabinet. After only a week in, Mak decided that room had to be the worst, for there was a never-ending loop of You Are My Sunshine playing. The song continued to play even after she ripped the mobile from where it hung over the empty crib.

She wasn't surprised to come to a Green Room the next month and found this one to be the loveliest of them all. The Green Room was a literal green room, a white shed with ceiling-to-floor windows that provided the perfect amount of sunshine for the blossoming vegetation that grew in every inch of the space. Mak found joy in her routine of watching dusk turn to dawn across the vast plane of grass that her temporary home sat on, picking fresh fruits and vegetables. But then came the Yellow Room.

And now, somehow, she was here. Kneeling over her friend's dead body with—



8 minutes to spare.

Mak let out a noise of distress as her eyes frantically scanned her environment. She hoped something in this wretched room would indicate how exactly she would dispose of Red's body in eight minutes. Her sight caught on sharp metal that curved into a dark wood handle. A shiver went down her spine at its menacing presence in a pool of sopping redness; before today, Mak had never seen the butcher's knife outside Red's hands.

Mak trembled as she gripped her face, nails piercing through blood-painted skin, in an attempt to suppress the building memories of him.

One calloused hand holding the knife with a tight grasp, his other brushing across her flushed cheeks with a softness. When he spoke, he said, "It's nice to be rooming with someone who isn't a full-blown lunatic."

Mak gave a half-smile, rolling her eyes teasingly, "Yeah, lucky you, I'm only slightly insane."

Red chuckled, "No, you're calm and... sweet. Respectful, always watching and waiting for the perfect moment to break the silence. Observant, too. How your eyes look around the room before you write in that journal of yours."

Mak's face heated up, and she gazed at her companion with her heart racing. His dark eyes peered through her own and seemed to be searching for something held within. "Why are you here?" Mak's lips curved into a frown, "What do you mean?"

"How did someone like you wind up in a place like this?"

Mak didn't know why she took offense at his question, pulling away from his thumb. It was an innocent enough inquiry, but what was that supposed to mean? "I chose to be here, just like you," she replied.

Red scoffed, "Why would anyone choose to be in this hell hole?"

Mak wasn't sure how to respond because she wasn't certain she could describe the last five-and-a-half months in this recovery facility as hellish. Although an unorthodox and relatively new treatment, the woman had faith that she'd be transformed into a new person as promised when her time here was done. Sure, some months were more difficult than others, but she always felt safe; no doctor or researcher would call for anything less. Pushing off the couch and moving to perch in her favorite island chair, she said, "It hasn't been that bad."



Red raised a scarred brow, "Really? What was your Violet room like?"

"Just like yours?"

"Let's find out," Red smirked, gesturing for her to spill.

Mak rolled her eyes, but Red waited patiently until she cleared her throat, "Well, it was just a huge, purple bedroom. It had an ensuite, which was nice but not as nice as the Indigo bathroom. Oh, and there was an unlimited, self-replenishing walk-in pantry!" Her eyes blurred slightly as she remembered the lonely room that simultaneously made her feel like a princess. It felt so recent yet so long ago.

"You had a bedroom, an ensuite, and a magic pantry?" Red gawked, "You sure had it nice, huh?"

"What was yours like?"

"Mine wasn't magical, that's for sure. I had a roommate, an old butcher," he paused and shook his head before continuing, "We shared a violet bedroom fit for a king, too. There was a large bed with a thick, velvet purple duvet. It was big enough for us to sleep in without feeling each other. We didn't have an ensuite, just a bucket and some water that was changed while we slept. Once, I tried to stay up and catch the poor guy whose job it was to clean our shit, but, you know, there's no such thing as insomnia in this place."

Red paused, his eyes far away as he stared at the fireplace. Mak wasn't sure whether she was meant to respond or just listen; she hoped for the latter as his experience was nothing like hers. When he didn't continue after a few lingering seconds, she spoke with a shrug, "I guess so. I used to lie awake for hours with my heart racing, but I haven't had a sleepless night since I've been here. Figured it was a positive result."

"Yeah, maybe," he responded. "Anyways, the butcher went crazy after two weeks when they stopped giving us equal food."

Mak frowned at his use of the word crazy, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we didn't have some magical pantry. We were given six pre-made plates a day for us to split for the first two weeks. Then, we were given a plate less each day until we were left with just one meal a day for us to share. The butcher was convinced when we shared our lunch for the first time that they were plotting against us."

"Who's they?" Mak choked back a laugh of disbelief.

Red sharply cut his eyes over to her, "The people that put us in this place." "The doctors?"

"Forget it," he shook his head with a disappointing glare. "The next day, I woke up to the butcher holding this knife above my chest. He said they told him it was the only way for him to move forward in his treatment."



She was running out of time fast, Mak realized, shaking her head. Especially if she was to be consumed by memories at every moment, it was more difficult than Red said it would be. Mak couldn't understand how the young man she grew to adore within a few weeks could have done this seven months in a row. The grief gnawed at her, sinking her heart into a black hole, but it was the guilt she couldn't take. As Mak berated herself, more memories of Red's words flooded her mind.

"Do you think you deserved better than me?"

She remembers blinking, taken aback by his sudden question, as the two sat silently in front of the fireplace. "What?"

"Your rooms, plus you didn't even get an Orange Room! It makes me wonder why yours were so nice while mine were anything but. I fought to be here, but you..." Mak was embarrassingly speechless as she typically was when Red decided to speak to her. The doctors had to be why their experiences in this experimental treatment were different, right? She expressed this thought aloud, to which Red scoffed. "No, seriously," she protested, "maybe we just needed different treatments. We're different people with different backgrounds, after all. We needed different measures of help."

"How do you know that?" Red shot back, "I don't know where you come from, and you don't know a thing about me. How could you assume we're so different?" Mak pursed her lips tightly together. She thought about her life before these colored rooms. The sleepless nights mixed with the weight of fatigue and despair that smothered all saturation in her. Then, in that pit of darkness, the familiar feeling of loneliness seeped deep in her core, to the point where her very being screamed irrelevantly. She thought it fitting to die alone in her disheveled cave, but when she opened her eyes, she was cuffed in front of her psychiatrist, mother, and a man in a white suit. They told her about this new self-rehabilitation program, promising light at the end of the hall.

No, Mak didn't know much about Red or where he came from, but she had hope for the first time in a long time. So she replied, "Your accent," and walked to her seat at the island, ending the conversation there.

Now, she ugly sobbed as here she is, only two weeks later, dropping tears on his body rolled up in a scratchy rug. Red said he had to do it when describing his first time. He told Mak of the sick feeling it brings you, the chilling, tight grip on your physical and spiritual being. He would probably be proud of the woman's quick move to wrap up his form to hide the precise slice across his jugular. He would tease her when realizing the only reason she reacted so fast was to minimize the amount of blood splattered on her.



"Do you think you could do it?" Mak repeated the question Red asked her last week in a whisper. "I don't think you can."

Well, maybe Red was right. With six minutes to spare, she didn't think she could follow through with the instructions he had told her only a few days prior. Mak sat there, as she had for the past four minutes, blood splattered across her cheeks and a tight ball in her stomach. At this point, she had given up on suppressing the memories and let them flow without restraint.

Red confessed to murdering multiple times during their companionship, but his eyes were wet and glossy the last time he spoke about it with Mak. His voice was tight as if what poured from his mouth with ease a few weeks ago now pained him to say, "I'll be honest with you, Makayla."

A shiver went down the girl's spine as her name fell from his lips. Mak typically hated when someone said her full name, but it sounded nice coming from him. At that moment, though, she rolled her eyes, dismayed from not knowing his real name.

"Well, you're a new case in my book, too," Mak responded, attempting to lighten the thick air.

"No," he shook his head in frustration, "You don't deserve this."

"Deserve what?"

"What I have to do," Red frowned at his heavy butcher's knife.

It didn't take Mak long to realize what he was implying. She kept her gaze locked on the knife as Red ran a tool across it in linear, uniform swipes to sharpen what already came to a shiny point. Although the back of her mind screamed for her to snatch it away and run, Mak remained seated and sketched the image before her without looking away.

"Threatening to kill me again? Maybe it's Stockholm Syndrome, but you don't scare me, Reddy," Mak replied despite the loud thumping of blood in her ears.

Red suddenly seized his rhythmic scraping, "I'm not the one holding you captive here or making the rules. I learned on the outside to read people, stick with the good and take advantage of the bad. In here, none of that matters. The butcher was good, but then he tried to kill me. Though I can't blame him, he said he was only a room away from getting out of here; he had to do what he had to do. It's too bad I saw it coming. But that's the thing in this place: You stay alive by taking a life, and you'll have a better one... if you survive the final room, that is. Red Room's always last, no matter what colors you've cycled through."

"Are you really going to kill me?"

Red stared at his knife in silence for a moment before the ear-splitting sharpening noise filled the air once again.

"Hmph," Mak huffed, "Well, how would you do it anyway?"

Red replied, "Simple. A slice across your throat while you're asleep. Then, I'd roll you into this rug until you bleed out before chopping you to pieces. I'd throw them into the fire to get rid of your remains before the clock strikes zero."

Mak nodded slowly, her eyes locked on the smooth motions of Red's hands while her mind took in his words.



The clock ticked past another minute, yet Mak could not remove herself from the depths of her memories. Past and present blurred into one as she gazed into the blazing fireplace. “What will you do when you get out?” She asked Red, assuming her death was soon to come.

“See my Mama,” he replied, a faint smile lifting his lips.

Mak thought of her mother, whom she saw for the first time in years when she awoke in the hospital before her first night in the rooms. She was the main reason why Mak went through with this unorthodox treatment; even after paranoia and depression cut away all relationship ties, the grip of Mom’s hands and the scent of her perfume sent waves of nostalgia. It reminded her of all the times before when she could leave her apartment without crippling anxiety or looking over her shoulder in fear, giving her hope.

“Mama was the best,” Red continued, taking Mak from her thoughts. “She didn’t see me like other people did. She was gentle and forgiving. Always had a smile. She was disappointed in me this time, though. I had never seen her cry before, but when they told us I’d spend the next twenty years behind bars, her eyes got all watery. She still didn’t let those tears fall, though.” His words drifted into a solemn whisper, the weight of disappointment dragging his shoulders. Mak wasn’t sure if he’d continue, but she refused to let this topic drop as it was the most personal Red had been during their entire stay. She asked, “What did you do?”

Red shook his head with a pained look. “I wasn’t back in the game, I swear. I was on probation, and it was my last strike; I wouldn’t risk it all for a few dubs! I just missed that floating feeling you can only find on the streets. I had no cash, but I knew my homies would front me. Turns out it was all a setup, and now the last time I saw my Mama, she’s got tears in her eyes. Stupid!”

“I’m sorry, Red.”

“It’s fine,” he chuckled darkly, “I’ll see her again. That’s why I agreed to this. My lawyer said it’d be in and out, seven months in some new treatment facility for ‘unstable individuals.’ Sounds better than 20 years in prison, huh? Yeah, right...”



Another minute ticked away.

Mak lifted her eyes from the fireplace and glared at the digital clock. She should’ve known the device was cursed when it suddenly appeared in this room. All the other rooms were void from any indications of time, minus the sun’s movement through the windows of the Green Room. So was this one until the couple awoke to the clock’s menacing presence atop the fireplace. The blinking red numbers counting from 48 hours sent an ominous feeling through Red but only excited Mak with the concept of them finally going home. As foolish and delusional as she was, the girl didn’t actualize that only one of them would walk out of the Red Room alive.

Now, she thought about what she would do if she could return to when there was more than enough at her disposal. She wondered what Red would do if only he had more of it. Mak suddenly blinked and stood, rushing to the kitchen where her journal rested on the island. Flipping to the back, she let out a choked sigh, her eyes filling with tears. Every page for the last twenty-or-so was filled with intricate sketches highlighted by quant doodles of the objects within the Red Room, from the dancing fireplace to the porta-potty stuffed in the corner of the living room. But every other page was dedicated to her roommate. Mak never showed him these drawings out of embarrassment, but she couldn’t help herself from detailing his distinct features and mannerisms through her art at any given chance. It wasn’t uncommon for her to draw the people closest to her. She had journals upon journals filled with Mom’s facial expressions from her time in depressed self-captivity.

Through these drawings, it felt like Red was still alive. His cheesy grin stretched his face wide on the paper, and his fluffy hair brushed against his forehead. There was a recreation of every facial expression of his, from furrowed eyebrows to low-lidded eyes. Mak even drew him into some scenarios from stories he told her about his life outside The Rooms.

“I used to be really into skateboarding,” Red remarked with a chuckle one late afternoon. “I remember working on cars for extra cash and saving up for the sickest decks. I would eat shit practicing tricks for hours, man! I’ll never forget that feeling of finally landing a trick after so *many* failed attempts. Bonus points if you caught it on tape!”

There was an entire page dedicated to this memory in Mak’s journal. A large pencil drawing of Red holding a skateboard was surrounded by smaller sketches of him mid-air from various angles. She prided herself in her attention to detail, capturing the furrowing of his brows in concentration that he often showed while sharpening his knife.

There were more, too. Red cooking with a shorter faceless woman that represented his Mama. Red with a toolbox and grimy hands from toying with a car's engine. Red smiling. Red frowning. Red holding her face was depicted in about every angle Mak could imagine.



Forget this!" Mak slammed her journal closed with a heaving chest and continuous tears. She looked around the room with blurry eyes, hues of red only fueling her emotions as her mind scrambled. There were only three minutes left.

Red's voice floated from her memory, "You have to get rid of the body before the clock strikes zero. They're gonna think you're crazy if they see a dead body and you covered in blood."

"But I thought they wanted the other person dead?"

Red rolled his eyes, exasperated as if his roommate were a kindergartener that refused to learn their alphabet. "Yeah, but no one wants to clean up a mess. The idea is for the other person to no longer be an issue for the system."

As much as Mak wanted to believe the words from her companion's mouth, she just didn't. She never had, only going along with the young man's tales because she liked the sound of his voice so much. Any indication of disbelief on her behalf would leave him sulking quietly. But even now, as her eyes rested on the carpet roll, Mak didn't think she could bring herself to chop up his body and throw it in the fireplace. Certainly not with less than three minutes left.

The young woman stepped from behind the island, her nails gripping her palms.



Mak took a deep breath before unraveling the dark rug that held Red's body. The pungent metallic scent of semi-fresh blood hit her like a truck and curled her stomach. The peaceful softness of his face would've filled her heart with endearment had the deep cut across his neck not stood out like a sore thumb. There was no denying his death, but the bleeding had stopped enough to allow Mak to convince herself otherwise. If she didn't see him die, did that really make him dead?

The young woman fell asleep in his arms for the first and last time the night before after the two captives admitted to their fear of what would come next. That night, Red whispered, "If this is the last time we see each other, I want to thank you."

"For what?" Mak asked, refusing to move her head from its spot nestled in his neck despite it muffling her words.

"For not killing me. This has been the best month in I don't know how long. It feels nice to end on a high."

Mak only smiled against his skin, pressing a gentle kiss before her eyes drifted close without her permission, and she was fast asleep. The next day, she awoke an unknown amount of hours later to the sight of Red gushing bright blood. She ran to his side in front of the grand wood-burning fireplace and underneath the insidious numbers blinking briskly from atop it. The clock cast the living room with a red hue that made sense. Ten minutes remaining, it said.



Like this entire experimental treatment, time moved way too fast. Faster than Mak could keep up with to think of a solution out of this mess. As the clock ticked past another number, she decided she would not leave this place without Red.

Mak suddenly gasped. The butcher knife was gripped tightly and thrown across the room at a blacked-out window behind the couch. A dull noise was made as the object hit the glass, sending a wave of confusion and anger through the young woman. She should've known from her time in the Yellow Room that escape was futile. Mak spent weeks crying, screaming, and punching holes in walls that were magically fixed the next day in her last room. Then, she wanted to escape her conscience in that bare room, but now it was an actual emergency.

Mak growled in frustration as she marched to the window and banged her fist against it, "Help, please, he needs a doctor! Someone, please!"

A chair was thrown against the glass, yet it bounced off just as easily, not even leaving a scratch. Mak sucked her teeth and pressed her nose against the window to see what was out there, but she couldn't see a thing but a void of darkness. Mak screamed, punching the glass in a fit of emotion, surprise slapping her when she bounced off it. Her fist still hurt from the force of her impact, though.

The young woman looked down at her hands in all their red glory and then up again at the digital clock.



Mak knew she didn't have much time left. She was still unsure what would happen when the clock struck zero, but less than 30 seconds remained to find out. Regardless, she knew she couldn't leave Red behind or attempt to throw him in the furnace.

Wide steps brought Mak back to Red's resting place, and without thinking, she squatted low and threw a limp arm across her shoulders. Her right arm slid underneath Red's shoulders and wrapped around his waist.

"Yikes," Mak whispered as Red's head dropped forward. She pushed his head back to rest on her shoulder before dragging his lifeless feet behind her to stand in front of the brick door that served as the only entrance and exit. She could hear the clock tick, tick, ticking behind her. Each second drifts away like a tiny leaf in the wind until it reaches...



...and sends a menacing sound through the room. Mak's stomach twisted, turned, and sank deeply as the door creaked open. A sliver of white light illuminated the room a tiny bit and sent a surge of curiosity and excitement through her. She did it! But she didn't dispose of the body like Red said or clean up his blood. She just didn't have the energy for it, and besides, it was their job to clean and prepare the room for the next person.

As the door took its time fully opening, Mak wondered what this looked like and what would happen to her next. She didn't want to look "crazy," but she also refused to leave her friend behind. Even that meant her dying too.

The door finally opened to reveal a tall, Black man in a too-tight suit and a short, stout older White man in a too-long lab coat. The Black man reached out a hand without moving his feet. He lowered his dark shades to the tip of his nose and beamed with his hand, "Come here."

A part of Mak wanted to ignore his command and curl up on the floor with Red in her arms, while the other part reminded her what this was all for. Hope and happiness on the other side.

Gulping, Mak hoisted Red upright and shuffled them in the men's direction. Her right shoulder sagged with his weight, and her heart beat loudly. When she reached the exit, she glanced at the men's faces and recognized them as her doctor and the head researcher of the treatment center.

Their jaws dropped slightly; stunned blinks and fire crackling were the only things filling the silence. In a raspy voice, the researcher said just one thing under his breath as he scribbled on a notepad, "Dallas Hernandez. The once undefeated subject of the Room Trials. Eliminated."



Portrait 2 (Faces Collection)

x Maci Fulton

Hard to Come By

x Patrice Joseph

Concessions conceive connections, so come correct.
You busy counting claims, cheating the system, and catching charges—
But not keeping count of the many accounts, and court dates missed.
Bitches got you on the top ten most wanted list,
You listed on the niggas hit list
They hitman telling you that you asked for this.
Common sense is hard to come by and your only concern is the chase—
Completely pacifying all your other needs.
Apparently, critics are supposed criticize—
Well your critiques lack a critical analysis.
You scamming your way through, cause you can't seem to find the balance
Crimson checklists became your only outlet
Congratulations! You've just been crowned the world's best con artist.
I'd call you a clown but that's a mockery of their industry.
Hooks, lines, and You the sinker, greedy for artificial pussy—
I meant to say fish but that caught your attention.
Every story needs a dory but your glass is half empty.
Cold-hearted, but that don't make you hard
Oh I bet you calm now, cause critics normally do the name-calling.
Have you ever seen a building named after a critic, or was it named after a prolific.
The writer of the script already knows how this shit go down
You won't believe, dreams are hard to come by—
Everything is merely too much to handle.
You're cynical, not critical
You can't critique something you don't believe
You canceled love—
But Love don't cost a thing.
Your immunity to love doesn't exist,
It takes more than a fitted 3 ply cloth to escape love—
Yet masks couldn't have been more perfect in the moment,
Guise that kept you from other ruins—
Except you developed your own,
By counting it as a win.

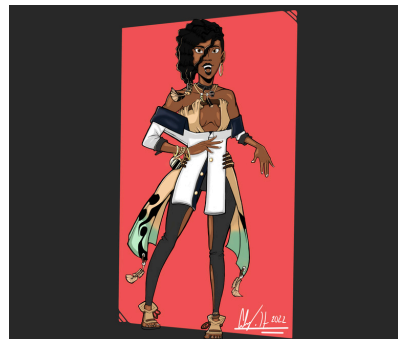


Mental Note

x Dymund Thomas

I am a woman.
Too straightforward?
Allow me to break it down for you.

My mind is a playground.
My body, a temple.
My heart, gold.
My voice, powerful.
My aura, alluring.



Jules (Full Body!)

x Aubrey Hough

It's just something I absolutely adore about the inside of me.
It's radiant.
It's rare.
Authentic.

Y'all don't hear me.
Let me break it down some more.

My mind is my powerhouse.
It births my creativity.
It captures original thoughts.
It organizes disorder.
It keeps me on my feet.
My body,
A pretty brown frame that can steal the eyes of blind men.
My body,
A place only meant to be explored by someone worthy.
My body,
The most valuable part of me that I must protect at all costs.
My body holds the soul of a woman that is unapologetically herself.

My heart is the purest part of me.
It gives selflessly.
It beats to the drum of compassion.
It loves completely.

My voice is strong.
My voice flows through the tip of my writing pen.
My voice is the tunnel to my mind.

I hope y'all hear me now.

I am a woman internally and externally
I recognize the validity of my existence and there is nothing anyone can do to take that away from me.

Saying "I am a woman", unlocks the confidence and unlimited potential inside of me,
That is why I call it a "Mental Note".

My Love.
My love is addictive,
It cuddles you like a mother does a newborn.
It nurtures you so much that you feel like everything you have is safe with me.

It gives "motherly", but is nowhere near the same.
My love should be considered sacred, but instead is free and limitless.

My love is suffocating, yet distant.
My love is afraid of not coming back the way it left, but it gives consistently.





Jules (Headshot)
x Aubrey Hough

My love is unbelievable, yet accepted.
My love never complains, it just hides the pain.
My love doesn't vanish, it tries to conceal itself.

My love is unwavering.
My love is a lot of different things at different times, but it never fails.

My love hasn't always been gracious.
My love hasn't always been kind.

In fact, my love has done damage.
My love has been forgiving when it should have shown no mercy.
My love has bit the very hand that fed it.

My love is learning how to grow kinder.
My love is taking precautions because, my God, does it need protection.
My love is fragile, yet firm.

My love is showing me how to take better care of myself.

My love isn't just for everybody else, it's for me too.
My love nudges me and I ignore it.
My love sits at the door leading into my heart, just waiting for me to open it.

My love wants to love...Me.



Adversity
x Jermaine Lovely

When people come face to face with adversity, they bow down or fold under pressure.
See, I was told pressure make diamonds, but for others it may be too much to weather.
Their self esteem falls slowly and becomes as gently as a feather. People tend to let adversity destroy their dreams, like paper in a shredder.
Instead of acting upon the advice, "don't give up cause it will get better"
Stand up and face it.
Don't let adversity be one of the factors of how your margin of success is measured.
Let it fuel a fire of motivation,
Pushing you to be the person who didn't quit when pressured.

Love Languages
x Taliyah Rivera

Love languages are interesting. Because how are we supposed to talk about quality time when my daddy never showed me no love? Words of affirmation when it's my perception that needs healing. Toxic. Who's to blame? But I look in the mirror and I remember her name. We're one and the same, the blind leading the blind. Generations of broken homes create poisonous relationships that we carry on.

Keeping Peace > Keeping a Piece

x Xavier English

My third eye reveals
To become fulfilled
First there's a void to fill
That you avoid to feel
That can either destroy or build
So, wait and hold still
Rather than to carry the weight and hold steel
Because to bear arms but leave your heart on your sleeve concealed
Is to live by the sword until it's the hill you die on with nothing left to shield
Relinquishing the ability to recover and heal

I'm Fine

x Taliyah Rivera

I wish I could show you how my brain takes things and distorts them to fill a mold I created. It's startling. Almost frightening. The feeling is quite crippling. To take words as solid as stone yet bend and shift with the breeze, it's a power. But with this power comes struggle. As not only are my words twisted but so are the words of others, wrestling in my mind. But it's fine. It's always fine. Because nobody can know that you often lose a game where you're the only player. The playmaker. The game taker.

The fixer and the breaker. When Me, myself, and I are the only people my brain seems to recognize. Materialize and Memorize. Reality shifted and the memory becomes fuzzy. Almost as if the world is covered in static and I can never seem to find my glasses. Like putting together a puzzle without the full picture I make up my own story and bend the characters to my will. A twilight zone of my own design I confine myself within my consciousness. But it's fine. I'm always fine. Right? Because who wants to deal with the fragility of overthinking? Being told you're overreacting it's overwhelming as the two play piggyback in your mind. A game of tag where the winner and the loser are one and the same. Going back and forth and back and forth, my internal game of tug-of-war never coming to an end, round 1 to infinity only to pause as I finally fall asleep, flawless victory. In my head solid stone becomes glass. And the past? What's that? As I lay in bed at night, the past invites itself into my head. Forcing me to replay moments over and over in my bed....My mind is multi-talented, performing stunts that my body wouldn't dare to try. Patiently waiting to cease my moments of peace pouncing on them like prey. But..... It's fine.



Bubbles

x Skylar Evans

The Bop [Original]

x Zipporah Reeds

There are not enough hours in the day anymore
and I have a lot to do
like events to attend, errands to run, classes, jobs, and
homework
You can only do so much in a day
especially when the day ends at 5:30
Hours just zoom by
and are gone before you even realize
and I try to use every second wisely
but I am not perfect
Five-minute scroll break here or there
occasional snacking
then the body orders sleep
There goes the whole plan
It is actually extremely exhausting to plan the hour
so how can I get things done without making every day a
catalog
the romantic answer is to take it a day at a time
only worry about what you have control over
accept incompleton
and some failures as divine intervention
BUT DON'T FORGET TO BREATHE
Breathing is mandatory for the hour



Drowning

x Skylar Evans

A Moment in the Sun

x Frank Brown

It's Wednesday - 121 degrees - no heat index, just heat.

I'd say it's a heatwave, but here it's just Wednesday with 364 more Wednesdays to go. It all feels the same in Afghanistan. We'll use that term; deployments differ in many ways, but the heat persists and melts everything together into an oversized omelet of eev.

Everything is beige - dust clouds, dusty roads, and buildings painted by the constant barrage of sandstorms. Here the sun reigns over the region and rain keeps its distance. Clouds rarely visit. A lost one might float by, but it quickly finds its way back to more favorable conditions. It's so hot you hear the heat as soon as you step outside - "HAAAAAAAAA". It's everywhere.

Everything we wear adds ten extra degrees. The Army's fifty shades-of-beige uniform, OCPs (Operational Camouflage Pattern), could be called H-A-Ps — Hot Ass Pajamas; on our feet are H-A-Bs. We wear a vest of body armor bundled with ballistic bulletproof plates that weigh 45 pounds. Sometimes the sergeants tap their teammates' gear to make sure they're not conveniently forgetting their plates in order to shed some weight. Seven pouches of ammunition, 210 rounds, attached to the vest would spark a hell of a fireworks display should I spontaneously combust. A two foot long rifle slung over my shoulder clunks against my chest. There are few brief moments of respite from the sunlike food, a bit of recreation, and a lot of laughter.

It's much cooler in the cafeteria, almost cold, and at lunch I can see life slowly coming back into everyone's eyes. Some of the coolest commodities in the cafeteria are the tiny Juicy Juice boxes. Each carton is 30 seconds of joy. Rip-its were once popular. They're like Red Bulls with a shot of crack. It gives you wings, but also seizures.

Since we are only allowed 60 seconds of joy per day in the Army, the cafeteria staff enforces a two-juice limit. Soldiers smuggle the Juicy Juice by stuffing the cargo pockets of their H-A-Ps with as many boxes as possible to the point that everyone looks like a backup dancer for MC Hammer. At least this outpost has a cafeteria.

Resources are more scarce on other bases in Afghanistan. Some don't have dining facilities, so troops convoy to the closest compound and pick up food for everyone else. This, of course, is a major difference between home and a hot zone. Chow pickup is an official all-out mission. It's like DoorDash but with armored vehicles, machine guns, and grenade launchers driving at maximum speed to avoid getting ambushed with AK-47s or blown up by a bomb someone placed on the side of the road. Beefaroni hits different when you risk your life for it. Sometimes the convoy is rewarded by grabbing a few extra treats for their trouble. It's like their tip.

One Wednesday the commander's driver emerged from their beige-ish humvee with a holy grail after the chow run - an ice cream sandwich. You would think humans had seen the miracle of sweetened frozen milk between chocolate-ish layers for the first time. No one else had one though. As soon as the driver lifted his mini-miracle to his mouth, another Soldier ran by and slapped it out of his hands, laughing. That driver became a man that day; I saw the origins of a supervillain right before my eyes. Luckily for us, before he began pondering fratricide, he remembered the extra sandwiches he smuggled with his Juicy Juices.

Some days, a base hosts a bazaar. It's an open market where townspeople come from all over with unique-ish items to sell like rugs, handmade dolls and bootleg DVDs. Each DVD was a grab bag of three movies. One could contain *The Terminator*, *The Predator*, and *My Little Pony* or *Toy Story*, *Toy Story 2*, and *The Passion of the Christ*. That one felt a bit sketchy because I felt like I was being judged by the Lord for bootlegging his biopic, but three bucks is a steal.

Another Wednesday I saw a lady frantically screaming and shaking a handmade doll in our direction. I started making out what sounded like: "BOBBAAAAAAYYYY, BOBBAAAAAAYYYY," I turned to look around. "BOBBAAAAAAYYYY, BOBBAAAAAAYYYY," My friends were doubled over, cackling. "She thinks you're Bobby Brown!" I mean, I do have a gap between my front teeth, we are near the same complexion, and I'd be damned if my name tape might give one pause (BROWN). I know she didn't see my name from so far away, but I suppose that once she did, it was settled. Bobby would have surely fallen on hard times to join the Army at this point. But here he is: Bootleg Bobby! At first I couldn't fathom how she would know anything about New Edition Bobby, Solo Bobby, or Downward Spiral Bobby, but music is universal. I witnessed a death metal cover of Brittany Spears in Germany, Polish Pointer Sisters in Warsaw, and now I couldn't shake the image of the vendor with her doll and her two homegirls dancing background in their burkas sweating it out to "My Prerogative" in the middle of the desert.

But just like our smuggled Juicy Juice, bootleg biopics, coveted ice cream sandwiches, even knocking an ice cream sandwich out of somebody's hand, everybody needs something to take a little bit of the weight off for a moment in the blazing sun. I thanked her and bought the doll for eight dollars, almost three DVDs! I walked away with my friends, still laughing and screaming, "BOBBBBAAAAAYYYY!"





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