

What The Body Holds

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Abstract

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How does interruption show up in our bodies? Interruption is an important theme in this collection, which attempts to acknowledge bodily interruptions, interruptions of speech, identity, silence, power, and memory. This manuscript, at its core, is about the reclamation of the Black Body in different stages of life. A hybrid work that includes poetry, fictional short stories, and stream-of-consciousness writing, this collection appreciates the body and what it holds. The body serves as an archive, preserving moments of tenderness and love alongside experiences of abandonment, longing, and pain.

What The Body Holds
By Zyaire Cheatham

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Bee Sting

One bee flew around my head while I was lying in bed, then another, and another. I looked underneath my bed frame and saw a beehive, bees crawling in and out, filling my room. Their buzzing traveling close to my ear. I tried to swat them away, but there were too many. I couldn't leave the bed; I had to sit still and let the bees surround me.

I woke up and ran to my little sister's room, half asleep and mostly confused.

I knew she would be awake; she could stay up for hours. The night was hers and the day was mine.

Even though she was younger, she had the gift of calming me down. Jade looked at me as I stood in her doorway, still shaken up, and all I could say was, "There is a beehive under my bed."

She laughed.

"Zyaire, there is no beehive under your bed."

I knew she could see the uncertainty draped on my face. Still laughing, she guided me back to my room. She looked under my bed. "Nothing's under there. Goodnight, Zyaire." She went back to her room. After she left, the fear slowly loosened its grip on me. I looked around one more time before I drifted off to sleep.

It was a funny story to tell people. Even though there was still a part of me that wasn't convinced it was a dream.

On one of the hottest days of the year, my legs were stuck to the faux leather couch. The ceiling fan was turned up to the highest setting, to the point where I couldn't even hear the TV,

when I heard the buzzing of a bee. I looked around and found the bee on the back wall. It flew away, giving itself a tour of our small apartment, coming back seconds later.

When Jade and I moved into the apartment, we were shocked when we realized there were no bedroom doors. The first thing we bought were curtains. The apartment was little more than a long hallway, a bathroom, and our living room connected to the kitchen area, where the only window sat.

This apartment saved my sister and me. We needed a place to stay as soon as possible, and when we were able to move, relief settled over us. Even though it was small, it was ours.

So, I must protect it from the bees.

The window was only slightly open, even on chilly days, so the apartment didn't feel stuffy. We opened the window up enough so that our cat, Luna, couldn't squeeze through, even though she tried, and that worried me.

The bee was still in the apartment. I thought about my dream and felt the fear rise in me again. I peeled myself off the couch and opened the window wider, thinking that maybe the fresh air would guide the bee back outside.

The window became both a threat to my cat's safety, who I knew was close by, and a potential relief for me. The bee sat there. I tried to continue watching TV, but my focus was on the bee. I ran to my room, and I waited. The bee disappeared after a while, making its way outside.

Those strange occurrences continued to happen throughout the summer. A wasp flew in a couple of weeks later, and it felt like an attack.

When a wasp stings you, they don't die afterwards like a bee. I learned after my standoff with this wasp that wasps are known as accidental pollinators, meaning they don't intend to

pollinate, but the pollen sticks on the wasps. I started thinking differently about wasps after that. Even they carried pollen somewhere.

Before I knew this fact about wasps, the wasp that infiltrated my home needed to be killed.

I grabbed the closest spray bottle from underneath the sink, bleach multi-surface cleaner, and I sprayed until the walls were dripping with bleach chemicals. The apartment smelled like it had skipped the step of smelling clean and gone straight to chemical overdrive. The wasp crawled its way out of the apartment, taking staggering steps. I watched from a distance. A part of me wanted the wasp to make it out; I didn't want to cause any more harm. I closed the window and watched it as it felt the cool breeze on its smooth body. I believed it survived; it flew away.

I've seen a total of three wasps and two bees in the apartment. I've told people about my dream, and now, suddenly, they have entered my space.

There was no beehive under my bed, but there was a hive nearby. Somehow, they kept finding their way inside.

I wondered why me and why my home? Maybe it didn't mean anything, but only the heightened possibility that one of these days the bee or wasp was going to win and finally sting me.

I repeated the same ritual: opened the window a bit wider than I wanted, watched my cat so I could stop her from getting close, and then attempted to guide the bee back outside without getting stung.

I've gotten stung once. I was little and remembered how it felt.

It courses through the body like it already knows the path, and it hurts just a little. The first reaction is finding where the bee stung you. The second reaction is to check if the stinger is still in place and then muster the strength to remove it. The shock comes. Your body bursts into survival before your mind can catch up.

The closest thing to this kind of reaction, of getting stung, is writing. I have moments where I don't write at all. I stare at my notebook and think: why have you become so foreign to me? When I finally get the courage to open my notebook, I see the remnants of every sting, every time I let something painful move through me long enough to become language. Writing for me can be painful because it is the only time that I feel this urge to survive. It hurts a little only because I let it stay dormant for so long. I enjoy looking at what remains when I let the feelings and stories become something tangible.

But a bee dies when it stings you, draining it of life. Maybe that was why there was a beehive under my bed: to keep me pumping.

This collection of short stories is dedicated to the many stings my body still carries.

I Have to Tell the Truth

I have to tell the truth.
I must.

I have to tell the truth.
It will go away. *I will lean closer to the lies.*
Make you bigger
while I grow smaller.

I have to tell the truth.

It might kill you.

But...

But...

But...

But...

But...

Anything could.
A penny could fall from the tallest building and kill you.
So why do you think the truth couldn't?

You could be having a lovely day, and a bus comes out of nowhere. You are slain.
So why do you think the truth couldn't?

Catch me on a good day.
I might be nicer.
I might hold you before I rupture. You will be dressed in my guts.

I let you hold the truth in your back pocket for too long; you see me staring at your butt.
Reminding me of what you have and what I have not.

You hold the truth.
You twist it in your hand like a damp towel.

Catch me on a good day.

That is a good day for me. That is the day that my fingers caress you, and you trust me because you trust my touch. You like how my fingers feel on your cold skin, you like the heat from my fingertips, how I move on you, how I let you inside.

I let you in, and you take me. You want my fingers in your mouth.

I put my fingers in your mouth.

You want me to squeeze you.

I squeeze every inch of you.

My hands creep up to your throat.

I could do it right now.

I could be one of the reasons you die, but I let you go.
I let you sleep.

I take the truth from your back pocket.

You don't know that I have it because you never thought I could.
You don't know that I carry it in my front pocket.

I lick you every time I walk pass you, I hold you closer, and you think you have me. You think you own me.

But...

But...

But...

But...

But...

How can you own someone like me?

How can you own my hair? The hair that rises to the sun and wants it all.

How can you own my eyes? The eyes that see through frames that cover my whole face.

How can you own my mouth? The mouth that sputters words but knows exactly what it wants to say.

How can you own my lungs? The lungs that fight for air, and when they find it, carry it close.

Each breath matters: each time my chest rises and falls, a job has been done.

How can you own my legs? The legs that have ruined many jeans when my thighs collide in harmony.

How can you own my nose? The nose that remembers the candles in my childhood family home when the power went out. We fell asleep in the living room that night, all five of us, and let our bodies warm us.

So...

With all that logic? I will keep the truth of who I am with me because it belongs to me.

I am a whole landscape.

V a s t .

I have to tell the truth.
I have to tell the truth.
You can say it with me.
It might not matter as much to you as it does to me. But let's try it!

"I have to tell the truth."

Don't watch me scream; I'm trying to feel again. It happens first in my mouth, trails down my throat, and I feel it through my veins. My teeth start to chatter. Don't catch me if I fall; I've got it from here.

Union of Hunger

I prayed while he ate.

He ate everything, leaving me the crumbs.

He sat at the table, never picking up a fork or a knife. He ate the meat like an animal, tearing off pieces. He slurped his soup and licked the bowl afterwards. He drank, getting the very last drop. He wouldn't stop eating until he couldn't move from his spot.

There were many nights when I left him at the table to sleep it off. I would eat after him, watching him. A look of disgust would race across my face, but I knew not to let it linger.

I ate the smallest of bites. Sometimes, when I cooked, I would hide portions in the oven or in random places around the house. He would find them, or the rodents would, and devour them immediately. I knew he looked around the house even when he wasn't hungry because he didn't want me to enjoy the food that I made. He would take too much when he left for work, leaving me with too little.

The prayer ended when I heard him step away from the table. He never talked to me in his gluttonous moments. I never really wanted him to. I cleaned up his plate and put it in the sink, brushed the crumbs off the table into my hand, put them in my pocket, and then made my own plate. I made steak tonight. I cut mine up, so it looked like I had more, and spread it on the plate. I could hear his footsteps from upstairs, listened to the creak of the bed, and knew he was asleep.

The food stared at me, and I began to get nervous. There wasn't enough food. There never was. I got so small that I couldn't recognize my body. I was proud of my curves and how my body used to serve me. I betrayed my body. I looked at my body on rare occasions, and it felt foreign. I raised my arms, and it was my arms, but it didn't look like my arms. My legs were

skinny. My stomach was too flat; I could see my ribs. My hair that used to rise to the sun was always dry and brittle. I stopped wearing my ring because it kept slipping off; he didn't notice.

Before I could take a bite, static crackled through the speaker:

YOU MUST SERVE YOUR HUSBAND, OR HE WILL EAT YOU. YOU MUST
SERVE HIM AND BE GLAD.

I placed the Bible on my lap and held onto it tightly. I could hear the shuffling from upstairs, and him running down the stairs as fast as he could. His eyes were black as he sat back down at the table.

"But you already ate," I said to him. He grabbed my skinny arm and ran his hand along it. He lifted my arm closer to his face and smelled it before he licked it from my fingertips all the way up to my shoulder.

"I'm hungry again," he sneered, sitting in his seat at the head of the table. I slid my plate to him and got up to leave. "No, you watch me eat."

When he finished, he left the plate and turned off the light, leaving me in the dining room.

The days went on like this. The more he ate, the smaller I got. I ate the crumbs from my pocket that I had collected and drank water and wine.

Tonight, he told me he was going to be late.

I floated around the house all day, picking up things off the ground and sitting. The speaker went off many times today with the announcement:

YOU MUST SERVE YOUR HUSBAND, OR HE WILL EAT YOU. YOU MUST
SERVE HIM AND BE GLAD.

I pinched myself every time I heard that announcement; it came from Hell. The Ordinance came when the Cold came. The Cold arrived during Winter and never left, leaving us frozen in time.

There were many stories about husbands eating their wives to punish them for not serving them and letting them go without food. The men faced the Cold every day. The colder it became, the more they changed into desolate versions of themselves. They were always hungry. Women walked around with fingers missing, a missing eye, and bite marks all over their bodies. It was the new Ordinance: women were required to stay home and ensure the house was clean and that food was ready for the evening.

Women didn't work. The last time a woman worked was as a nanny for the wealthiest family in town. They fought to keep her in the home; she was older and had lived with the family since she was a little girl. When they told her she had to leave, she had nowhere to go. Outside was too hard for her, so she unwrapped herself from her blanket and let the Cold take her. Another unmarried homeless woman found the nanny's dead body. Her body was so cold that comfort never settled upon her.

I decided to leave the house while it was still light outside. The neighborhood was always quiet. The kids didn't play outside; nobody walked anymore. It felt like a ghost town. I bundled myself up in my coat and scarves. The frigid wind pierced my nose, making it hard to breathe. When I was a fuller woman, I knew my body would have been able to handle the Cold. My body feared the Cold and wanted to pull me back inside. I needed to get out of the house.

After settling into the Coldness, I looked around and saw no one. All the cars were gone from the street; the men had taken them to work, even if they were just a block away, so that the

women stayed inside. All the curtains in the homes were closed. I walked down the stairs and opened my gate, and I could feel eyes on me.

I didn't know where to go. There weren't many places for women to go. The men did all the shopping, so we never went to the store; the children walked themselves to school, and all the clothing stores were closed to the public. We could only get our clothes through the mail, and since I didn't know my size, all my clothes were too big for me. It was too much trouble for him to return them.

I decided to walk towards the bridge. The water was always so calm, and I could stand on that bridge for hours. I looked up and saw the shuffling of curtains from one of my neighbors across the street. I knew she was looking at me. Women have gotten so scared to leave the house. They allowed us an hour a day to go outside, but many women never took it because we didn't know if we would want to go back. There have been many women who have left their homes and never come back. They would walk around town like zombies, huddled close together in the Cold. The husbands would remarry because there was always a woman who felt the Cold was the ultimate menace. The husbands would see their first wives and act like they never knew them, or they would throw them some change and go on with their day, holding their grocery bags full of food for their new wives to cook.

I was met with silence on my walk. The coldness seeped through my clothes. I looked around as if it were my first time seeing everything. I saw a few women on the street. Fires burned to keep them warm.

They shared everything they had and sat together silently. A few of the women hummed.

When I got closer, I recognized one of the women. She looked up at me. She wore glasses. I always remembered her bright brown eyes. She was the town's librarian. She looked at me, meeting my eyes.

"I know you," she said, standing up. "How do I know you? I know you. I know! I know you... Who are you?"

I told her my name. She looked up to the sky, trying to remember, then looked down at me with her sparkling eyes.

"The reader! That is what I called you. I remember you. You used to come in all the time, two or three times a week. You had some excellent book choices." She gently grabbed my arm and led me away from the other women. "They don't like hearing about the past. It makes them sad. I? I revel in it. Brings me warmth on these endlessly cold days."

I smiled down at her. I don't remember her being so short. I suppose hunger and the Cold can shrink a person. Her hair was always done; she liked to switch from braids to a short afro. Now, she had her hair in a ponytail. She wore bright clothes even on rainy days.

"I would have gathered that a woman who is inside would have more weight on her." She put her fingers through the sleeves of my coat to feel my skin and held on to my wrist. I leaned in closer to her, and she kissed my forehead.

"I haven't read a book in a while, only the Bible," I said, taking the Bible out of my coat pocket. She smiled.

"The library is closed. They forced me out, and because I never married, I found myself out here with the Fighters."

"The Fighters?"

“Yes! That’s what I call us. We are fighting the Cold! And we will win.” She leaned into me. She radiated warmth.

“How are you fighting the Cold?” I asked.

“By living! But the Cold will take me sooner or later, it begs to do so, but until then, I choose to live for a bit longer.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t your fault. This Cold? It’s greed personified. Men will get hungrier, women will disappear, but at least I can do it on my terms.”

A woman close to the fire started coughing. She shivered and fell to the ground. The other women lifted her.

“It shouldn’t be this way,” I said, looking at the woman stumble to get back on her feet. The other women held her up, and they continued to hum.

The Librarian adjusted her glasses and stared up at me.

“You must eat and get your strength back up. I feel like you have so much to do still.”

“It’s so hard to eat. I’m so hungry,” I declared.

“You have the best meal at home. Now go. Continue your walk. It will only get colder out here,” She laughed and turned back to her friends. I wanted to chat with her more; it was the first conversation I’d had with a woman in a while.

I arrived at the bridge. The water underneath was frozen. The icicles hung from the bridge, and everything was silent. I walked under the bridge, and a chill went through my body as I stepped onto the frozen water. I could see the water moving underneath, the bubbles building up.

Once, this water had been warm in the summertime.

Families gathered by the water, the men grilled and made plates for the whole family, the women gossiped and let the sun settle over them, and the kids played in the water until the sun said goodnight.

There was once life that lived in this water, but all the fish went to the surface and gathered on the land. Nothing survived in the Cold. The water remained still, stuck. I touched the frozen layer, and my fingers burned from the cold.

I walked further and further away from land until I was in the middle of the frozen lake. The air was crisp and windy. It surrounded me, sending a shiver throughout my body. The ground started to crack from underneath me; I attempted to walk back as quickly and carefully as I could, but before I could continue towards the bridge, the ice gave way.

The water met my body like a thousand knives. It pierced my skin, raced up my nose, and held me down. I couldn't get a good grasp of the frozen floor above me. My hands were too cold. My body wanted the water to take it, to kill me. It had given up on me in so many ways, but this way hurt the most. It was telling my brain to stop my heart from pumping; it was telling my lungs to fill up with this ice-cold water. It was telling me to let go. The water started vibrating, and I could hear the speaker beginning its announcement:

YOU MUST SERVE YOUR HUSBAND, OR HE WILL EAT YOU. YOU MUST SERVE HIM AND BE GLAD.

I screamed, and no one could hear me; nobody could do anything for me. It was dinner time, and the husbands were home with their black, matted eyes and their greedy smiles, waiting for their wives to feed them. The wives sat there as the husbands ate, and they were getting smaller and smaller. The women out in the streets continued to fight with the Cold.

I looked up at the surface one more time before the cold water made it impossible for me to do so.

I prayed a silent prayer that even if this were the end, my body would show up on the surface. “God, let my body be found!”

They hummed, and so I listened.

Their presence gave me warmth.

“And the Cold tried to take you, but it wasn’t your time,” an older woman said, smiling at me. She sat on the other side of the fire, warming her hands. She repeated it a few more times, then she got up.

She came back with the Librarian.

“You are awake. Very good!”

“And the Cold tried to take you, but it wasn’t your time.”

“Very true, Liza. It wasn’t her time,” the Librarian said, leading the older woman to the fire.

“Thank you,” I said, sitting up. My body felt weighted.

“You must get home and eat. That is what you must do,”

“There is no food at home unless he lets me eat, and even then, there isn’t enough.”

“Your meal has been at home; you need to eat it. Your body begs for it.” She replied with a knowing smile.

She stood up and gave me her hand. She wrapped the blanket tightly around me as she led me home. She put her body against mine and held me up. She walked as far as she could, noting that she didn’t like being in the neighborhood. The cars were back on the streets.

I walked into the house, and it was cold inside. I turned on the heater and headed upstairs. My body was tired. I changed out of my wet clothes and got straight into bed. I settled into the blanket, trapping the heat inside with me, and closed my eyes.

I could hear the front door swing open and him running upstairs as fast as he could. He threw a bag of groceries on the bed.

“I’m hungry,” he announced, his eyes black.

I looked at the groceries on the bed, and I looked back at him. I nodded my head and grabbed the food.

He sat at the table the whole time, banging on the table. I could hear him grunt and move around impatiently. I prayed before going to the dining room, asking God to forgive me.

I passed by him, rubbing my hand over his shoulder. His skin was cold. I sat down at the other end of the table with the plate. I looked down at the plate in front of me and could smell the hot food.

I started eating.

I didn’t want to look up at him, but I could feel his eyes on me, watching my every move. He sat there silently watching me eat. I knew I had to look at him. He snarled at me, angry and in disbelief. The man I once knew had become something feral. But how could I say I ever knew this man? How could someone who claimed to love me want me to disappear?

I could feel my body grasping the food; every bite felt like nourishment that my body craved. I could feel each chew, I could feel my feet on the ground, and my kinky hair touching my ears. I lifted my arms to stretch them, and I kicked my feet under the table.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread.

I was able to finish my plate before the table was flipped over to the other side of the room. He raced towards me. I was still sitting in the chair.

“You must serve me!” he yelled, licking his lips, and the ringing in my ears felt strangely good. My body was reacting.

My body.

My body.

My body.

I took my hands and held his face. My thumbs found his eyes and ripped them out of his eye sockets. I had both of his eyes; he fell to the ground screaming. Blind, he looked up in the last place he saw me. His face was dripping with blood. I looked down at his black, cold eyes; the heat from the living room kept me warm.

“You have never seen what you have done to me, so you will never see where I must go,” I said.

I held the eyes for a moment. All the evil was held in these eyes. I placed them in his hands and left.

The Cold did not welcome me as I walked outside. I didn’t know where I was going. Uncertainty was a feeling I knew I must get used to.

A warmth settled inside me. I could hear his cries from down the street, drawing a gathering of people on their porches.

The wives stood behind their hungry husbands as the husbands watched me in disdain.

The eager eyes of the women filled me with comfort.

I hummed.

All I Can Say

Wide Open

Have you ever clenched your mouth so hard?
My jaw would clench up so hard. I thought my teeth would chip, so I stopped talking, but everyone around me just kept talking to me.

My mouth would hurt.

My.

Mouth.

Would.

Hurt.

Nobody seemed to care that my mouth would hurt. They just kept talking to me.

It was a moment of losing. Everyone around was winning. They kept throwing their swords at me. I tried to pick them up, but my mouth would hurt. I couldn't stop clenching. I thought my teeth would chip.

People said I had a nice smile. My gums were healthy, and my teeth looked strong. I tried to speak, but I couldn't get the words out. The words were blocked behind my strong teeth. They just kept on talking to me.

Stop talking to me. Stop giving me your swords. Leave me on this beach where I know I'm going to lose.

My jaw wouldn't let me speak.

How did I become so disconnected from my body?

Why does my mind move faster than my mouth?

Why did my mouth decide not to speak?

They stopped throwing their swords at me. They walked off sadder than I.

All the swords were at my feet. They gave me the weapons to win.

I didn't want to open my mouth.

Stuck Open

Stuck, v, past tense

"Unable to go any farther." mentally unable, physically unable.

In 1885, were people just feeling stuck? Is this a universal feeling?

It wasn't the physical inability of being stuck—*toes digging deeper and deeper into the gray rocky beach.*

It wasn't a temporary feeling of being stuck—*glue in between your fingers.*

It was the feeling. It was being 'mentally unable'. It was being able to fall asleep, only to wake up at 4 in the morning because your mind is stuck in a falsehood that you have determined to be true.

You can't move when you're mentally stuck, and your head is sinking into the pillow at 4 in the morning.

It's sleep paralysis.

The demon stands in your doorway—a black silhouette of a figure unfamiliar to you. It doesn't have a face; it stands in your doorway staring at you. You can't lift your head, and you know you must start praying, but before you do, the demon slithers closer to you.

"Where does the stuckness reside in your body?" the demon asks me. I shake my head to avoid the question.

The question brings me back to the place where I feel the stuckness.

My jaw hurts so much; my mouth doesn't want to be this wide.

My eyes direct themselves up to the ceiling, and I can't seem to make them come down.

I feel it in my neck.

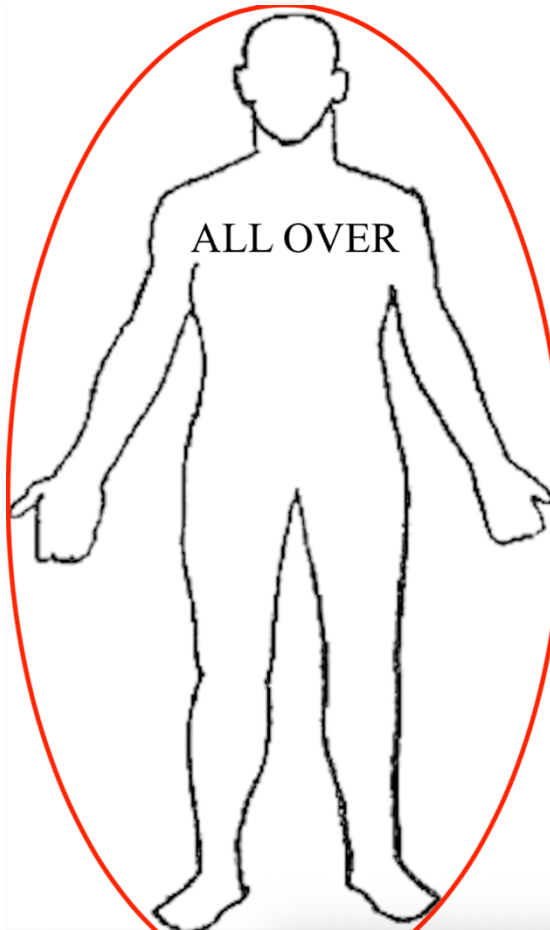
My muscles have never seen the light of relaxation when I speak. They tense before the words come out, during the words, and after.

My brain has already made up its mind on what words I cannot say, and I am still unprepared.

My lungs hurt the most. I grip my chest to catch the air, but it's nowhere to be found. I need to hold on to something so I can catch myself.

I always seem to be able to gather myself afterwards. Those blocks are the most ruthless.

The demon smiles at the revelation. The demon mounts me. Leaving me breathless.



Bare Open

**My thoughts are not in sync; they double.
Is it my fault that I hold on to everything?
I'm bare when I fall asleep. The covers can't hide me.
I dig myself steadily into my fallacious impression of me.
The plume of my body is deep with detachment.
I trust only the arrangement of the cattails, not myself.
My mind mocks me to think this is real comfort.
I lean into disarray and strangeness; this is enough.
Why do I trick myself that this pain will ease the further I get away from myself?**

Feel Open

I yearn to hold my younger self.

I can see her sitting on the steps of her childhood home. She would be making a perfume from the flowers in her yard. Smashing them under a rock as the bees surround her. The 2005 red Taurus wagon is sitting in front of the blue home with white trim.

I take a moment to look at the house that was once a home. The house where I shared a room with my sister. I would wake up to listen to her snores to make sure she was still there. My brother's room was across the hall. I would wait outside his door until he let us in, and we would watch him play his video games. The living room became the bedroom during movie nights and the dining room on Thanksgiving. The dining room was where we would put all our clothes and wait patiently for someone to fold them. We would enter our parents' room, which was our favorite room in the house. When our parents left for work, my siblings and I would fight to see who could get into their bed first. The kitchen—the kitchen was the darkest room in the house, painted a forest green. I would lean against my dad as he made dinner. The house of many memories, the house where we would measure our heights and record them on the wall with crooked lines.

A beautiful day it is; I look back down at her.

She wouldn't notice me coming up to her, too involved in her little world. Her shoes are off; she's wearing shorts and a tank top with intricate patterns. This little girl doesn't know much about what the world will offer her or what it could take from her; she is content with that. She is content with playing outside, perfecting her cartwheels, waiting for her mother to get home so that she can follow her throughout the house. The little girl often wonders how tall she will be. She thinks about whether she will ever straighten her hair like her friends. She thinks about

boys— but that thought leaves her head as soon as it enters. She wonders, in her bed, if she will stutter forever. If this is her fate. She has so much to say, but why is it *so* hard for her to say it? I can look at her all day. I can look at the many bruises and scrapes on her legs from tripping on her Twinkle Toes, the skin picking around her thumbs (something I still haven't grown out of), and the way she rubs her itchy nose. She finally looks up at me. She sets the rock down, scoops up the remnants of the flower in her hands, and walks over to me. She recognizes me in the same way I recognize her. I see past her, and I understand exactly who she is, and she appreciates who she will become because she knows this is who she is supposed to be. She gives me a once-over before letting me smell the flowers. It smells like earth, the dirt coming in contact with small hands, the smell of childhood. I open my arms to her, and I hold her. I hold her head. I smell her head, and the smell of oils and shea butter warms me. She hugs me back and wraps her arms around me. She is so used to tension in her body that a hug feels no different. But this is the first time where the hug feels like an embrace to let go and to breathe. I close my eyes and kiss her head. When I open them, she is no longer there. But I feel her. I feel her arms around me, and I don't want to let her go.

Birthday

“Don’t ruin your hair,” my momma scolded as I ran out the front door. My twin brother, Morris, and his friends were waiting for me on the front steps. I hitched up my dress a little to see the steps. They all looked at my blue and white dress, my white Mary Janes, the blue ribbons floating in front of my face, and snickered. I pinched every one of them.

“Don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a dress, Toni.”

“Cause, I don’t wear dresses.”

It’s true, dresses stayed deep inside my closet. Behind the winter jacket and sturdy jeans, the dresses never moved up. They stayed in the back, collecting dust. My momma put me in this dress, this dress was in her closet, ironed out and perfectly pleated for our birthday. She didn’t even show me the dress until this morning, telling me that she got me a birthday present.

I pleaded not to wear this dress. It was the first day of Summer Meals down at Roosevelt Park. Every kid from the neighborhood would be there. I stomped, I threw shoes down the stairs, cried, I did everything. Momma sat on the couch until I wore myself out. She told me to pick up everything I’d made dirty and meet her in the kitchen so she could do my hair.

The hot comb added to the warmth I was already feeling on this summer day. It was still morning, and my brother hadn’t gotten up yet. I felt a shiver every time she got close to my neck with the hot comb; the kitchen smelled like burned hair and grease. Daddy came into the kitchen a few moments later. He looked at my hair and gave me his proud smile.

“I knew I had a young lady under there.”

Both Momma and Daddy laughed, but I didn’t see what was funny.

“Where you going this early?” Momma asked Daddy. She had her hand positioned over my eyes as she did the front of my hair.

“Got to get some more things for the party. We don’t have ice.”

“Can’t have no ice!” They laughed again, and the joke escaped me once more.

“Why do we even have to have this party?” I asked. Momma got a worn-down rag and eased the comb through it, then put it down.

“To celebrate you and your brother. Do you know what I went through to have both of y’all? Pushed out one, then had to push out another. We’re celebrating.”

“But it’s only going to be older people there?”

“That’s not true, Aunt Ruby and her babies will be here. Her daughters are around your age. And Bobby and his lady have two sons. There will be plenty of youngins’ running around.”

I shook my head. “I don’t like those kids.”

“Aren’t you going to the park later on? Invite some of your friends over,” my dad suggested, leaving the kitchen with his keys dangling from his front belt loop.

Momma put the comb on the stove and turned my chair to face her. She got a few small black rubber bands and started working on a style to add the blue ribbons. When she was done, she kissed my sweaty forehead.

“You will have a good time. Now, go get dressed.”

I walked as slowly as I could to my parents’ room to get the dress. It was on their bed, waiting for me. It took me a while to get it on, so I had to call Momma upstairs to help with the buttons.

“Can I wear the dress closer to the party?”

She shook her head and buttoned me up.

“Heard you almost got a spanking?” Morris said to me, walking towards the park.

“Too old for spankings, Momma said we have to start talking now.”

The other boys, Ty and Little Benji, followed behind. Ty lived two houses down the street from us. He laughed at everything, even when things weren’t funny. He was shorter than me, but promised us that he was going to have his growth spurt this summer because his momma told him so. Little Benji lived in the biggest house, so we always said he had the most money. He was taller and had a nice smile, which I sometimes found myself looking at a bit too long. He had nice white teeth and always carried quarters in his pocket. We walked down the road to the park. The neighborhood was waking up, and people were congregating on their porches to wait out the heat. Miss Pearl let her cat out. She didn’t know her cat was the fighter in the neighborhood; he fought every cat, dog, and raccoon, and went back inside like it was just another day.

“I heard it's the Twins' birthday today!” Miss Pearl said, adjusting her screen door a crack. “Happy Birthday, Twins, and Toni, you look so cute in your dress. Just darling!”

“Thank you, Miss Pearl.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

The boys laughed again as they looked down at my dress and my white Mary Janes. I should have punched them for laughing at me. But I took a deep breath instead and carried on.

We made it to the park. A few families were already there, setting up their spots for the day. The wading pool was getting filled up. I liked the wading pool at Roosevelt Park; it was clean, and I liked the rocks underneath me. I could spend hours in the pool.

The people who set up the Summer Meals were unloading their pickup truck full of meals and water bottles. They wore bright green t-shirts, so we knew who they were.

“Should we get our meals now?” Ty asked, scoping out the scene. It wasn't busy yet, so we could be the first and be able to look into the bags for the chips and cookies we wanted. We all agreed that we should get our meals now and set up our area at one of the picnic tables nearby.

The people smiled at us, and the closer we got, I was able to recognize one of the green shirt people. He was a high school boy who lived across the street from us a few years back. Ricky? Rocky? I don't remember his name, but I know it started with an “R”. His dad was a drunk. Morris and I used to listen to his dad out on their front lawn, screaming and arguing with the house. The house never said anything back, but maybe to him it was cursing him up a storm.

One night, we heard screaming, and Ricky/Rocky (the name will come to me) and his Momma were in the middle of the road as their house started to burn. The smoke surrounded the home as the fire settled from room to room. It took the firefighters hours to get the fire out.

Ricky/Rocky and his Momma were held up at Miss Pearl's house while the cops were looking for his dad. They moved away, and many of the kids in the neighborhood got many whippings for going through the rubble.

Ricky/Rocky recognized us, too. He tried not to make eye contact, which was rude.

I looked at his shirt and through his messy handwriting, his name was there: Randy.

“Randy,” I said under my breath.

“Yeah?” He said, handing my brother and me our bagged meals.

“Nothing. Did anything survive from the fire?”

My brother pinched me so hard that it sent a wave through my body.

“You can’t ask that. That’s why you get soap in your mouth more than I do.”

“I didn’t say anything dirty. Just wondering.”

“Yeah, this,” Randy pulled out a necklace that said his father’s name. “It’s a dog tag. My father’s. Some other stuff was able to get salvaged, too.” We all looked closely at the dog tag.

“What’s it for?” Lil Benji asked, trying to resist the urge to touch it.

“It’s an identification tag for people in the military. It has their name, ID number, blood type, and religion.”

“But that’s not you. That’s your dad,” I said.

Randy put the dog tag back inside his green t-shirt.

“It’s the only thing I got of him. They took him to a big prison for arson. Haven’t seen him since.”

“Arson? That means for starting fires?” Morris asked. Randy nodded his head. He looked behind us, and there was a line. He gave the rest of us our meals and moved us along. We got our waters and went to reclaim our table.

I opened my bag, and I got lightly salted potato chips, an oatmeal cookie, and a ham and cheese sandwich.

“Anyone want to trade?” I asked, holding up my possessions.

“I’ll trade you the oatmeal cookie for my peanut butter,” Ty said.

“Don’t like peanut butter. Any other takers?”

“How about your chips for my BBQ flavor?” Ty insisted. I think he just liked to bargain. The BBQ flavor was the best one.

I threw my chips at him.

“Wait! These say, ‘lightly salted’, I don’t want nothin’ ‘lightly’ anything!”

I grabbed his chips. “Too late. A deal’s a deal.” I opened the bag, and the smell of BBQ brought a smile to my face.

“I’ll trade you the peanut butter cookie for my chocolate chip,” Little Benji offered. Ty handed the cookie over to Little Benji. The sun settled on Little Benji in just the right spot that I could see the brown in his dark eyes.

“Leave me out of it. I’m not trading for nothing,” Morris said, unwrapping his sandwich.

We ate our food, smacking and chewing with our mouths open. The sun hid behind the clouds, and a group of girls from our grade came over with their bagged meals. There were three of them. Cynthia, Pam, and Lorelle. I didn’t spend much time with them. They had many sleepovers, and it used to make me upset because I had never had a sleepover with girls before. My mom said if I made an effort to dress up, maybe I would be invited. They surrounded our table and smiled at the boys before resting their eyes on me.

“Toni in a dress?” Cynthia said. The other girls giggled behind her. Cynthia was the head girl; she stood in the front. She was pretty and had very smooth chocolate skin because her mother doused her in Vaseline every day. Morris said he liked her and that she had nice cheeks. I stared at her cheeks and couldn’t see what was nice about them.

“She’s the birthday girl; she had to dress up,” Little Benji said, looking at me. My eyes melted to the floor. I started to pull at the blue ribbons in my hair, taking them out one by one.

“I like the color on you,” Lorelle said. Lorelle wore blue shorts and a white top with Navy-Blue Converse. She usually wore dresses, but I could tell that they made her uncomfortable in class. She would move around a lot. In these clothes, she looked at peace.

“Yeah, it’s way different than what you usually wear. You actually look like a girl,” Pam said, taking one of my ribbons and pulling it through her fingers. They all laughed. It was a belly laugh. I’m still trying to figure out what the joke was.

I don’t understand what Pam meant by looking like a girl. But that comment made me want to jump over the table and show her what a girl could do.

“Shoo with you all,” was all I could mutter out.

The white in my shoes was very clean, very white. I don’t know how my mom trusted me with these. I put one of my feet on the seat and tightened the strap on the shoes.

“Happy Birthday, Morris,” Cynthia said, redirecting her stare from me. Morris pulled at the neck of his shirt and sputtered out a thank you. “And you too, Toni.”

They walked away whispering and laughing. Lorelle looked back at me, shaking her head.

I could feel the pain of wanting to cry in my throat and my nose. It hurt. Even though I couldn’t hear what those girls were saying, it couldn’t have been nice. They weren’t nice girls.

Why does my mom want me to be friends with mean girls?

I got the rest of my belongings, and before I knew it, I was running home. I could hear Morris call out my name, but he remained seated as I ran through the open park. My eyes were stinging from the tears, and everything became blurry.

I looked down and saw Miss Pearl’s cat on the sidewalk, but it was too late. I tripped over the cat in this stupid blue dress. The cat hissed at me and scratched my face before running away around the side of a house. Nobody was around to see me or help me. I tried to get up, but my knee hurt, and I saw blood running down my left leg onto my dress. Drips of blood fell down my

face, and I knew that that cat did a number on me. I was only two blocks away; I just needed to get up.

I held my head to hold the bleeding in place and limped all the way home. The dress was sticking to the dried blood when I got outside. There were a few cars outside, and I could hear music coming from the backyard. I decided that I needed to get to my room as soon as possible. If I put my chair in front of my door, no one would be able to come in, and the party would have to be cancelled because one-half of the birthday twins wouldn't be in attendance. This was a good idea. I just needed to get up the stairs leading to the house and the stairs going upstairs to my room.

The first set of stairs didn't have a railing for me to hang on to, something that my dad always said he was going to install after falling down the stairs one icy morning. The best way to get up the stairs was to crawl because I knew my body wasn't going to help me in the way it usually does. I bent down, and the blood from my face sprinkled the steps. The music got louder, and my heart started to race the closer I got. Why couldn't anybody see me? The birthday girl?

Where was my brother?

I made it to the top of the stairs and sat down. I needed to take a break. I put my head between my legs.

"You need help?"

I looked down at my feet and saw a pair of Navy-Blue Converse.

Lorelle stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm okay, you can go now," I said, still not lifting my head. If I lifted my head, she would see my face painted with blood coming from both my face and my knee. I didn't need any more embarrassment.

“So, you just going to sit like that?”

“Yes. Until my brother gets back.”

“Might be a while. Cynthia wanted to have some time with your brother. I think they like each other.”

“They do. Which is starting to make sense because my brother is evil, and Cynthia’s the most evil of them all.”

Lorelle laughed, but nothing was funny.

“Match made in Hell,” Lorelle said.

That was funny. I laughed alongside her.

“I fell pretty bad and a cat messed up my face. If you help me, you will see all the blood on me and how dirty I am.”

“That’s fine.”

I lifted my head and finally made eye contact with Lorelle. She didn’t flinch or stare too long. She walked up the stairs and helped me up. I told her I wanted to go to my room. She wrapped her arm around me, and we went up the stairs together. She didn’t hold me tight and asked me every few steps if I was okay. Everyone was outside in the backyard laughing their “belly laughs”.

Lorelle opened my door and looked around my room before setting me on my bed.

“You got a big room. I share a room with my two sisters.”

“It’s not as big as my parents’, but it works for me. Do you mind putting that chair on the door for me?”

Lorelle got my desk chair and steadily leaned it up against the door. She sat on the ground.

“So, your plan is to barricade yourself up here on your birthday?”

“They will cancel it once they find out I’m not coming down.”

“But you got people here to see you,” she said, standing up to look through the window.

More people were showing up, and I could hear Momma’s greeting voice.

“I don’t really like those people. Only my parents.”

“Well, I’m here.”

“I don’t know if I like you. I mean, you’re nicer than those other girls, but you don’t talk to me. Ever.”

Lorelle turned back towards me. She looked at my clothes and the blood. She walked towards the door, moved the chair, and left my room. I didn’t know where she was going. I hope she wasn’t getting Momma. Momma would blame me for the mess and all the hard work she put into my outfit. But she didn’t get Momma, she came back with a face rag from the bathroom and started cleaning my face and knees. I flinched when she got to my knee, and she held it tightly.

“I’ve had to clean my sisters up. The more you squirm, the longer it’s going to take.”

It didn’t take long before she cleaned me up. She showed me the blood-soaked rag.

“Thank you, Lorelle. But I’m still not going downstairs.”

That was when I heard my Momma’s voice calling me downstairs. I could hear her swift footsteps coming up. She opened my door and stood in the doorway, gasping at my dress.

“Oh, Toni. What happened?”

I started to cry as I too looked down at my once-blue dress.

Lorelle sat back down on the floor. Momma scooped me up in her warm arms. The smell of her perfume allowed me to close my eyes as she hushed me. Momma told Lorelle to go downstairs and that the others were down there as well.

She held me for as long as I needed holding.

“I’m sorry, Momma.”

“Now what do you got to be sorry for?”

I got out of her hold and looked down at the blue dress I knew she was proud of.

“I ruined your dress.”

“Oh, baby. Let’s put you in something you want to wear,” Momma helped me take off the dress and threw it in the corner of the room. She touched my face and smiled at me. “Looks like someone is going to have a scar.” I followed her into her bathroom, and she ran the water for me. The water was a nice, comforting temperature. I closed my eyes as she washed my body and tended to my knee and my face.

We went back into my room, and she started laying out my new outfit. It was a green and pink floral top, some shorts, and my white Keds.

“Can I tell you something?” Momma said before leaving my room so I could change.

“You look so beautiful.”

I changed into my clothes and looked at myself in the mirror. The scar on my face came from my left eye all the way to my upper lip. I touched it, and it still stung, feeling like a lightning bolt on my face.

I could hear people asking for me. I needed to be downstairs. I raced down the stairs and was welcomed by many faces. The cousins, the aunts and uncles, Miss Pearl (who I need to tell about her dumb cat), my brother, my friends, the girls, Lorelle, and my parents. Daddy gave me a big hug before inspecting my head, giving me a big kiss afterwards.

I found Lorelle during the party, and I hugged her, and she warmly returned the hug.

Momma said it was time for us to gather to sing happy birthday to the twins.

Morris stood next to me as we both eyed the cake.

“Are you okay?” Morris asked.

“Better than you.”

We blew out the candles at the same time.

Like how twins do.

Big Lie

“There she goes, yelling again. Come inside, girls,” Dad said.

Miss Luna was never the same when her son left. Dad told me not to stare, to be nice. But how could I not stare? If she wasn’t screaming and cursing at everyone that passed by, she was sleeping inside with all the windows open. Uncle Johnny said he saw a raccoon slip into the home one evening and come out with a full belly, looking nearly comatose. I didn’t believe Uncle Johnny. He was only a few years older than me but acted grown. The one thing that Uncle Johnny said was: “The older you get, the better the lies slip out of your mouth. Your eyes get better at holding in deceit, and you learn how not to twist your mouth to hold in the truth.” I think grown people get better at pretending. Miss Luna learned it later in life after he ran away.

I remember fragments of Miss Luna’s son, Arthur. He was a big guy. He had wide shoulders and naturally ginger hair. Miss Luna didn’t have ginger hair, nor did her late husband. So, it was strange.

Dad said that Arthur played football and that he was good at it. Football scouts would come to his games just to watch him, the same as the rest of the town. Dad said she watched him play like she made the sun herself. Her pride and joy!

The way he left has always been up for speculation. My best friend, Toni, told me that her mother told her that Arthur committed a crime in the next town over, and the cops kidnapped him in the middle of the night, and the last words Arthur said to his mom were: “I’ll come back. I didn’t do this.”

I retold this story at dinner and the whole table stared at me before bursting into laughter. My little sisters, Tessie and Joanne, laughed a bit later. They were young, and I gave them a look

to shut them right up. My dad, my mom, and Uncle Johnny were already a bit drunk. They gave us apple juice for dinner while they finished a bottle of dark whiskey.

“Lil Mama, if the cops took him, don’t you think there would be police lights lighting up the block?” Dad questioned me.

“Not necessarily. What if they wanted things to be peaceful?” I responded. My mom shook her head. Uncle Johnny covered his mouth with his fork to keep from laughing.

“We black, Lorelle. The cops don’t reward us with peace. They would have the whole neighborhood awake to prove a point,” Uncle Johnny said, stuffing his face. Mom nodded her head in agreement.

Maybe this wasn’t the truth, just another lie.

“The real reason that her son went away was for football. Got a good scholarship and ran off.” Dad said after the laughter died down.

“That’s not what I heard,” Mom said.

“What you hear, darling?”

“I heard that he got a girl pregnant and went off to marry her.”

“No, he was a promising boy. His hair stood as a testament to the light around him,” my dad said. Uncle Johnny, Mom, and Dad both laughed at the hair joke. I couldn’t muster up a laugh even though it was funny. I couldn’t understand how Toni could say something untrue so easily. How was she able to lie and not show the lie on her body?

A few nights later, I heard a wail come from Miss Luna’s house. She was sitting outside and was screaming and wailing.

“Take me, Lord. Just take me before they do!” she kept on hollering. I watched her for what seemed like hours, and she kept on repeating it. I looked back to make sure my sisters were

asleep; I didn't need them awake to hear this. Everyone on the block was too scared to say anything, so we all stayed cooped up in our homes, praying for the agony to end.

I must have been watching for too long because I fell asleep by the window. The sun woke me the next morning with its inviting glow. Looking over at Miss Luna's house, it seemed the night's event hadn't happened. It looked peaceful with the flowers attempting to grow. The grass was a bit on the longer side, but it looked like someone cared enough to do it for her.

I went over to my sister's and nudged them awake; their small bodies reacted with annoyed grunts and shuffling under the blankets. I exited our stuffy room, and the house was quiet. It was summer, and the heat was going to make its rounds, so I wanted to get started on breakfast.

I laid out three bowls. I could hear Tessie and Joanne come down the stairs. They both gave me hugs and sat down at the table, waiting for their bowls of cereal. We only had Cheerios. I sprinkled some sugar and gave them their bowls.

"What are we doing today, Lorelle?" Tessie asked, taking a big bite.

"Ask mom, I'm going to be with Toni."

"Can we come?"

"No." I didn't mean for my tone to be so abrupt. I looked up at them, and they met with smiles.

"That's okay, Rel. I want to go to the movies, anyway," Joanne said. I smiled back and enjoyed my bowl of cereal.

I snuck out of the house before mom, dad, and Uncle Johnny woke up. I turned on some cartoons for the girls and swiftly made my escape.

Toni lived four blocks away, but today we were going to meet at Roosevelt Park. Toni and I became close after her birthday party. She was a good friend, and we were the same size, so we shared clothes. We were meeting at the park, and she said she was going to give me back my yellow baseball tee.

She was already at the park, with her feet in the wading pool. She didn't see me coming, but I could see her making small waves in the cool water. I took my shoes off and sat next to her.

"Hey," Toni said. She had a popsicle in her mouth and handed a wrapped-up one to me. Juice from the popsicle trickled into the water.

"Where is everybody?"

"I don't know, and I don't care." It was only us in the wading pool. Toni stood up and started walking around. I followed her.

"Toni, why did you lie to me about Miss Luna's son?"

"What I say? I don't remember."

"That he committed a crime and was arrested. Mom and Dad told me that wasn't true and laughed me out of dinner."

"That's what Momma told me." Toni shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, that's a lie."

"How you know it's a lie? It could be the truth, and what you heard is the lie."

"Why does everyone lie?"

"Because the truth can be hard. And all adults do is lie and spread the lie like a web. A tangled mess," Toni shook her head. "Why don't we just ask her?"

“My parents won’t let me go on that side of the street, and Miss Luna is never in her right mind. Last night, she was screaming all kinds of things about wanting the Lord to take her.”

“The truth is making her a mess,” Toni said.

We spent most of the day at the park, watching people. The only time we left the park was to go to the corner store, with the change we found around our homes, to share a soda and some chips. A few of the boys came to the park, and we watched them until the sun went down.

“The streetlights are going to be on in a few; I should head home,” I said, gathering myself from the refreshing green grass. Everyone started walking to their home, smelling like the outdoors.

I came home to my parents fighting on the front lawn. They were up close in each other’s faces. Spit was coming from both of their mouths, and I was wondering who was going to hit first. Uncle Johnny was outside too, laughing that loud laugh of his, leaning up against the family car with a beer in his hand.

“Where’s the girls?” I said in a frustrated tone.

“Inside,” Uncle Johnny said, sipping his beer. There was an audience outside, watching the chaos unfold, no one stepping in.

I raced inside the house, hearing Uncle Johnny finally getting in between them. The girls were sitting on the top of the stairs. Joanne was covering her ears, and Tessie was absorbing all this in, like she usually did. When I argued with her, she would mimic our mom’s movements, and it would make me angrier, not at her but at what she was picking up. I didn’t want to see her learn the anger that my mom held inside.

“Y’all okay?” I said, shuffling them upstairs to our room. They nodded their heads and went to their beds. “When they fight like that, don’t listen to it. It’s not for you guys to hear.”

They promised that they wouldn't fight like that in front of us, but this was a promise that they broke many times, adding to their long list of lies. I looked out the window, and Dad and Uncle Johnny were in the car, probably going to the bar. Mom was still in the front, pulling a cigarette out of her back pocket before taking one last glare at the neighborhood before coming inside. We could hear her in the kitchen, angrily banging dishes around, getting ready for dinner.

The sound of the car door woke me up in the middle of the night. Dad came home, loud, waking up the whole house. His boots sent an echo throughout the house. We all knew not to open our door or address him when he was like this. I couldn't hear Uncle Johnny, which meant he decided to continue the party elsewhere.

It had been a week of silence on the block. Mom and Dad were back to normal, kissing each other and acting like nothing ever happened. The girls stuck to me like glue, and Uncle Johnny was well... being Uncle Johnny. He moved at the beginning of Spring, saying he needed a few weeks to get his stuff together, and then he would be out of our hair. He was my mom's younger brother, but she treated him like her oldest child. He was kicked out of Grandma's house because of his ways. Thinking everything is a joke. He slept on the couch to let us know that he wasn't going to be staying long, then one day, after Dad took me and my sisters to go fishing, he was getting himself set up in my room. That was the first time I cried in a long time, and Dad and Mom fought in the kitchen that night as the girls held me.

The block has been quiet because of Miss Luna. We haven't heard from her or her daily and nightly hollers. Her house stood with a peacefulness that unsettled my stomach. I was sitting outside with the girls when Calvin, the neighborhood lawn boy, ran towards my house.

"You've seen Miss Luna? I was supposed to mow her grass, but she's not answering."

Calvin, a year older than me, stood in front of me with his working jeans and a white tee. He used to mow our grass before Uncle Johnny came along, and I would watch him until the last cut. He had vitiligo around his eyes and his shoulders, and maybe other parts of his body, but he hid it. He looked like a piece of art.

“No, haven’t seen or heard from her,” I responded.

Calvin turned back towards Miss Luna’s house. “It’s strange. Even if she was having a bad day, she would at least say hello to me and leave the money in the mailbox.”

“It’s been quiet over there. I’ll come with you to check it out.” I told the girls to stay on the steps as Calvin and I walked over. All her windows were shut, and the curtains were drawn. The closer I got to the house, the more my stomach started to flip.

Calvin walked up the stairs and knocked a few times; every knock got louder.

“See? Nothing.”

“Let’s go around back.” I looked at Tessie and Joanne, and they were in their own world, like always, playing with their dolls.

Calvin, being familiar with the outside of the house, led the way. We walked to the backyard, and I saw a kid’s playset. It was old, and moss and leaves were growing around it.

“Miss Luna didn’t want me to cut close to the playset,” Calvin said, watching me look at the playset.

This was the playset that Arthur played at during the day to the cool evenings. Miss Luna watched him as she pushed him on the swing and waited for him to go down the slide.

Calvin looked through the back door window and started twisting the doorknob.

“Wait—”

“Something’s not right, Lorelle. We should see,” he said, reading my thoughts.

The back door was unlocked, and we went inside. The house was cold and dark inside. We went through the kitchen, and there were many flies and fruit flies. Everything inside the home was covered up with black sheets, and all the pictures were turned over. A smell penetrated my nose, and I almost fell back from the smell. On the dining room table, there were piles of paper and a pen, as if Miss Luna was trying to write something, but the words couldn't come out.

"Miss Luna?" Calvin said, covering up his nose. We were met with no response. Calvin and I were at the bottom of the stairs, and we were greeted by more flies.

"The smell is awful," I said.

"Stay here, then."

"No, I know what we're going to find up there. I want to see it." Calvin nodded his head, and we walked upstairs.

Calvin attempted to open every door like he was afraid of what waited behind it. The sound of his footsteps and the creaking of the floor sent a chill through my body. There was one door that was locked, and I knew that room was once Arthur's. Calvin continued to the end of the hallway, and the smell crept beneath the door and surrounded it.

He opened the door and peered his head around, then he stumbled back, knocking into me.

"What you see?!"

"We need to go get somebody, Lorelle," Calvin said, running down the stairs. I should have followed him. I know I should have, but I needed to see it with my own eyes.

I opened the door wide enough to see Miss Luna in her bed. She was underneath the covers; her sheets stained with blood. I ran down the stairs and through the house, meeting

Calvin in the backyard. He was bent over, throwing up. He came up to me and hugged me, and I cried in his arms.

Calvin sat in front of my house until the ambulance arrived and took Miss Luna's body. Everyone was outside. A few adults came up to Calvin and me and asked us what we saw, but my Mom shooed them away. Even if she weren't there, I wouldn't be able to tell.

Calvin's mom came and walked Calvin home. He waved to me and gave me another hug. There wasn't much for us to say; it was our first time seeing a dead body.

Throughout the night, my Mom or Dad would check in on me. I would act like I'm asleep.

There weren't any arguments; there wasn't much talking at all. Uncle Johnny couldn't even say much but asked how I was doing.

"I want my room back," I said at dinner.

Nobody said anything about it. Uncle Johnny just went back on the couch that night, and I was able to get back to my room. Before going to bed, I would check on my sisters watching to see the rise and fall of their breath under the blanket.

A few weeks passed, and the rumors began about the death of Miss Luna. Many didn't believe the autopsy report that Miss Luna did this to herself. It was hard to believe, but as the news came out about the death of Miss Luna, the truth started to come out as well.

Arthur died on a college trip. He was spending the weekend touring his number one choice college. After a night of partying, some of the guys from the football team took Arthur to a lake. He didn't know how to swim, and he drowned in the lake. They didn't want this to get out, so they said that Arthur disappeared, but Miss Luna knew the truth. She knew that those boys had done something bad to Arthur. The truth wrapped around her so tightly. I know that

feeling of tightness. I get it when I see my parents fight; it is hard to breathe. Miss Luna just couldn't breathe anymore.

We Learn How to Love

Even with time, we don't know how to love.

We know how to recognize.

We remember the good smiles.

The laughter stains the walls and floods out to the streets.

We feel skin.

We touch.

We hug.

We fight because this is, too, important.

We learn how to love.

We are each other's raptures.

The end times begin when we stare into each other's eyes.

This is the truest feeling.

We must learn it.

Cousin

They wanted to get married on the beach.

The only thing they asked of their guests was to attend the wedding without shoes.

They wanted them to feel the sand between their toes, to listen to the couple read their vows while the sun-kissed sand massaged their feet. Many were excited not to wear shoes and to be on the beach. It made people feel young again.

There was one person who didn't like the idea at all.

She scoffed at the very idea.

She read the invitation to see if her eyes were deceiving her. But it was so clear—the rule. She swallowed hard, and it felt like sand in her throat.

She sent the bride-to-be a handwritten letter expressing her displeasure.

Hello Cousin May,

I hope this letter finds you well and that you will consider my position. I was thrilled to receive the wedding invitation in the mail. It came on a rainy day, and I was at home. I like watching the mailman come; it is part of my routine. He comes, puts the mail in the mailbox, and I give him a wave as he smiles back. He is quite attractive. His hair is a bit long, though.

The day that I received your message, I remember feeling awfully bad for the mailman because he had to weather the storm. He had on shorts, which was a peculiar choice considering the rainfall. He was holding his hood up as the wind circled him; it looked as though he was going through his own personal tornado. I knew he could feel my presence, but that day, he didn't look up; he was avoiding the only bit of human interaction that I received.

All of that is beside the point of this letter. I wanted to emphasize how much I needed this invitation. I stay home most of the time now; the world can be scary. If you don't know, I still live in my family home. Staying in my family home became more of an act of necessity than a sanctuary, as a house is "described" to be. When I read the invitation, I was excited to have a reason to leave my home. The invitation was beautiful, the font was perfect, and the stock image of the sand on the bottom was a nice touch. You gave me a reason— something I have not had in a really long time.

Then I read the bottom of the invitation: No Shoes allowed!

I was shocked. I couldn't breathe. I woke up a few moments later on the floor, the invitation lying next to my head. No Shoes? How can you expect me not to wear any shoes? I know we will be in the sand, and wearing no shoes in that environment is welcomed, but I found myself in a state of disagreement. The sand between my toes seems like a nightmare, and then you know how the sand looks on our skin tone— we will look like an ashy mess.

Oh, Cousin, I hope you reconsider the "no shoes" requirement and see how this could completely ruin your beautiful day. If you need any help finding shoes to go with your wedding gown, I'm happy to advise you.

From your dear cousin,

Holland

"I don't remember you ever mentioning a 'Cousin Holland.'" May's fiancé, Wes, said, after reading the letter. May was biting her nails as Wes read the letter—a habit she had as a child.

May read the letter many times. She was going to throw it away and call her mom to uninvite Holland to the wedding. There was already so much stress coming from wedding

planning, and Holland was not going to add to it. May stewed over the letter all day, at how Holland had to set the scene with the mailman, to the dramatics of her fainting. It was all too much.

And who writes letters anymore?

May made the mistake of forgetting to throw the letter away, and when Wes came home from work, he saw it on the kitchen table and asked May what it was about.

“It’s nothing.” May snatched the letter out of Wes’s hands and threw it away. Wes took the letter out of the trash and read it.

He was used to May giving him little information. It was something he grew to understand about her and learned to work around. It took him two years of dating to meet anyone in her family. They were all quiet, just like her, and shielded themselves from anyone getting to know them.

“Then why did you invite her?”

“My mom asked me to. I’m going to uninvite her. She doesn’t even live in this state; her whole family moved to Aliceville, Alabama, when she was younger.”

“That letter is quite interesting.”

“It really isn’t.”

“I think you should write her back.”

“I probably won’t.”

May sat at her desk a few days later. Holland’s letter was sitting in front of her like a threat. She picked up her pen and thought about her handwriting. It wasn’t as beautiful as Holland’s, and it made her think about how she always loved Holland’s handwriting when they

were younger. May would watch Holland write and try to copy her handwriting, but it never looked as polished as hers.

She found herself staring off in the distance and could see her and Holland sitting on the warm cement in front of May's family home, writing their names on the walkway. Their Uncle ****, with long, skinny legs, walked up, casting a shadow over the girls. He always wore a tan outfit that draped over him because it was always a size or two too big. He smiled down at the girls, and they adjusted their sitting positions. He had crooked teeth and wrinkles around his eyes.

"Now whose pretty handwriting is that?"

"That's mine," Holland said, looking down.

"Well, niece, you have some excellent penmanship; you write like an adult."

"Thank you."

He walked past them and disappeared into the home. He always left the house close to midnight after helping May's dad finish off a whole bottle of whiskey.

Even though May's handwriting wasn't good, she pondered the idea of writing to Holland and thought a response was not only necessary but polite.

Dear Cousin Holland,

I see that you still live in your family home. I'm assuming not much has changed with you, only your age. I do hope all is well. I know it's been a while since we last spoke.

I wish we were on better terms and could catch up. We could talk like how we did when we were kids, reminisce. But this is not the reason for this letter; this letter is to address your disapproval of the no-shoe policy for my wedding.

I understand where you are coming from. Asking for this request is slightly unusual, but it isn't something out of the ordinary. We will be at the beach, and it is one of the only public spaces where wearing no shoes is acceptable.

This is my wedding, and I want people to be comfortable. I'm usually not strict, and this is out of character for me, but you will be the only person at the wedding wearing shoes, and it will throw off the whole ambiance of the ceremony.

So, if you can't get with the program, then you do have the option of not attending. I just need a headcount by the end of the month.

PS: If you have any other concerns, here is my phone number. It's quicker that way.

(xxx) xxx-xxxx

Sincerely,

Cousin May

May reread the letter many times. She wanted to sound stern, but not rude, and direct. She mailed the letter that day and continued planning the wedding. That evening after dinner, she found herself biting her nails more than usual, wiping the blood on her clothes as she had as a child. Looking down at her nails, she saw that she had bitten them down to the nail beds. She got into bed that night with her legs up to her chest. Wes couldn't even cuddle her.

"Is everything alright?" Wes said, turning on one of the lamps.

"Yeah."

"You look tense, May. You can tell me."

"I wonder what she is doing right now. That's all."

"Who?"

“Cousin Holland. She is two hours ahead. She might be asleep, or she might be awake, pacing her living room, waiting for my letter.”

“You wrote back to her?”

“I did. She set a trap for me, and I took the bait. How stupid! So stupid.” May held herself tighter. Wes lightly grabbed her arm and turned her towards him.

“Can you...Can you please help me understand what’s going on? What is your relationship with ‘Cousin Holland’?”

“The air quotes aren’t necessary. She’s my cousin, but it’s complicated. And it’s only complicated because I don’t even understand it. We grew up together. Her family lived down the street, and she was an only child. Her parents were strict; they made sure she always dressed nicely and looked clean. We were close, then there was a shift, and we never got back to our old selves.”

Wes knew there was more to the story, but he also knew not to push. May reminded him of a rock, and he just had to keep on chipping at it. He gathered May up in his arms and held her the whole night.

Holland received the letter a few days later. She traced her hands over the letter and smelled it to see if she could smell how May’s house smelled. When Holland wrote the first letter, she looked up May’s house to see where she lived. The house was small, but it looked warm inside. There were flowers in front of the house, and Holland wondered whether May tended to them or just let them grow on their own. May never seemed like the type to take care of flowers; she didn’t have the patience. Of course, Holland was judging May based on how she knew her when they were young, but patience was within; it can be taught, but there will always be personalities that squirm.

She read the letter in her small kitchen and finished it in her bedroom that evening. It was short, but it was packed with so much. Holland found herself laughing underneath her covers when she saw the phone number. She would never call May. She doesn't call anyone. The landline is only there for decoration. Her skin became itchy just from the thought of being on a sandy beach.

Holland woke up the next morning feeling a bit revived. She slipped on her slippers and began her morning routine. It consisted of opening some of the windows in the house to let in fresh air; she locked them every night, a habit she had picked up from her parents. She wrapped herself in layers of clothing, another habit from her parents. She brushed her teeth and washed her face with cold water. She walked down the long hallway, stopping at her parents' room that remained closed, and took a second to breathe. Her whole morning routine ended with a hot cup of tea in her small kitchen.

How would Holland respond to May? She pondered over her tea until it became cold. She looked down and remembered when she and May had a tea party at May's house.

It was a cold day. The forecast called for snow, but when Holland looked out the window, she couldn't see anything. It was just cold. It was after Christmas.

Holland was gifted a tea set. The only person that Holland wanted to share it with was May. She bundled herself up in all her warmest clothes, said goodbye to her parents, and ran down the street to May's. When she arrived at May's house, she shuffled past her aunt and uncle and tripped on the stairs leading to May's room. May was sitting on her bed. Holland gently put the wicker basket that held the tea set on May's desk.

"Do you want to have a tea party, Cousin May?"

May hurried out of her bed to admire the tea set. It was a beautiful blue-and-white China tea set. May observed the tea set and was too scared to touch the precious China. For a moment, May didn't feel worthy of using it.

"It's beautiful, Cousin Holland. But what if we break it?" May asked.

Holland smiled and began taking everything out of the wicker basket.

"We won't. We will drink tea like ladies and gossip until the snow comes down."

They both looked outside. Still no snow.

They waited a while for the tea to cool down, lying on May's bed, staring at the ceiling. Two Black girls daydreamed together.

They enjoyed the silent moments between them; they understood that they both needed these moments, that they offered a comfort not found in the outside world. They knew they'd entered a dreamlike trance when their breathing synced and everything else was still.

May dreamed of the days when her father was sober. He would come into the house, kiss May, her brother, and her mother on their heads, take off his work clothes, and join them in the living room until dinner. There used to be laughter in the home; now there were eggshells everywhere she stepped. She hated it when her father called her name in his slurred speech after his outings with Uncle ****. He would look at her not as a daughter, but as something else.

Holland would watch May from the corner of her eyes, but she also daydreamed. She daydreamed about killing Uncle ****. She dreamed about cutting Uncle ****'s lips off so that smile would no longer be etched into her brain. Those arms- she wanted to cut his arms off as well, every time he asked for a hug. He had a sinister presence that made Holland shudder to her core. She turned towards May to distract her from her thoughts.

"I want to see your brain, May," Holland said. May turned to her and smiled.

“I want to see your brain, too, Holland.” Holland hugged May. “Holland?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you feel yourself getting older?”

“I think so. I have gotten taller!”

“No! I mean, like, can you feel your body getting mature?”

“Puberty. My mom told me about it a few months ago. She told me not to tell you, because that’s a conversation you’re supposed to have with your mom. So don’t tell,” Holland walked to the teapot and put her hand on the side to feel how warm it was. “I think it’s ready.”

“I won’t tell. I promise,” May sat up in her bed. She joined Holland at the table. Holland poured the tea into both teacups. She held her teacup up.

“Cheers!”

They both took a sip of their tea. They needed sugar, as it was too bitter for them.

“Your body is your temple, May,” Holland said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that once puberty starts, you have to take care of your body in certain ways. My mom told me that I will need to wear deodorant, so I don’t smell. I have to be in charge of my baths. I need to put lotion on myself. I have to wear a bra. Not yet, but soon, as my body gets older. You get hair in certain places. It just comes one day, and then, as my mom says, ‘your body is your own, it is fully yours, and you must love it.’ She made it sound beautiful.”

May looked at her own body and smelled her armpits.

“I don’t smell anything yet.”

“That’s good.”

“I don’t think my mom will explain it the same way as your mom. She already says I have to watch how I walk around men and boys. Don’t want me to be ‘fast’. But I’m not trying to be. I don’t even look their way,” May said. She held her mouth shut to keep from talking.

“Stop doing that! You can talk to me.”

May started biting her nails. “What if I never love my body? I’ve seen pictures of what my body could look like. My dad has magazines. I don’t know if I want to be looked at like that.”

“You’ve seen pictures?”

“Yeah, I wanted to stop looking, but I couldn’t. They didn’t have clothes on.”

“I think that’s another way to love your body. I don’t know. But you will find your own way of loving it.”

“My body, my temple.”

“My body, my temple.”

Holland made herself another tea and sat by the window waiting for the mailman for the rest of the day. She found some paper and started writing a letter back to May.

Cousin May,

I wasn’t surprised to receive your letter. After all these years, I still know who you are. Still, I was very ecstatic to get a letter back from you. Can you imagine the thrill I felt when I saw your name on the envelope?

Let me tell you about sand. It clings to your body in places that you don't want it to cling to. It's uncontrollable. It's messy. On your wedding day, do you want to be messy? I value cleanliness, and your rule goes against that important value.

You mentioned that this request is out of character for you but let me remind you that it is very much in character. You lead with timidity, but the message is always so clear— and forceful. You will not budge on your no-shoe rule, so I must either respect it or assume that my invitation is void.

I respect it. I will not be in attendance.

Do you know why I moved? Or has that memory escaped you? Do you remember— after weeks of us not seeing each other— you rode your bike over to my home to see me? Your father had left and never returned. Your mother was a wreck. You came to my house in your pajamas and rang the doorbell. I saw you from my old bedroom. Part of me was excited to see you. I felt my heart grow warm. When I close my eyes, I see that little girl, that version of you. Another part of me felt the sorrow of what was to come when I stepped outside to meet you. You stood there looking at me. Then you looked past me at all the moving boxes and back at me, your eyes full of sadness.

“You’re leaving me, too?” May asked. She brought her hand up to her mouth to bite her nails, then remembered her mother had to bandage them a few nights ago from the damage she had caused.

Holland stepped outside, and the cool air sent a shiver through her body.

“We've got to move, May.”

May didn't remember the last time Holland called her "May" without the cousin in front of it. It felt like a slap. They haven't seen each other in a few weeks. May tried calling, but Holland could only last a few minutes on the phone, and May had to watch on the sidelines as her family fell apart.

Everything was out of control, and May couldn't stop it.

May started crying. The cry came from her chest and bellowed throughout the neighborhood. Holland held her and let May cry.

The girls sat outside and held each other against the cold and the threats of the world.

May let go of Holland and leaned against the house. "Why do you have to move?"

"My parents want to move away from the family," Holland answered, looking down at the ground.

"Why? Can you tell me?"

"May, I don't know how to. One day, I know nothing, and then the next day, I'm forced to remember everything— even the bad stuff. Bad stuff happened to me, May. I told my parents. And even though my mom didn't cry in front of me, I heard her crying. I made my mom cry."

"What happened?"

"My body, my temple."

The girls sat outside for hours until May had to return home. The girls promised to write letters to each other every week. May wanted to spend every moment with Holland. When she walked back to her house, she knew that something had changed between them.

I cried the whole night because I was leaving you when you needed me most. But the more I think about it, the more I believe I needed you, too. I was jealous of you, May. While my parents always told me to be a young lady, you were still allowed to be a child. When you left that day, I was angry at you because you still had that innocence.

When we moved to Aliceville, everything changed. My parents never let me out of their sight; the house was the only thing they could control. We sent a couple of letters back and forth, but I knew much had changed. I sat in the same place I sit today, waiting for your letters, but they never came. It's so awful what distance can do to young souls yearning to be together.

I cannot fully express my gratitude for your invitation. I wish I could celebrate your union with your special person. Does your partner know about me? I bet he doesn't. But that is beside the point; there is too much tied to this return home, and I am simply not ready.

With deep regret,

Cousin Holland.

The letter sat on May's bedside for a week. Unopened. The wedding planning was stressful, and when she received the letter, she felt it wouldn't help with the stress. She put it away in hopes of forgetting it. But the letter was hard to ignore. She dreamed that night of Holland but could only see her as a child. She wondered what Holland looked like now, whether she still dressed the same, and whether she ever grew up.

May opened the letter when she knew that Wes wasn't going to be home. She didn't want him involved in any of this. May knew he wanted to be, and he wanted to support her in this and understand Holland and her relationship. But for Wes to understand their relationship, it would require her to open too much about herself. She read the letter. She ran to the bathroom to throw up.

She sat on the bathroom floor and bit her nails until her fingers felt numb.

May remembered that day, too. It was a memory that even her therapist couldn't get out of her when asked about her childhood. She mentioned her father leaving the house and being raised by a single mother, but that was May could bring up in her sessions. It always felt like a lump in her throat when she wanted to say more. Only Holland knew the impact of that day, and only Holland could see that part of her.

Holland didn't know how much May cried. She cried on her way home, almost running into a parked car. She ran upstairs, past her mom and her brother, and cried into her pillow. She never cried that much. She didn't even cry when she saw her father leave the house with all his belongings. He didn't even say bye to her; he didn't even turn around. Her mother didn't know how to comfort her as she listened to her baby weep.

May remembered sending letters to Holland, and the last letter she sent to her. It was a one-paragraph letter about May starting her period. Holland sent a letter back saying she started hers right after Christmas. Holland ended the letter saying: "Our bodies, our temple."

May grew up, and the distance between her and Holland became insignificant. May made friends with girls older than her and way more experienced. She always felt like she needed to catch up. Her first sexual experience was one that she still shudders about when she thinks of it, maybe because she wasn't ready. When she met Wes, for a moment, she felt like she didn't need to catch her breath.

Wes came home and found May sleeping on the bathroom floor. He didn't wake her up but picked her up and carried her to their bedroom.

The next morning, she woke up and found Wes in bed with her.

"Did you drink last night?" Wes asked. May sat up and checked the time. 12:42 PM.

“Why didn’t you wake me up? I had to call catering to finalize our menu.”

“What happened last night?”

“Wes?” May attempted to give Wes a stern look, but failed when Wes returned it. “No, I didn’t drink last night. Must’ve been something I ate.”

“May. Something is not right, and I need you to tell me, or we can cancel this whole wedding.”

May took a long breath and closed her eyes. She knew that Wes would cancel the wedding. There was so much that a human could take, and he has been patient. She opened her eyes and met Wes’s gaze.

“I think I need to go see her. I think I need to apologize,” May said after telling Wes about everything. She told him about how close she and Holland were, her father’s absence, Holland’s leaving, the reason for Holland’s departure, and the shame and regret for not reaching out to her. She took her time and made sure her mind wasn’t racing. Every detail mattered, every conversation she had with Holland mattered, and every moment she had with Holland mattered. She started tearing up and self-soothed like she did when she was younger. She raised her hand to her mouth to withhold the words, but Wes held her hands. “I was so mad at her.”

“You were young, May.”

“She was, too.”

It was another rainy day. Holland sat on her couch. The mailman came by, smiled, and waved at her. She waved back. She expected him to be as distant as he was the last time it rained. She checked the mail and saw another wedding invitation. She laughed. She heard a knock on

the door. It was a quiet knock. It wasn't as forceful as the Jehovah's Witnesses who walked up and down the street, and the mailman never knocked. She ignored it, but the knock persisted.

"I think you got the wrong house!" Holland yelled, annoyed.

"Cousin Holland?"

It took her a second to open the door. It was silent on the other end, and I knew she was standing there in her home. There was a breathlessness when she finally opened the door. She wore only her robe and slippers. She stared at me for a while, letting the air between us thicken. She looked the same, only older. Her hair was pulled in a tight bun and had those deep brown eyes that made you feel love whenever she looked at you. This was my Cousin Holland.

The day before I was supposed to leave, I called my mom. I was nervous to go. There was a part of me that felt like there was no point in going. We had lived our separate lives for so long that going would stir up too many emotions. The other part of me knew I had to. I wasn't eating, and my fingers hurt all the time.

"Well, I think it's a good idea, May, but do you think it's a good time to go? The wedding is near, and you still have so much to do. Maybe wait until after the honeymoon? I think that's the perfect time. I can even go with you, if you'd like," my mom continued to ramble.

"Mom?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Why didn't you tell me that Cousin Holland was moving?"

I could hear her breathing slowly on the phone.

"I wanted to protect you. I knew that if I told you that Holland was moving, you would have asked me why."

“Because of Uncle ****?”

“Yeah. I remember when you went over there. Everything in my body wanted me to stop you because I was stuck in my own sorrows over your father. You came home and found out what the world could take from you. It could take a childhood.”

“It took it from Holland, too. Mom?”

“Yes, baby?”

“I got to go.”

In the small two-bedroom house, two Black women looked at each other like paintings in a museum. They studied each other. They looked at what the other wore, how each cared for herself. May wore a simple long-sleeved tee and dark-washed jeans. Holland thought she was beautiful. She liked the many earrings climbing up May’s ears— even though they weren’t Holland’s style, and they looked uncomfortable to sleep in; they looked good on May. May sat across from her, with her hand slightly covering her mouth.

Holland had never imagined seeing May inside her house. Her eyes swept the room, searching for anything out of place. Everything looked in order. May barely glanced at the room— she couldn’t take her eyes off her cousin, sitting stiffly across from her. May noticed that even in her composure, Holland was nervous about having someone in the house. She couldn’t quite settle in her chair.

“Did the mailman come by already? I wanted to see what he looked like,” May asked. A slight chuckle escaped her. Holland didn’t respond right away.

“Oh—yes. He made his daily appearance.”

“His *daily* appearance?” Another laugh slipped out.

“What?”

“Nothing. This is...this is weird.”

“Well, you were prepared for the weirdness of it all. I was not,” Holland replied. She took a deep breath and pressed her hands to her face. “I think we are doing this the wrong way— this interaction. You came here for closure, right? You thought that you could face me and everything that you believe you outgrew would slough off you like dead skin. It’s remarkable. Your wedding is a couple of weeks away, and you put in the time and the effort to see me— your cousin Holland? Remarkable.”

“Wait— this is not what this is about.”

“May, you do *not* get to control how this goes.” Holland stood up and walked to the kitchen, leaving May behind. May glanced at the front door, but when she stood, a flood of nausea overtook her. She ran down the only hallway in the house, and with her luck, the first door was the bathroom. Everything she ate came out of her.

When she returned, Holland was seated again. Steam rose gently from the table. The tea set sat between them.

“Are you okay?” Holland asked.

May sat back down and nodded her head. She took a few deep breaths. Holland poured both of them some tea and walked over to May to hand it to her.

“I’m sorry for disrupting your peace, Holland,” May said, taking a sip of the warm tea.

“I haven’t had peace in a long time,” Holland said. “Have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Had peace, May?”

May shook her head without feeling the need to. She couldn't stop shaking her head, and when she did, Holland was shaking her head too, in sync.

They lifted their cups at the same time.

"Can I tell you something, Holland?"

"Yes, please."

"The last time I had peace was when I was with you. I think that is why I am here. Yes, I have an agenda; we all have one, but I'm not here to outgrow you. I'm here to understand you."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"It's all too much, May. It is all too much. Even when my parents moved us away, it was supposed to be a new start, but it was my nightmare. Then you come here, with your ring and your fancy life, and I'm so proud of you—" Holland shook her head and pointed to the tea set. "This is not the original tea set. Uncle **** destroyed the other one. It was the only reason why I told what happened to me because my mother asked me why I never used it."

May shuffled in her chair and went to set the tea down. It spilled on the old wooden coffee table. "I'm sorry, I got it."

Holland raced out of her chair and went to the kitchen to clean the spill. She scrubbed the surface for a while. May put her hand on top of Holland's. And they looked at each other, and May could see the water forming in Holland's exhausted eyes.

"I got it, Cousin Holland."

Holland sat back in her chair, and May put the damp rag away, and they sat in silence for a while. It wasn't the same silence as before. There wasn't any exploration of each other and

trying to figure each other out. It was a silence that was preserved for a long time— a silence that radiated warmth even on the coldest of days.

I thought I knew who May was. I envied her childlike behavior when we were younger, but I always wanted to be in proximity to it. She sat in my home as a grown adult. A grown adult who has seen things and has been to many places. I have not. When I try to leave the house, there is a pull that keeps me inside and reminds me that it is safer here. I've locked my parents' room to escape that voice, but it is overwhelming and lonely.

“May, what is the beach like?”

#1234

I found out I was pregnant on the hottest day of the year in Portland, Oregon.

We had no AC in the car. I remember being stuck in traffic with your father, passing a McDonald's billboard, and throwing up at the sight of their disgusting burger.

I'd been nauseous that whole day, but I thought it was just the heat. I was sticky and nauseous, and your father wanted to go to a lake and get drunk with our friends.

But we weren't the only ones trying to leave Portland.

The trip to the lake was typically thirty minutes, but we sat in the same spot for what seemed like thirty minutes. I threw up the entire time while your father looked for the closest exit.

We stopped at a gas station. Your father waited in the car.

I knew your dad was anxious, but he never showed it. But I could always tell from the way he gripped the steering wheel. I wasn't sure if he was nervous because he thought we might have to turn around and spend the rest of the day in our small, hot apartment or if he cared that I was sick.

He rubbed my back with his index finger in small circular movements, but it didn't help.

When I left the car, I reassured him that some non-drowsy Dramamine would do the trick. He stepped out with me to smoke a joint.

The cashier was a young woman. She smiled when I came in. A fan was pointed directly towards her face, and one of her lashes was peeling off.

"Hey, do you guys have Dramamine?"

She pointed towards where the over-the-counter medicine was, across from the beer.

I grabbed a beer and scanned the shelves for the Dramamine, finding it next to the generic pregnancy tests.

Your father was leaning up against the car. I could see the sweat trickling down his face and on his shoulders.

I picked up a pregnancy test and headed up to the counter.

“You guys have a bathroom?” I asked, setting down the beer, pregnancy test, and Dramamine.

“The code is pound 1234.”

“Not very creative.”

“They will never get it.”

We laughed.

I paid for my stuff and went to the bathroom. It was dimly lit and smelled like Glade plugins.

I opened the box and looked at it in disgust.

It wasn’t the first time I took a pregnancy test with your father.

We waited in my kitchen—what would later become *our* kitchen— with boxed wine between us as we waited for the negative result.

Your father told me to take two tests, saying the first one could be a false negative.

I looked at him to figure out whether this was something he had done before.

“I saw it on a show,” he responded, already knowing what I was thinking.

I didn’t know your father that well at that time. We bonded over drinks and casual sex, but then he started to make me laugh, and his kisses began to feel like care.

We finished that boxed wine that night and fell asleep on the couch, with his arms wrapped tightly around me, so I didn't fall during the night.

When the test showed a positive, I knew I had to take another one.

Positive, again.

I wrapped the tests in toilet paper, slid them into my back pocket, and left the bathroom quickly.

The cashier looked me over as I walked out.

"Good luck," she said.

I handed the beer to your father when we got back to the car.

"What took you so long?"

"Had to use the bathroom?"

"Oh, okay. You feeling better?"

"Yeah, I think I just needed to get out of the car."

He opened the can, took a long sip, then offered it to me. I shook my head.

"No?"

"Not right now, still want to settle my stomach."

"Alright, we're almost there. They said they are already firing up the grill. Sorry, the drive's taking so long."

"It's okay. I don't mind it."

He rested his hand on my thigh and left it there the rest of the drive.

It started to cool. We watched the sunset in silence.

Your father was between my legs while I massaged his head. Everyone was in their own orbit, and we stayed in ours. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the tests.

I handed it to him.

He unwrapped them, and it took him a moment to turn and look at me, but when he did, he kissed me on my forehead.

I put my finger up to my lips, telling him not to say anything— not yet.

It was too soon, and you weren't part of our plan.

We drove home silently.

You were born on Thanksgiving.

A holiday your father and I never cared to celebrate—until you gave us a reason. I was excited to have you come, but you were making me uncomfortable. It felt like you had taken over my body, and I was ready to have it back.

They don't tell you how much a mother's body gives to their child during pregnancy. It felt like every movement I made was a movement for you. Every thought I had was a thought of you. You had my body for a moment. I watched you grow inside of me, and I would rub my stomach, just to feel you.

I thought maybe, once you were here, things would settle. That your father and I would get back on track.

Your father was nervous. He never told me, but he would disappear for days and come back acting as if nothing had happened.

I used to get annoyed. I used to scream, wait up for him, but it was causing me stress, and if it was causing me stress, I knew it was causing you stress as well. I had to learn where to put my energy.

The day that you were born, we couldn't reach your father.

I did it alone.

Your grandmother was there, soothing me, rubbing my head.

When they were finally able to reach your father, he wasn't at his friend's house; he had gone to the lake to clear his head.

He came into the room quietly.

I couldn't sleep—every movement you made pulled me asleep. I had to remember that you weren't inside me anymore. But you were still connected to me.

I watched him as he looked at you, and I knew then that I had to protect you from him in ways I didn't fully understand.

"She looks like you," he whispered to me.

He finally looked at me, and I could feel the heat rise in my chest. You started to move around, you whimpered. I wondered if you could feel the heat inside me.

"You missed it. You have missed it all."

"I know, I'm sorry. This has been a lot for me. But I'm here now."

"You don't think it has been a lot for me either? I can't just leave. This baby was inside me; I had to come to terms with all of this!"

You moved a bit more when I said this. Your father sat next to me, trying to get close.

I watched you as you slept, and I could still feel the line that connected us the whole time we were in the hospital.

We didn't know what to name you. We hadn't even thought about it.

I watched TV and read many books, looking for something that felt right.

My mother would call occasionally, always asking the same thing:

“Name her yet?”

You grew quickly.

I didn’t always know how to comfort you. I wanted to put you back inside me sometimes; that was the truest comfort that I could give you. Sometimes I would slip my index finger into your tiny hand and wait for you to hold it.

I wanted you to recognize my touch.

It was a cold winter.

Your father wasn’t finding much work, and I wasn’t ready to go back to work. I wanted to be around you, even though I didn’t know how.

The heater in the apartment broke. We spent many evenings pulling our bed out of the bedroom so we could feel the heat from the oven to keep you warm.

Everything felt unstable, and I didn’t want you to feel it. Your father stayed home more, but he didn’t help much. He rubbed your stomach when you were about to cry, but he never picked you up unless I asked him to, and I didn’t ask him often.

One night, as we were getting ready for bed, I went to check on you.

Your body was cold.

I told your father that we couldn’t stay here anymore.

“We don’t have the money to stay in a hotel,” he said, making the bed on the hardwood floor.

“I’ll call the landlord again.”

“He’ll say he will fix it but will never get around to it. What if I get us one of those heated blankets?”

“This isn’t a way to live.”

I packed a bag for you and me.

Your father decided to stay, saying that I was overreacting.

We took the bus to my mother’s. I held you close, wanting you to feel my heartbeat— like it was only beating for you.

We arrived at my mother’s, and the porch light was flickering, but I could see the glow of the TV through the living room window.

I knocked a few times. The TV paused.

I could hear my mother groan as she got up from the couch. She pulled one of the blinds to the side, and I waved.

We stayed in my old bedroom.

My mother turned up the heat and let us alone for the night.

It was my first time feeling comfortable unwrapping you, and I was able to finally look at your body and not rush to cover you again. Your complexion was as dark as mine. I could feel the warmth returning to you.

You opened your eyes and looked at me.

You have the most beautiful brown eyes, deep, dark, and steady.

You reached for my finger.

The next morning, you were still asleep. I didn’t want to wake you. It looked like you were finally getting real rest.

I left the door open and joined my mother in the kitchen.

She was putting powders and fruits into the blender. She didn’t turn around to look at me.

“You got to drink one of these protein shakes once or twice a day.”

The blender roared. For a second, I thought it might wake you, but I didn’t hear your cry. My mother took a long chug off the greyish-looking drink, made a face, and offered me the rest. “It’s disgusting, but it’s good for you.”

“I’ll pass,” I said.

“How do you expect to lose the baby weight?” She looked me up and down.

She held out the glass again.

“Not my biggest concern right now,” I said, sitting down at the round table that I sat in every morning before school. Those mornings, I would watch my mother scramble to get everything that she needed for the day. She always lost something and was terribly stressed in the mornings. I knew not to help her or move from the table, or she would snap at me.

The sounds of her cursing and things being thrown and tossed around the house always left me numb.

It made me hate mornings.

When I was old enough to walk myself to school, I would try to leave before she even woke up, standing around the school parking lot waiting for the doors to open.

She was calmer now. It was that retirement glow, where boredom turned into something like peace. The only stress now was her aspiration to quit smoking.

When I was in labor with you, I could smell the nicotine gum on her breath as she rubbed my back. The chewing got more intense the closer you came into the world.

My mother poured the rest of the protein shake down the drain.

“How’s babygirl?” she asked, nodding toward my room.

“Sleep. So, she’s good.”

“You finally leave him? For good? He always smelled musty. Not like a good must, not the must that attracts the opposite sex. He smelled like the must that deterred most women, not you, though. Were you able to finally smell the must?”

I took a deep breath before answering her. If I didn’t, I knew my remark would be one that would have left us trying to figure out where to stay next.

“I had to do what was best for her,” I said, pleased with my response.

My mom laughed a bit.

“You can say he’s musty. Now that you’re not with him and she’s too young to understand you’re talking shit about her father.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

She joined me at the table, sitting across from me.

“I did it all the time with your father, but then one day, I looked down at you when I was talking my shit to my best friend, Lolo, and I could see you understanding my shit-talking. Your dad is a piece-of-shit, but I wanted you to figure it out on your own, not because I told you he was.”

“I thought—” taking another deep breath. A few tears fell, and I caught them before they hit the table.

“That it wouldn’t happen to you? Sometimes the further you try to run from something, the closer it gets. You’ll be alright.”

You started crying in my old bedroom.

It was as if you knew that I needed to exit this conversation. I quickly walked into the room, and you were opening your eyes. I leaned over you, and you stopped crying, reaching out for me. Picking you up, I could feel your weight—solid, real.

I carried you around the room, showing you things, explaining them as you could understand.

You always looked like you were taking everything in, even at your young age. You absorbed everything, and everything was new to you. Nothing else in the world matters more than teaching you these things.

I carried you out of the room to start feeding you.

My mother was in the living room watching Divorce Court. Her eyes lit up when she saw you.

She put her arms out to hold you, and she gathered you close to her breasts. I've never seen her so affectionate.

I left, leaving you two alone.

There was one thing that I wanted to do with you when you were a baby.

I wanted to breastfeed you.

In the hospital, they tried many times to latch you onto me, reassuring me that some babies just don't.

It was painful to see you cry, and I couldn't feed you directly.

I wanted that connection with you.

I made your bottle and handed it to my mom so she could feed you. Right when I handed it off, I got a call.

It was your father.

I walked out the screen door and shut it as quickly as possible so you couldn't feel the cool air.

"Hello?"

I couldn't think of anything to say. The silence between us made me almost drop my phone. Your father's voice was scratchy, like he had just woken up. He had been able to sleep.

There wasn't much for me to say, so I hung up the phone before he could say anything else.

I walked back into the warm house. You were asleep in my mother's arms.

"You have a cigarette?" I asked, quietly.

She pulled out a pack of unopened cigarettes.

"My just-in-case pack. Still not smoking," she pointed to a lighter sitting on the coffee table, next to her vanilla candle.

I grabbed it and went out the front door.

The neighborhood was quiet. It has always been quiet— even when my house wasn't. My father and my mother used to fight, and I would step out of the house. It would feel like I couldn't hear them anymore.

I was met with a quietness that I much needed. I walked the same path I used to walk as a kid during those fights.

The sun tried to show its face, but the clouds won. I should have gotten a bigger jacket, but the cigarette kept me distracted.

I walked a few blocks until I ended up at the neighborhood corner store.

It was across the street from the elementary school I went to. The windows were covered, but the open sign glowed. I walked through the door and remembered the welcoming ding.

The man I used to see every week when my mother gave me money was sitting in front of the store. He didn't look at me, but I remembered his eyes—light hazel, kind—they complemented his skin.

I picked up some of my favorite candy from when I was younger: Red Fanta and Doritos.

I walked up to the man, and he finally looked up at me.

He was older and much slower than he used to be when chasing kids out of the store who used to pack their schoolbags with snacks and run out. He would chase them down the block and come back with their bookbags. Parents came to the store many times to retrieve their children's bags, and he would say, "Your child is not allowed in this store." His accent was reminiscent of his home country; it was thick, but it was clear.

I never stole; I wouldn't even entertain the thought of going inside if I knew I didn't have money. I was scared of my mom, and I didn't want to find out what the repercussions were if she had to come and get my bookbag.

He didn't have to scan any of the snacks; he remembered the price, or he just came up with a random price.

"I remember you," he whispered.

"I remember you, too."

"What do you remember?" he asked. I handed him the cash.

"I remember you letting me take a Red Fanta home after school when I was short a few cents. You said, 'Only because you're a good girl.' You gave me grace."

He smiled, showing his gums.

His eyes sparkled.

“That’s how I want to be remembered.”

On the walk home, I checked my phone.

Your father called twice, two minutes apart, then gave up.

He was quick to give up. I hope you don’t have that trait.

I don’t say this to speak badly of your father. You are grown now, and you know who your father is. I never wanted you to know the inner workings of our relationship and pass judgment on either of us because we are the only parents you've got.

Your father loved you, in his own quiet way.

And I hope you remember that.

When I came home, you were awake. You looked at me and smiled.

My mother was still in the living room, watching a new episode of Divorce Court.

“Cold?” She asked, turning down the TV.

I kissed her forehead as I passed.

I picked you up in my arms and held you tight against me.

“Not too bad.”

My mom looked outside. I wasn’t sure if she believed me. But even if it was cold outside. I forgot to feel it.

“Name her yet?”

I pulled you away from me.

You had one of my braids wrapped around your small fingers. You are so beautiful, and you are mine.

“Grace.”

Venomous

Your fingers go numb after you touch it. Maybe your heart races from the unfamiliar feeling. It starts in your pointer finger, the finger your parents scold you for using. You use your thumb to scratch your numb finger, maybe to spark some feeling through it, but the feeling and lack of feeling override the relief you beg to believe. How can you feel and not feel at the same time?

The feeling travels from your pointer fingers to the rest of your fingers and up your arms. You itch your elbows, you rub your arms, you wish your nails were longer. You wish your nails didn't chip so easily; you were supposed to look up how to retain nail growth. Keratin? But like everything, everything that you found interesting, everything you wanted to discover slips out of your mind as unimportant. You remember that doesn't matter right now. The numbness crawls up to your neck, and you swallow more. Your tongue and mouth are dry, and swallowing starts to hurt. It feels like a nail filer. *Nails.*

You rub your neck aggressively to find some kind of comfort.

Your eyes sting, they are dry, they are watery, they sting, you want to rip them out. You don't want to see everything around you; you want darkness, blackness. You want to close your eyes and imagine something better, like going to the zoo, but then you remember the last time you went to the zoo and how sad you were for the animals trapped in there. You are those animals. The room that you are in— a small room, twin-sized bed, a closet, clothes scattered on the floor, a mountain of plates— is your cage. Take your eyes out! Take them out, please! Your scalp is on fire. Holy Hell! You itch.

Short nails.

You grab your scalp, pulling your hair to stop the sensation, you don't care if you itch it so hard that your scalp starts to bleed, and the blood trickles down your face. You will be a mess. Your stomach feels empty, and you hold your stomach to ease the feeling of hunger cramps, to attempt to fill the pit. The pain from the cramps alone makes you fall to the ground in a ball. The clothes in your room surround you.

The ball position allows the venom to travel through your body faster. Your feet swell. Your legs tingle. Every part of your body is on fire. The venom doesn't just take over your body; it wants to take over your soul.

Many believe that your soul resides in your body, and that your body acts like a shield, but your soul encompasses you; it moves with you like water. Your soul moves against you, underneath you, above you, on your left, on your right, behind you, in front of you, through you, past you. It is you. The venom wants to seize your soul; it sees you as something to conquer. Your soul fights back; the venom attacks, sending explosions throughout your body. You must scream! You scream! The soul absorbs the scream, using it as ammo.

Your soul reaches for you. Your soul whispers so silently that only you can hear:

"Love me like I'm your only destination."

It can kill you to try to take on something that isn't meant for you. Your body rejects it, but you ignore all the warning signs because it is supposed to make you feel good. That's what everyone says. Some people will never know how bad something that is deemed "worthy" to use can take away everything.

You had to learn the hard way, and quickly, too. You had no choice. It felt good at first—this venom. It masked everything that felt bad. It pushed your soul away from you, putting your soul in the backseat. It raged a fire in you, a warmth you have never felt before, and you knew

you wanted to chase it. It positioned you outside yourself. This venom eased everything. All the anxieties, all the feelings you couldn't understand. The venom told you that you were okay, and you believed it. You needed to know that everything was okay, so you consumed this venom more and more.

It is okay.

It is okay.

It is okay.

IT IS OKAY.

You could breathe now, but you didn't realize that your breaths were more staggered. You didn't recognize that the venom was making it hard to breathe. You didn't realize that your body, your soul, were telling you that you were not okay. This venom is a peril to everything. Everyone close to you can see the disintegration. I've seen it. It is easier for everyone around you to keep an arm's length, not because they don't love you. Oh, no, it's never that. They love you so much, they don't know what to do. They watch you chip away; they can hear the silent screams. When the moments of you come out, they embrace it to make that part of you stay forever. They want to pull at your soul to take the front seat, but you are defeated. The venom is louder. The venom wraps you up the same way your mother did, but your mother is right there. That is not your mother!

You watch as your soul fights for you. You didn't realize that you can still fight. You haven't felt this feeling before. As darkness surrounds you, you remember that light exists. You can see it, you can smell it, you can feel it coming for you. How long have you been living in darkness? I want to know. Will you tell me?

Your soul reaches for you, as the venom reaches for your soul. The venom never wanted to care for you; it tried to control you. It feeds on you losing yourself. Your soul doesn't want to fight the venom; it wants to get back to you, but you must reach out for it as well. It is scary. I know. I wish I could make it all go away, a blank slate, but we can't do that. We must go forward. You must go forward. You must reach out. Your soul is right there. Look at it. You let go of your stomach, and you extend your arm.

It's okay to cry.

You watch in silence as your soul holds you. You still can't feel your body, but you know you are shaking. You are scared. You have been scared for a long time; the possession crawls out of your body. You watch it leave your body, and it slithers out of your dark room. You can't feel your eyes, but you know they are heavy. You close them. Your stomach still hurts. You let out a cry so loud. You say to yourself, so honest and true: "It is okay."

The stillness that those words bring shifts the room, and you hear the laughter of everyone around you. You feel the kisses all over your face. They lie down on the ground with you, and you can make out their smiles in the dark. You want to touch them back, but there is some hesitation. You look them all in the eyes, and they look back at you. You close your eyes, and when you open them up again, they are gone.

In Truth of What We Carry:

Take that breath

Take that last breath and plunge.

Take that last breath.

Let her see language for what it is, let her imagine it.

Find her within the interruptions. Within the repetition.

Let her carry this body, her body, and let her carry it the way she knows how.

There is so much wrong when the sea is still.

There is no wrong when the sea is violent.

Ragged edges mold her.

She entered the sea knowing she would be without breath.

She plunged.

Letting the water take her.

It was violent. It was still.

She found comfort in the restrictions. Her lungs trying to find pockets of air.

She surrendered to the sea.

She finds herself in open restraint. She reimagines herself to survive because she is not
solely what she once was.

She can't be.

The Blues

Take me back to when my family was alive. This is my only wish. My only prayer. I dream about us in the kitchen, eating breakfast. My dad was the cook, and I think he simply liked keeping our bellies full. My sister sat next to me finishing her homework while my mom sipped her tea, glancing up at us with love resting in her eyes.

Bring me back.

I don't like to plead, but the only thing that keeps my heart beating is the grief of pleading for them to return. So, I say as politely as I can write, take me back to when my family was alive.

And not rotting in their bedrooms.

The doors to their bedrooms remain locked. I walk past their rooms, and a sense of sadness seeps through under their doors, so I put towels underneath. I don't do this only to soak up the ghastly smells of their decaying bodies, but maybe I can trap their souls in their rooms. I want to keep them with me a little bit longer. I don't want to let them go forever.

The Blues came fast and all at once.

It was a wave that forced everyone underwater, unable to escape. The first case of the Blues I witnessed was in front of my neighbor's home. A few days before my neighbor, Glenn's, death, he complained to my father about feeling ill. My father told us how blue Glenn looked. His skin, fingernails, toenails, and eyes were the color of the blue hour. He said that Glenn didn't look well and told Glen he should go to the hospital, but Glenn was a stubborn man.

Glenn lived alone with his dog, which he won in a bet. The dog followed him everywhere. He was a shabby mid-sized dog, not as white as he should have been. Glenn told us,

because “the previous owners never washed the dog, those fuckers,” a yellow tint was forever on his fur.

Glenn woke up on a cool, crisp autumn morning. He looked at his dog and decided today was a good day to rake the leaves engulfing his home. His dog watched him from the porch as he began his last day on earth. A long, heavy cough that I could hear from my room made Glenn pause, and when he uncovered his mouth, blue blood appeared on his sleeve. The instant look of worry fused on his face as he tried to run inside. He slipped on his first step, hitting his head on the ground, but that wasn’t the thing that killed him. On the ground, he coughed more, staining the steps with his blue blood as he tried to crawl into his home. He knew he wouldn’t make it as the coughs got more violent. His dog came to him and howled as if it could feel Glenn’s pain. When the neighbors finally came outside, Glenn was sprawled out in his blue blood, and his dog lay close, soaked in the blood.

That was just the beginning of the Blues.

I start my morning the same every day. I eat a granola bar and some beef jerky, and I give the dog the same meal. The dog has been with me since the passing of Glenn. He used to sleep in my sister’s room, then went to my parents’ room, and unfortunately, for him, ended up with me. We called the dog “the dog” because we didn’t want to attempt to train the dog in learning a new name.

We found out the name of the dog when we went scavenging in Glenn’s home. We found a vet bill in one of the drawers in the kitchen during one of our weekly searches for supplies.

“Ruby. The dog’s name is Ruby,” my sister, Jade, said, holding up the vet invoice in her blue hand.

“That’s a lovely name,” my mom said, putting a flashlight and some batteries in her pockets.

“Doesn’t look like a ‘Ruby’ to me,” Jade said, “What you think, Dad?”

“Sure,” my dad said, distracted. He pulled some food out of the freezer and inspected the expiration dates.

Jade sighed. She was getting sick. The blue color surpassed her dark complexion. Everyone knew she was dying. My mom wanted her to stay in her room so that she was comfortable, but Jade didn’t want to. She wanted to go on our searches with us. She didn’t want to wither away in bed.

“How about you, Opal?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t like the dog enough to care about their name.

“No, tell me. Tell me what you think. Isn’t it odd that the dog’s name is also named after a gemstone, like us?”

“It’s not that odd, Glenn was quite fond of you girls’ names,” my mom assured.

Jade ignored her and turned to me.

“Write it, Opal. Tell me.”

“Leave your sister alone, Jade,” my dad said.

Jade walked over to me. She was so beautiful. When the Blues started, she decided to cut her hair short. The short afro fit her; the cut made her eyes look bigger, kinder.

“Jade, please continue finding more supplies. It’s getting dark out, love,” my mom said, with a weary smile.

“I want to know what my sister thinks, is that too much to ask?!”

My mom and dad stopped what they were doing and looked at my sister. Tears formed in her eyes.

I grabbed my notepad out of my backpack. I passed the note to Jade.

"I thought the dog was a boy."

Jade laughed and stuffed the note into her back pocket.

It is a rainy day. I don't have the energy to attempt to complete any searches or any tasks. It wouldn't matter if I tried anyway. Lately, finding supplies and food has been scarce. I try not to think about it too much.

Ruby sits and watches me as I walk back and forth. It's quite comforting to have Ruby with me, even though she doesn't like me. She studies me and every move I make. The smell of the bodies doesn't upset Ruby anymore; she's gotten used to it. She used to lie by the doors and sniff and scratch to try to get in. Now the smells have found a place in the home. I've gotten used to the smells too, blind to them.

My daily pacing is interrupted by the loud sound of tools banging in the shed behind our home. Ruby reacts faster than I and runs towards the back of the home. I grab a knife from the kitchen.

I look through the window and see some of the tools scattered on the ground. The sound of the rain becomes louder, and Ruby's growls follow suit. I don't see anyone, but I do see some more stuff stored in the shed outside. I look down at Ruby. She waits for me to open the door. I motion for her to be quiet and to wait for me.

This is not a good idea. I shouldn't open the door. But I need to defend my home and my family.

I open the door. Ruby follows behind me. Crashing sounds grow louder the closer I get. I get to the shed and see a figure foraging through my stuff—my stuff! The figure is wearing a long black raincoat, and the hood is up. They hurriedly look through everything that doesn't belong to them.

I walk closer to them and gesture for Ruby to bark. She lets out a loud bark, shaking the intruder. The intruder looks at me with wide, startled eyes and drops the items they have found useful.

I point my knife at them.

“Ah, shit! Don't need to scare me like that, there's enough stuff in here to go around,” the intruder kneels to pick up the fallen items. “You don't have to wave your knife around either. It's unnecessary.”

The intruder takes his hood off. He glances up at me. He looks like my dad, but with shorter hair. My dad had dreads. I miss his dreads and the smell of the locking gel.

“Cute dog. Does it bite?”

I don't answer.

“Well, tell it— boy or girl?” he pauses, waiting for my answer. I look at him nervously. He smiles at me and stands up. “Boy or girl?”

I take out my notepad and write in big letters.

“Leave.”

“Okay, I'll leave. You must live here. But I want to know, is it a boy or a girl?”

I turn the page.

“Girl.”

“She *seems* friendly, and you don’t talk. That’s a fascinating team,” he says and smirks. He walks past me. “You might want to leave this place soon. There’s nothing here anymore.”

I shake my head. I can never leave.

“My name is Azure.” He exits the shed. Ruby lets out a low growl. I watch him as he walks off my property. I turn around to see what he has taken from the shed, but he has left everything there.

I run inside my home, and I lock everything up. I watch him as he walks down the street. He looks back at me and gives me a wave.

I haven’t seen or heard from Azure, but after meeting him, I had my first dream since losing my family.

My family was there, and we were at the beach enjoying the sun. Jade and I were playing cards while my mother read, and our dad continued barbecuing on the grill. It was a good day.

Jade put the cards down, and she stood up. She stretched, and the sun cast the most perfect glow on her. She reached out her hand and smiled down at me. I took her hand, and she led me into the blue water. Her eyes were fixed on me, and mine stayed fixed on her. I couldn’t see the water, and how unkind it was. The waves were big, and the water wasn’t blue; it was black. There was no sun where the water was.

I tried to pull Jade away from the water, but she only looked at me, her smile steady.

She was strong, and before I knew it, she submerged herself in the water. The waves swallowed her. I screamed and ran back to my parents.

They sat in the same position. I took out my notepad.

Jade needs help!

I shoved the note in both of their faces. They smiled at me. The same smile Jade had.

They got up and went into the ocean.

Letting it take them.

I woke up, and Ruby was by my feet on the couch. My forehead was sweaty; my whole body was.

I walked to the kitchen and searched the cabinets for something to eat. I only had a few bags of beef jerky left and some bottled water. I opened a pack and gave half of it to Ruby, put some water in her bowl as I looked for my map of the neighborhood.

Today is a scavenging day.

The map is underneath some textbooks. It is still important that I learn something, even if it is trigonometry. When the world becomes itself again, I must not fall behind.

I often think about what it would mean for the world to become itself again. I think that would be the day that I finally put my family to rest. But the more the world goes silent, the more I feel I need them with me.

I unfold the map and trace my hand over my dad's handwriting. The map details how to scavenge and stay safe. I remember when he gave me the map.

The house was quiet after my sister's death. There wasn't much joy after her. My mom took it the hardest; she never slept, and I know that wasn't good for her health. We lived on a strict routine: breakfast, clean, read, and survive.

One evening, my dad called my name. I found him by his cough. He was sitting outside on the porch. It was a gorgeous night, the stars were out, and I could hear the crickets playing their tune.

I forgot my notepad upstairs in my room.

"Sit, Opal."

I sat next to him. I looked at him. He was slumped a little bit more than usual. I blamed it on lack of sleep, but there was something else making him tired. His eyes were not the vibrant dark brown that I loved to look at. He carried bags under his eyes, and his skin was pale.

He handed me the map of the neighborhood. We got this map when we first moved into the gated community. It didn't look much like a typical gated community. Every house had its own distinction. Ours was a sequestered corner home, with a wrap-around porch.

"Opal, you will need this. I outlined what you should be looking for when you go out, how long, and what houses are empty. Many of the families left with most of their belongings, but there is some good stuff lying around."

I nodded my head.

My dad crossed out the homes we had already gone through. The biggest note was to only be out for an hour. He saw me staring at that note.

"Only an hour, Opal. You don't know what threats are out there."

I nodded.

"You're a smart girl, Opal. Always have been, always will be."

He kissed my forehead. We sat outside in the silence that I always long for.

My parents died a week later.

They never told me they had the Blues. I figured it was their way of protecting me. But I wish they had told me.

I wish they didn't just lock their bedroom door; the aggressive coughing kept me up at night. I banged on the door for them to let me in, so I could see them one more time. But they never did. Their blood trickled under the door.

I look down at Ruby after examining the map.

Today we are going to hit the Bryants' home.

They were a newly married couple, planning on starting their family, but never did once the Blues came. Doctors came out with many theories about the origin of the Blues; one was that it was contracted through sexual activity. It stuck for a while, couples broke up, and the birth rate decreased significantly. But like all the other theories, this one didn't last, and we never figured it out because all the doctors started throwing up blue blood.

The Bryants' home was seven blocks away. They lived close to the gate. My dad told me not to go too close to the gate; there is more danger out there, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

I set the stopwatch for one hour and began walking over to the Bryants.

The neighborhood stays still in time. Every time I go out, I remember driving through the neighborhood with my mom and Jade, riding around until the song was over. Over time, the sidewalks and streets were overgrown with grass that decided to take root. Nature always seems to win.

I stand in front of the Bryants' home and take my stopwatch out.

I have 45 minutes left.

Ruby is next to me, taking in the environment. I let her smell the front lawn, losing her in the tall grass. I walk up the pathway to the Bryants' home and look around before I open the front door. It is unlocked. It smells like a decaying home. The wood creaks under each step Ruby and I make.

It is a single-level home, so the search should be quick.

Ruby follows closely behind.

I go to the living room first. Searching the drawers, I find a pack of batteries covered by some papers. There isn't much in the living room, so I walk to the dining room.

The family China is encased in a big dark oak cabinet. I can tell others have been through the home. They tore through the home as if a family had never lived there.

Ruby smells the cabinet and looks back at me.

I go over to it, but I can't see anything. I open the cabinet and feel around. My hand lands on a makeshift handle. I pull it up and let my hand feel around, and it is a backpack.

I grab the backpack and set it on the floor.

23 minutes.

Ruby sniffs the backpack and sits back as I inspect it. There is a flashlight, canned foods, seven water bottles, and dried fruits. I hug the backpack, as if my life depends on it, and it does. When feeling the backpack, I feel something heavy in one of the side pockets. I unzip it, and there is a small pistol.

I throw the pistol across the floor. Ruby walks over to it. I smack the side of my leg to get her to come back.

I've never held a gun in my life.

It is small, but it is still dangerous.

Ruby and I look at each other. I crawl over to the gun, carefully pick it up, and put it back in the backpack.

I walk around the home a bit more, looking at photos of the Bryants. They looked so in love, so fresh in a life that they wanted to cultivate together. There are only two rooms; the first room is an office with two desks next to each other. There are papers scattered, the shelves are

open, and the printer is on the floor. Whoever scavenged the home left it a mess, knowing no one would clean it up.

I walk to the other room, and I feel a weight. It is heavy, and it feels familiar. There is also a familiar smell that I recognize. I open the door and see the Bryants on their floor. They do not look like they died from the Blues; there aren't any blue blood stains on the ground, it looks like someone did this.

I walk closer, and Ruby tries to follow, but I instruct her to stay by the door. I look down at their bodies and can see that both of their necks are slashed. I stumble away from them.

Who could do this?

I run out of the house, my bag and the backpack I found trying to weigh me down, but all I know is that I must get home. Ruby runs with me; she is an older dog but runs like she is young. We are almost home when I hear a whistle.

Ruby runs towards the whistle. I try calling her back, but my voice isn't there. It's never there when I need it.

I follow Ruby, and she is standing next to Azure.

I give Ruby a look, telling her to come here. Then I give a stern look at Azure.

"Hey, it's okay," Azure says, putting up his hands.

I take a deep breath, trying to collect myself.

"I saw you running. I was trying to get your attention. You see something?"

I shake my head. I lie.

"You sure? I was watching you. You ran out of that house up there."

Why is he watching me?

I wonder if he's been watching the house, scoping it out.

I know I need to get home. I motion for Ruby to come, and I start walking home.

“Hey, hey, hey! Where are you going?”

I point to my house.

He catches up to me and grabs my arm.

I shove him off.

“I’m sorry. Okay? You are the only person I’ve seen in a while. It’s exciting.”

I give him a quizzical look and take out my notepad.

“Don’t follow me.”

Azure laughs; it is sarcastic.

“Why are you so adamant about being alone?”

I stop.

I’m not alone. I will never be alone.

I continue walking. Azure follows me until I am in front of my driveway.

I shake my head at him.

He steps back from my property. The timer goes off, scaring both Azure and me.

“Is this a safe distance?”

There are no rules anymore, but I am happy to know that he understands public and private property. I shrug my shoulders and go inside.

Days passed, and Azure made it known that he wanted to chat with me. The Mute girl. He set his tent in front of my home; I could see the flashlight from it every night.

I haven’t had to leave the house, only to take Ruby out. Azure leaves his tent early in the morning and doesn’t come back until sunset. I wonder what he does during the day. He usually doesn’t come back with much stuff from his travels.

On a cool morning, I am woken up by Ruby barking at the front door. I look out the window, and it is Azure, shivering. He waves at me.

I grab my notepad and open the door slightly, enough for me to squeeze through. I don't want him to smell the inside of the house. I stand in front of him; he smells like the outside, and his eyes are tired.

"Hey, I know you don't want me up here. It's cold. I was wondering if you had a coat I could borrow?"

I look past him. It is cold, winter must be coming. Since the Blues, the days have all started to mesh. The seasons meant nothing unless they penetrated your skin.

"Let me look," I write on my notepad.

He nods his head and sits on the chair, waiting for me.

The only coat I can find that doesn't smell like rotting bodies is my dad's leather jacket. It is a long leather jacket, and my dad's favorite. It smells like him, and I wrap it around me one more time to feel his hug. I'm sure if it is a good idea to give this jacket to Azure, but I know that my dad would have.

Azure is still waiting for me. He sits there, stoically, looking straight out in the neighborhood. A fog surfaced, and everything was still.

I put the jacket in his lap. He gets up from his seat and inspects the jacket, running his hand on the thick leather.

"Thank you," he says, putting it on. It fits him awkwardly; he isn't my dad. He isn't as big as him, just a boy wearing a man's jacket.

I nod my head.

We stand there watching the fog, trying to see past it.

Azure puts his hand in one of the jacket's pockets and pulls out a bracelet with charms hung from it.

It was Jade's. The sound of it dangling in the air reminds me of her. She never took the bracelet off. I always wondered where it went after her death.

Azure puts the bracelet in my hand before I could even ask for it.

"Whose is it?" He asks, looking into my eyes. I turn away. There is no point in telling him any of this. We will not be close. I can't afford it. "Can we stop this? I know you lost people. I've lost people, too. It's only us, and you won't let me in. I don't even know your name."

I take my notepad out.

"I don't trust you."

"You won't even try. I have accepted that you don't talk. That's fine. I love the silence. Truly. But why must we be alone?"

He moves closer to me. He is looking at me, trying to figure me out. I back away from him. But he is right. I haven't given him anything.

"Opal."

"That's your name? It's pretty."

"Your turn. Where did you come from?"

Azure smiles at the note.

"I'm not from this gated community. I actually lived in the city with my mom and brother before all this happened. But the city was dangerous. I saw a lot, did some things I'm not proud of—" Azure says, shaking his head.

"Did you lose yourself?"

“No.”

“Then you’re okay.”

Azure glances up at me. I can tell he is trying to figure me out.

“You’ve been here the whole time?”

I nod.

“My home.”

“Look, supplies are low in this neighborhood. I know because I leave every day checking the same houses, and there’s nothing. You’re going to have to leave.”

I shake my head.

“We can go together.”

I shake my head.

“The Blues killed everyone it needed to kill. We survived, but we won’t survive here.”

I shake my head.

“Why not?!” Azure shouts, an echo heard throughout the neighborhood.

“My home,” I point at the previous note, clutching Jade’s bracelet in my hand.

Azure shakes his head and walks down the stairs. He zips his tent. I went inside and closed the curtains for the rest of the day.

I woke up in the middle of the night in the cold house. Ruby was next to me, snoring silently. I opened the curtain slightly. Azure’s light was out; he must be asleep. I got up from the couch, making sure not to wake up Ruby. I put on some extra layers and moved around the house to warm myself up. I went to the kitchen, sat down at the table, and peered out the window.

Maybe Azure was right, but how could I leave?

“It’s quite simple, actually. You go out the front door.”

Jade is sitting across from me. She smiles at me when I look at her. I rub my eyes to see if she would disappear. I cannot go crazy. But she is sitting right there. She looks like herself.

Her skin is glowing; she looks warm. She moves from her spot and comes closer to me.

Taking my hand, she lets out a deep breath.

“Hi, Opal.”

I go to get my notepad, but Jade’s warm hand forces me to sit.

“You don’t need your notepad, Opal. Just speak to me. It’s me.”

I open my mouth but then close it again. She doesn’t need my words; she can tell what I am thinking. I look at her, feeling her skin, the smoothness of her arms. She stretches them out for me to feel them, to be close to her.

“Hi, Jade. I’ve missed you,” I think. She smiles at me.

“I’ve missed you, too. I’ve been wanting to visit, to let you know I’m okay. But Opal—I’ve been grieving you too, grieving life.”

“How did you know you were ready?”

“Because *you’re* ready.”

“I’m not.”

“You’ve got to be, Opal. That Azure kid is right. Supplies are low; you and Ruby will not survive much longer if you stay here.”

“I can’t leave you. Leave mom and dad. No, no, no, I can’t.”

I feel my eyes stinging.

“It’s kind of late for a meal,” my dad says, walking into the room. He goes over to the cabinets and looks at how empty they are. He shakes his head. “Opal, baby, you got no food.”

“I know, Dad.”

“Yeah, Dad, you’re not helping. I think she can see she’s in a life-or-death situation,” Jade says, rolling her eyes. She closes all the cabinets. My dad sits at the table with us.

“Life-or-death? How pessimistic,” I counter.

“Your sister is right, Opal. This is not looking good. Have you been using the map? Have you gotten all you could get?”

“Yes! I use the map; there just isn’t much left. I think that Azure kid has been taking a lot more than he needs to.”

“Hmm, yeah, that Azure kid,” my dad says, looking away.

“You don’t trust him?”

“We are just a figment of your imagination, Opal. So whatever you feel, we feel it too,” Jade says.

“I don’t trust him. There, I said it,” my dad said, putting his hands up.

“Why don’t you trust him?”

“Opal, I think you need to trust your gut about him. What does it tell you?”

“I don’t know. He’s the only human I’ve seen since you guys. He’s been out there, seen a lot more than me.”

“You’re smart, and you’re my girl, so you will always take care of yourself and that dog in there,” my dad responds, pointing to the living room.

“Where is mom?”

Jade and my dad look at each other.

“She’s not ready yet. She couldn’t handle leaving you on this earth by yourself.”

“How can I see her?”

“By living,” Jade says.

I blink, and they are gone. The kitchen is cold again.

I walk back to the living room; Ruby is still asleep. I snuggle up in the blankets and fall asleep.

The next day, I wake up to Ruby in my face. She is giving me kisses; she wants to have a good day. I write on the notepad and slide it to Ruby, knowing she couldn't read, but she could understand.

I write: "I saw my family last night."

I look outside, and I can see Azure's silhouette through the thin tent. He is up. Ruby and I get up, and I go to the backpack I found at the Bryants' home. The gun is in there, shiny and glaring back at me. I take a dried fruit packet out and walk outside to the crisp air.

Azure is unzipping the tent when he sees me. I throw the dried fruit to him, and he gives me a big smile and opens it up. I watch him eat the entire packet in less than 30 seconds. I give him a smirk.

"I guess I was hungry," he says, getting out of the tent. I nod.

I take my notepad out and hand him the note.

"When are you leaving?"

"As soon as you agree to come with me."

"What if I don't go?"

"Then we die together. That's kind of romantic in a Shakespearean type of way," he says.

"You read Shakespeare?"

"School ended before we got to it, but I know a bit about the dude."

The dude? I walk up the steps to my house and search through the bookshelf until I find what I was looking for. I throw the book at him, watching him catch it carefully.

“Thanks, I guess, while I’m dying, I can read some Shakespeare.”

“It will help pass the time.”

He laughs, and I can’t help a laugh escape from my mouth.

“So that’s what you sound like, Opal?”

I look down at the ground. The air between us becomes heavy.

I need to change the subject before he asks me about why I don’t talk. I don’t know him well enough, and I have never had to explain it before. Some people understood, and some just didn’t.

Azure knows he is losing me.

“Where is the dog?”

I whistle for Ruby to come out. She is listening from behind the door. Ruby comes and stands next to me, wary of Azure. I nudge her towards him. She sniffs his hand and then lets him pet her. Azure rubs her stomach, and all over her, it is the best rub she’s gotten in a while.

“Her name is Ruby.”

“Hi, Ruby,” he says. “She is a good dog.”

I begin to write a note to him; it is going to be a long one, so I sit on the front steps.

“I don’t know if I should go with you. But I have to do a scavenge, and you said that there wasn’t anything, so we’re going to have to go outside the gate.”

I slide the note to him.

“You want me to come with you?”

I nod and write back to him: *“Yes, I need to know if we can make it.”*

“Okay, let me get my stuff. There’s a place I would like to take you. I haven’t been. It’s not a house, it’s about two miles away, and if we leave now, we will be able to make it before sunset.”

I hadn’t gone that far. What if there are others? What if they are dangerous? Azure looks at me to search for any confidence on my face, but I’m not sure if I have any. I look back at the house and do a quick prayer.

I pack the backpack that I got from the Bryants. I take the gun out and look at it. It is heavy in my hand. I put it back in the backpack and got everything I needed. Before we exit the house, I kneel to Ruby, holding her face, and tell her with my eyes: “We got each other, alright?”

Azure waits outside his tent for me. He is bundled up, wearing my dad’s jacket. I could only see his eyes.

We stand in front of each other. His eyes smiling at me. I had put on some dry mascara. I’m not sure why.

“You ready?”

Azure talks most of the way. It isn’t annoying; it is what is needed. He rambles mostly about living in the city, about his mom, and his younger brother. His mother died first, in their shared bathroom. He found her there the next morning. He tells me he didn’t want his little brother, Noir, to see, so he closed the door and waited until night, and when Noir was asleep, he took her outside for the morning crew to get her.

“How did Noir take it?”

“I never told him. He got sick right after. He passed away in my arms. I laid him out on the streets, and because most of the morning crew had passed away, he sat outside for three days until they got him. Shit was sad.”

“That’s when you left?”

“Yeah, right after they picked him up, I got everything I needed, and I left. I wasn’t sure where I was going, but I needed to leave the city. It was so much harder to leave the city than to come in. Everyone was sick and losing their minds. I sat around at a bus stop, and everyone around had the Blues, but they were still working, still trying to live. I remember sitting next to this young mom; she and her children had the Blues. I sat so close to them. I wanted to get it; I wanted to die right with them. But I never got it. I always wonder why? Don’t you?”

I keep my head down. I thought that after my parents died; it was going to be my turn. I lay in my bed wanting to pass the same way they did. I didn’t eat. Ruby was next to me. But it never got me. I tore through the house, angry, then I just cried.

“It doesn’t make sense, any of it. But at some point, you’ve got to stop trying to make sense out of things and survive,” Azure says.

We walk in silence the rest of the way.

Azure stops in front of a mom and pop’s grocery store. It is dark inside and unusually quiet. Ruby starts to growl. I step away from Azure.

“It’s alright, Opal. Nobody has been around.”

I stare at Azure, who is stepping closer to the store. Something about him is off. His hand is shaky.

I grab my notepad and write: *“This is not safe.”*

Azure laughs.

“Opal, I haven’t seen anyone since I left the city.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You said you needed to scavenge. This is the perfect place to do so. This place has been sitting here, untouched, from what I can see. There could be some good stuff.”

Azure walks closer to me, Ruby growls, and I look around. We are surrounded by forest; anything could be lurking in the trees. I turn around to walk away, and I hear some sounds coming from near the store. I start running and hear a whistle.

“Oh, come on, Opal! You can’t be scared your entire life.”

Ruby and I keep running until we make it in front of the house. There is no one around. Azure didn’t follow me. I run inside and lock everything up. I command Ruby to be quiet because I’m not sure if I’m being followed. I must have been.

Azure was going to set me up.

There are others out there.

I couldn’t sleep.

Azure never came back to the tent at night. Ruby and I sat on patrol, trying to figure out our next move. Azure knew exactly where I lived. But he isn’t going to do anything tonight.

I wake up, and it is still dark. Ruby is still awake at my feet. She is watching outside, a low growl coming from her. I peek through the window, and flashlights are lighting up the house. I counted 7 flashlights before they ran around the house.

I can’t make out any faces, but I know I must hide. I slide down from the couch and hear a knock on the door.

“Opal?”

Azure.

“Opal.”

“Opalllllll.”

“Op-al.”

“Opal.”

“OPAL.”

“oPaL.”

“Opal!”

I don’t recognize their voices. It sounds like they are coming from everywhere. All boys' voices.

“Opal. It’s Azure. I didn’t want to do it this way, Opal. I thought that if I got you away from the house, you wouldn’t see what we must do to it.”

Why? I wanted to shout it, but my voice hid deeper inside me than usual.

“You must be asking ‘why’ right now, huh? It’s survival. You are the only house that we haven’t gone through, and from what I’ve seen from your shed, you got some good shit!” Azure says, laughing, followed by other condescending laughter. They are around my home.

I need Ruby to be quiet, but she can’t stop barking. I know she is scared, so am I, but I must be still. I put my finger over my mouth, and she tries, but she can’t help her nature.

I can hear the window in the kitchen getting broken into. Glass shatters. Ruby runs to the kitchen, and I can hear her growling. There is some shuffling, and then a few more windows break. I need to hide.

The window in the living room breaks around me. I grab the backpack and run towards the stairs.

“Get the dog outside, and find the girl,” Azure says.

“God, what is that smell?”

“Smells like dead bodies.”

“Azure, is this girl okay?”

I run upstairs, not sure where I am going to go. I hadn’t been in my room since my parents’ passing. I open my bedroom door, and my bed is still made. Everything looks the same since I last left it. Time stops in my room. The smell of family permeates my room. It makes me nauseous. I hide underneath my bed, pulling the cover low enough so they can’t see me, but I can see their footsteps.

“It smells worse up here.”

“This girl is crazy. Azure, you didn’t tell us she was crazy.”

“She’s not crazy. Go to each of the rooms; she must be here somewhere.”

I close my eyes, saying a silent prayer.

I open them, and two boys who looked about 15 or 16 years old are smiling down at me. They both reached for me. I scream and start kicking, but they are strong.

They pull me down the stairs. Azure is at the bottom of the stairs. He stares at me with unrecognizable eyes.

The boys drag me through the kitchen, and the rest of the crew is there, going through each cabinet. I look around, trying to find Ruby, but I can’t see her.

The boys push me into the shed.

“You’re going to stay in here while we take a look around, you freak.”

I hear them go through my house. They go through every room, tearing the place apart. I sit against the door and let the moonlight attempt to warm me, and I close my eyes.

“Well, it seems like we are in a little bit of a predicament.”

I open my eyes, and Jade is sitting on the ground in the corner of the shed. She walks over to me. I lean my head on her lap.

“I’m sorry,” I think.

Jade lifts my head so that I am looking at her.

“Why are you sorry?”

“Because I couldn’t protect the home. I let my guard down.”

“Opal, it’s okay. You’ve got to worry about yourself right now. We’re lying up there dead, but you’re alive. Stay alive.”

“Your sister is right,” my dad says. I run to him and hug him. I want to be in his skin for as long as I can. He hugs me back, taking the air from me, leaving me to smell the residue of his loc gel. “Those boys only know harm to survive. You know something better.”

“What do I know?”

“You know you’ve got to be smart.”

“They locked the shed. I don’t know where Ruby is. I don’t know what they’re going to do with your bodies. What if they destroy you?”

“Calm down, baby.”

“Yeah, or you’ll end up like the Bryants,” Jade adds.

The Bryants: They were murdered. Their necks were slashed; it must have been Azure and his crew.

I can't do much tonight. Rest is the only way I am going to get back to my home. I close my eyes and let the night cover me like a blanket.

I wake up to the cold morning chill. It is bright outside; the sun is out, but it isn't offering any warmth. I look out the small, shed window and see a few of the guys from last night. They are all around the same age. All of them are Azure's followers.

I wonder where Ruby is. I hope that she didn't run too far. She is the rock that holds me together.

I look around the backyard. They put their tents up, making themselves at home in my home. I watch them all day. They never check on me. I honestly believe they forgot about me.

Azure knocks on the door of the shed. I peer at him through the small window and sit down, leaning against the door.

"Hey, Opal. I'm sorry to have to do this to you. Your house stinks. I don't know how you could live in that?" "It's an awful thing to let your family rot up there like that. What did you think was going to happen? That they come back?"

I bang on the door.

"I get it, Opal, I do. Your home is beautiful, a family home. I saw some pictures of you guys all together. The smiles were genuine. You guys were happy, settled. Man, Opal, I used to wish for something like that growing up. For a family that looked like they cared. My mom worked a lot to take care of Noir and me. She worked so hard, barely getting by, and when she was home, she slept, trying to recover from her workdays. Opal, you had something special with them. Truly. All of us boys wished we had what you guys had. Maybe that's why we all found each other. Lost souls."

There is a hint of sadness in Azure's voice.

“I know you won’t say anything back. Something must have happened for you to lose your voice. I feel sorry for you, Opal. I really do. And I feel sorry for what I’m going to have to do to you. You see, we really like your house. We’re going to take those bodies out of those rooms and burn them for you. Do what you can't.”

I shake my head. I have to think fast and get out of this shed.

I bet up and see Azure walking into the house. The other boys follow him.

There isn’t any way for me to get out of this shed. The window is too small to get through. Everything is building up inside me. The shed feels smaller.

He is going to win.

He is going to take my house.

He is going to burn my family.

He is going to kill me.

A familiar hum comes from the dark corner of the shed. I look up. She wears her favorite pink dress, her hair in a short afro, and she has her favorite MAC Ruby Woo lipstick. She is colorful, so beautiful. She is my mom.

I don’t have the strength to run to her, even though I want to. There is a light around her that brightens up this dark, depressing shed.

“Mom,” I say out loud.

This is the first time I spoke in years. I need her to hear my voice, to hear my call to her.

She walks over to me and wraps me up in her arms in the only way a mother could. I rest my head in her bosom as she hums. She is warm; her skin feels like the sun is only kissing her, showering her in its glow.

“You have it in you. It’s deep inside, rooted in everything that is you,” my mom whispers so quietly, only for me to hear.

She holds me for what seems like hours, humming me to sleep.

I am woken up by some of the boys outside the shed. They kick my leg.

It is dark outside.

“Get up. It’s time for the burning.”

I follow them outside. They all stand around the decaying bodies. My family doesn’t look recognizable. The only thing identifying them is the clothes they have on.

The boys push me down to the ground. Azure is standing in front of the bodies. The bodies are laid out next to each other. The boys cover their noses.

“Nice for you to join us, Opal, for the burning. This is going to be good for you, I promise,” Azure says, with a sly smile.

The boys put their hands on my shoulders to try to weigh me down.

Azure snaps his fingers, and one of the boys gives him a match. Right when he is about to strike it, I use all my strength to get myself free from the weight of these strangers. Azure dropped the match and yells: “Get her!”

I run towards the house. I run as fast as I can.

The house is trashed. They only did this to hurt me, but I must stay focused.

I run up the stairs towards my room. I can hear the boys coming towards me. They are determined, but I just have to be a little bit more determined than they are. I have to be more so that I could survive.

I have nothing else to lose but myself.

I close the door, locking it. The boys bang and bang. I know they could get in. I just need a few more seconds. I crawl underneath my bed to grab the backpack.

The gun is still in there. It feels lighter in my hands, as if it is made for me.

I hold the gun out.

The boys stand there looking at me as I hold the gun up towards them. I steady my hand. They will not see me shake.

They slowly start to stand down, leaving my room until Azure pops in. He sees me with the gun, and there is a look of evil that almost makes me lose focus. He has a knife in his hand.

“I’m done playing these games with you, Opal.” He lunges towards me, slapping the gun out of my hand.

The other boys fall back as Azure pulls me down to the ground. I struggle for the gun, but Azure is strong. We fight.

He slits my inner leg in the tussle. I yell out in pain as I look down at the red blood covering the carpet. He gets on top of me. I wince in pain as he puts his finger in the deep cut. The knife is at my throat, and he smiles at me. A smile that I want to forget, but I know will stick with me for the rest of my life.

“D-d-d-don’t, Azure,” I say. The words spurt out in the only fashion they know how. It is the reason I decide to hide my voice. But it is also the reason I will live.

Azure looks down at me, trying to process my voice. In the moment that he sees a part of me, I can find his weakness. I pull him off me with all the strength that I can have. I reach for the gun as he tries to pull my legs.

The sound fills the entire bedroom. My ears are ringing. There is no more movement; we are all still.

I open my eyes and see Azure's blood mixed with mine. He lay in front of me, his eyes open.

I crawl over to him and close his eyes.

I hold the gun a bit braver now as I walk down the stairs. The boys are in the front waiting for their leader, who is dead in my bedroom.

They look up at me.

They are young, but they are not innocent. I can see these bodies in survival and know they aren't going to last long, but it isn't going to be me who provides them with their expiration dates.

"Leave."

They run away as fast as their young selves take them.

I sit down on the porch and rub the gun against my temple.

Ruby!

I need to find Ruby.

I need to bring her home to me.

I whistle to her, but there is no movement. She can't have gone far. I look around the neighborhood to think where she could have gone. I go towards neighbor Glenn's house. The front door is slightly open. It is open enough for a dog to step through.

I walk into the main bedroom and find Ruby in her doggy bed. She is awake, shaking. I run up to her and grab her face so she can look at me. She is safe. She licks my hands, and I hug her.

Ruby walks closely by me as I limp back towards the house. I grab many blankets walk to the backyard.

My family is still out there in the cold, dark morning. Sunrise will be here, so I have to do this quickly.

I wrap them all up in the blankets. I bring them inside one by one. They aren't heavy; they are mostly bones.

Ruby follows me back outside as I grab the matchbox.

I lay them back in their beds. I gather the backpack and fill it with whatever is left from the messy scavenge.

Ruby and I go to the front of the home. Taking one more look, I breathe in. It smells good outside; it smells new.

Looking down at Ruby, she licks my hand one more time. I light the match and throw it inside the home. The flame is slow, but it consumes the home all the same.

I look through the windows as the house fills up with smoke.

Ruby and I watch as the blue hour makes love with the red flames.

Poetic Statement

Wasn't quite sure how to write this, and I think it is for many reasons, but the main one is that I want to write it right. What the fuck does that mean? This could be written "perfectly," and I could still find a fault in the perfection because perfection is not a real thing. So instead of focusing on the way I can tell it, I'll just tell it. I went to the Associated Writing Programs Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. The whole trip, I was able to hide. Skate through, undetected, and I love that. I like just being another head in the crowd, to be part of the headcount. But for the last panel I went to, I was up there.

I was speaking about Black people in publishing, even though I don't know anything about publishing, and I don't remember agreeing to being up there. I recognized myself in the way that I thought everyone would recognize me, through the way I talk, through my stutter. Awful way to think, but when you find that one thing that makes you stand apart from the crowd, you think everyone else will only see that. It's not true. I know it's not. I know I'm well loved, and that love is unconditional; it reaches deep. One of the panelists stuttered. It was eerily identical to mine. All in the repetition. Some letters want to be held just a little bit longer in the mouth. I always thought the letters "B, D, and E" just love me the most because they cling to me, they want to stay inside where it is safe. I love those letters as well, but just like a parent, I need to let them out, be part of the world. That's what letters and words are supposed to do. They are supposed to be something, hold weight in this world. So why do my words and certain letters seem so scared? Are they scared about how they will be perceived? Do they know something that I don't? Anyways... This panelist stuttered. When I figured that out, I wanted to hold every word she said to my heart. Even in the crowd, I wanted her to know that at least someone was listening. I looked around to see if anyone had a smile on their face or if they were resisting the

urge to laugh. I looked at the other panelists to see how they would respond, but they listened. We all listened. Then the anxiety crept in. I was supposed to be in the crowd, you hear me?! Oh man, it was an insane moment. And it was also the last panel I went to, the rest of the conference (I still had one more day). I told my Airbnb roommate, Angelica, that I was going to stay and write for the last day of the conference to reflect on my experience. But I did no writing on my last day. Just ordered an expensive seafood boil and stared at the walls. I didn't write because I knew the only writing I had to do was on this experience, and I just couldn't.

After the panel, I walked out of the conference, having no idea where I wanted to go, then I remembered that I do my best thinking with good food inside me. I walked two or three blocks. It was chilly outside, I brought a small coat with me that didn't have deep pockets, and the only part of my body that could not get acquainted with the chill was my hands.

There were so many Black people. I say that because I can go a whole day in Seattle and not see one Black person other than my sister, Jade (who I live with), and that is truly sad. I love seeing my people and being amongst them. Even at the conference, I noticed the panels that featured Black writers and thinkers; I would see the same people, and I would bask in the community that we created.

I found myself in front of Shake Shack and thought this was the best food to reflect with. I took out my notebook to relieve some of the edge of dining by myself, but I couldn't bring myself to write. Maybe it was too fresh—this whole experience. I felt undressed, and I was slowly putting my clothes back on, trying to exist again in the crowd. I wasn't able to finish my meal. I mean, I ate the burger, but I could have saved money if I hadn't gotten the fries. I walked back to the conference, eager to finally write about this, even though I wasn't quite sure how, so I called my mom.

She answered me with much haste. I've noticed she loves hearing about each panel. I call her after to give her the recap. My mom = my journal.

My mom recently told me about two experiences at her job in which customers stuttered. She told me that because of me, her eldest and most amazing daughter, she was able to give them the comfort and care for them to communicate with her. I told her: "You're welcome." We laughed and moved on, not knowing I was going to have a similar experience. In a crowded room, it was just my mother and I. Virtually, but you know what I mean. It's poetic. I told her about the experience and the anxiety I felt. She listened and understood. She seems to always understand. That's my mom. When it was time to get off the phone, she told me this is something I *must* write about...but to let it sit with me first.

I think it tried to sit with me at lunch, but I was too busy gluttonously eating my burger that I couldn't even look up.

It tried walking with me down Charles St., but I put my headphones in to block out the noise.

It tried to sit on the bus with Asia and me as I told her about the experience, but I was tipsy from the best shot of tequila and seven-dollar wine, so my mind was hazy.

It was on the dance floor, but I was in my conference-ready clothes. I couldn't get down like that.

It lay next to me in the bed, but I couldn't feel it because I was having a different conversation with my body, so I didn't have a hangover.

It was a persistent beast. It was me.

I like where I'm at in this writing; there is a climax, a sense of discovery, and faults. Those are some good things to find in writing, but something I seem to be missing in my writing

is me. The “I” is overwhelming (and another letter I stutter frequently on). I like that letter. It’s centering.

I’m not in the crowd anymore.

I’m in my room.

At my desk.

Alone

Letting the letters come out when they’re ready.

I took on this project because I found myself wondering about language and how language interacts with the body. Language has always lived close to my body. Attaching itself even though sometimes I want to run away from it. I will never forget when my stutter was so bad that I told my siblings that I was never going to talk again. We had a small whiteboard, a black dry-erase marker, and it was going to be my form of communication. It only lasted a few sentences because my brother asked why I wanted to do this, and I responded by saying: “because I *won’t* to.” It wasn’t funny to me, but my siblings laughed and told me to cut it out. I figured out the spelling between “won’t” and “want” and carried on talking.

This experience and my experience at the AWP conference solidified why I was doing this project. As much as I tried to evade language and speech, it seems to want me to explore it more, so that is what I decided to do.

Stuttering is a bodily interruption. It is the physical. I feel it every time. But as I started to understand what bodily interruption means, I began to see it in other ways. How does interruption show up in our bodies? Interruption is an interesting term and an important theme in this collection because there will not just be examples of bodily interruption, but interruption of

speech, of identity, silence, and of power. From this collection, I explored that idea. I explored it through a Black girl/woman lens.

Black womanhood is a constant awareness of how the body is perceived. In society, Black women learn from a young age that our bodies are policed, they are watched and controlled. Our bodies hold trauma, joy, curiosity, and pain in a way I could only describe through my writings. Black bodies are always in negotiation with visibility and wanting to live. Our bodies are always up for discernment. We are more than our bodies, but our bodies are lived. It is a journey where we will forget our bodies and forget what we owe our bodies and what our bodies owe us. I wanted to explore different ways that the black body could show up: the Black body, the loving body, the growing body, the detached body, the lonely body, and the overexposed body. But I wanted to add my body as well, so I wrote about the stuttering body and the writing body. By writing the stuttering body and the writing body, I started to understand that I wasn't only facing the body that I live in, but I'm reclaiming language, making it my own, and by doing that, I'm reclaiming my body.

I'm not doing this project to ignore the interruptions in Black women's bodies and my body, but I attempt to honor the pauses and let language be.

I couldn't write this project without being in conversation with writers who also explore the themes of language and body. And there have been many conversations where, after I read their work, I felt like they were in the room with me, asking me, "Do you get it?" Some of those most important writers who have fueled my study and my writing have been Toni Cade Bambara, Claudia Rankine, Giada Scodellaro, and Roxane Gay.

A skill that I wanted to develop in my writing was voice. How does voice influence the story and the themes I want to communicate in my writing? All of the writers mentioned have a

unique voice for their characters, but the writer that moved me the most was Toni Cade Bambara. Her short story collection *Gorilla, My Love* dealt with characters who had strong and distinct voices. Bambara uses the first-person perspective to not only legitimize the voices of either young girls or grown women, but she also uses diction and slang to make these characters come to life on the page. All her characters were strong; they were all Black. But she did not continue the trope of a “strong Black woman/girl,” she made them multifaceted and innocent.

The short story “Gorilla, My Love” was about a young Black girl, called Scout, who learned what betrayal was and what it felt like for her. Her voice was young, and she was seeing the world for what it is. At the end of the story, Scout, upset in the passenger seat of her Granddaddy’s truck, realizes adulthood. She says, “And I’m losin my bearins and don’t even know where to look on the map cause I can’t see for cryin. And Baby Jason cryin too. Cause he is my blood brother and understands that we must stick together or be forever lost, what with grownups playin change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad. And don’t even say sorry.” (Bambara, 20) Throughout the entire story, Scout’s voice was so poignant and rich that it captured me. That’s what I wanted to do with my short story collection: I wanted to explore the richness of language and voice, especially in the Black community, and through a young black girl’s point of view. From this story, that was how I created “Birthday” and “Big Lie”.

In two of my stories, I knew I wanted to echo similar themes of girlhood, and Bambara was my anchor in tapping into those voices. I wrote the two stories from the perspective of young Black girls from the same neighborhood, but had different home life experiences, and how that shaped how they looked at the world or asked for guidance. I wanted the girls to be girls. In a review of “Gorilla, my Love” in the Cincinnati Review, Sakinah Hofler notes about Bambara’s writing: “Often, stories from the African American community reflect harsh realities, the

oppressed struggling to thrive under oppression, slavery, the ripple effects of Jim Crow and systemic racism, living beneath the burden of the white gaze—stories that elicit sympathy, empathy, and understanding. Bambara opts instead for the approach of joy, with an emphasis on community and Black femalehood.” (Hofler) That was very important for me to consider when taking on this project, especially when focusing on the Black bodies and language. I wanted the young girls in my stories to go through the journey of how their bodies are perceived, and how they communicate with their bodies and their identities.

The next two writers that I’ve been in conversation with have been Claudia Rankine and Giada Scodellaro. When experimenting with hybridity, there is always this want to see what you can do with what you know and expand on it. Hybridity works well with experimentation and by trusting your readers. Hybrid writing is important to me because I admire how it stretches language and storytelling. I could have created a series of short stories pondering on the theme of language, but that provides such a narrow lens of what language is that it would have done my project a disservice and me as well. My unique relationship and approach to language is encapsulated by the ragged edges of language and by interrupting and dismissing the Eurocentric approach to language. Hybridity challenges what we know or think we know of language. I knew I wanted to experiment with poetry, stream-of-consciousness writing, and also write traditional short stories. I had a lot of elements that I wanted to communicate with this project to make it a body of work and to emphasize the pauses. The best way for me to do it was through hybridity. The writers who created work that inspired me and gave me the confidence to do this were Rankine and Scodellaro.

Claudia Rankine wrote one of the most beautiful works called *Citizen: an American Lyric*. When I first read it, there were a lot of moving parts, and I knew this was going to be a

book that I had to take my time with to understand the moving parts. Rankine used a lot of the second-person perspective in this book, and it drew me in immediately. Rankine uses the second-person perspective as a meditation on body and race, as a change in perspective, and to live in another body. It was powerful, and it was effective. I used the second-person perspective in multiple pieces, but most notably in “Venomous” to communicate the harm we do to our bodies, how we step so far away from our lived bodies and selves, and the damage it can do. Rankine’s other work deals with fragments and voice in a way that I felt close to. She utilizes language to give it the breath that it needs. Her work shaped my thinking to explore those breaths, to put a microscope and let the readers look through.

Giada Scodellaro was another writer who centered Black women and thrived in the hybridity. In her work *Some of Them Will Carry Me*, the theme of intimacy and/or lack of intimacy was an important theme I wanted to communicate. What does intimacy look like? How does our body communicate intimacy? It’s not always physical, but sometimes the emotional has no other way but to be physically seen, and Scodellaro does that gracefully. Many ways she explores the theme of intimacy are through recipes; recipes are intimate in nature, sharing how to make a meal, how to nourish a body. An example of how Scodellaro uses recipes is in “Cabbage, The Highest Arch”. She writes: “*One head of cabbage*, my grandmama says. She likes to tell me things. It is mostly about the people she despises, or about her mother. Sometimes it is about how to sauté the cabbage with bacon, green peppers, and onions. She tells me that she does not approve of a woman cooking only for herself; *it’s selfish*, she says, *to cook only for oneself*. My grandmama drags her feet on the ground. When she is in motion, everyone knows it; the neighbors know it, and she makes a sound like sandpaper. We sometimes call her Sandy, to reference this sound.” (Scodellaro, 61) This is a short piece, but it captures her grandmama and

how food has brought them together. Scodellaro provided the security in my writing to explore similar themes and let them come out however they need to.

The last writer who helped develop my writing was Roxane Gay, and her short story collection *Difficult Women*. Her collection's title story, "Difficult Women," gave me a lens for seeing which bodies I want to emphasize. The kinds of women she wrote about in that story were: Loose Women, Frigid Women, Crazy Women, Mothers, and Dead Girls. She materialized these women to not only be what they are seen in society, but for the reader to dig deeper into who they really are. Gay celebrates these women and womanhood, all that it is and all that it must be.

Other writers and scholars helped me with this project, like Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler. Audre Lorde sees the body as a primary site of knowledge. Our bodies are our knowledge. We learn through our senses and through memory, and our bodies are the display of that. Butler's work was connected to my project through the lens of genre. I wrote a couple of stories in the science fiction and post-apocalyptic genres. It was a genre I wanted to dive into, and reading Butler's work helped me see it through the lens of the Black body.

This whole project is body, and I'm living inside it. Find me.

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