Acknowledgments

Not in the woods, but in the spirit of them. Not shoulder to shoulder around tables and campfires, but spinning stories and sparking connections just the same.

This year, thirty-eight young writers and nineteen staff members came together for WBS’s ninth annual Baltimore Young Writers’ Summer Writers’ Studio, aka Camp, from August 3–8, 2020. While the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to meet over Zoom and in Google Classroom and while we couldn't be together in person, we had an extraordinary week of writing and building community from apartments and houses across Baltimore and beyond.

We hope that when you read the work in these pages, a small part of the magic that warmed us during those days we spent deliberating, talking, and creating together reaches you. The sense of sanctuary generated by this sacred space has historically carried us through the year—and this year we needed it more than ever. Here, our writers thought deeply about Baltimore and its beauties and exigencies; about new worlds with their own problems and possibilities; about the difficulties of being in love and growing up in this moment of enforced distance and disruption; and about what it means to challenge oneself to express these concepts and feelings precisely and imaginatively with heart, vision, and craft—in short, about what it means to be a writer.

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—Patrice Hutton & Shangrila Willy
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Ode to the black girl...
by Monet Wimbish

*Bard High School Early College, Grade 12*

your skin ranges from the color of almonds to the darkness
of the sky your skin is beautiful and immaculate and unmatched
though the world tries to tell you otherwise people will fear you
for your heart is filled with strength oh beautiful black girl
they will try to break you perfectly black girl but you are unbendable
your skin possesses dark brown to black pigment within the hair and skin
your skin makes you look ageless you’re a pure beauty
the sun loves you
please oh magical black girl know you are worth more
than gold or silver
yes oh mystical black girl your ancestors were nubian queens
that fought for the better I salute to you
my fellow black girl
Ode to the black girl—part 2
by Monet Wimbish

*Bard High School Early College, Grade 12*

our hair is like no other magical black girl people will criticize
your culture
but don’t be afraid admirable black girl
oh glorious black girl our many hair options from braids to the afro
you are so gorgeous black girl with your hair growing towards the sun
as if to embrace it
you are so special black girl with your crown
of hair made a luxurious amber and fire our hair full of splendor black girl
ranges from 1s to 4s but all curls are so beautiful oh lovely black girl
the kinks coils and naps tell the stories of heritage
heretical sonnet
by Amanda Berry

Vassar College, Sophomore

perhaps i’ve been uprooted,
spilling dirt onto your bed,
the sort of thing that reminds my father
that i wasn’t meant to be purple.

hyacinths were only beautiful in my mother’s eyes...
and i’ve seen the shears so many times now
that all i can do is stumble from the altartop
with a lavender trail behind me,
too different, too dark, not dark enough.
soft enough to dig your fingers into
and pull apart like decaying bark,
shriveling into compost behind the church
with our sacrificial royal-colored handprints on the door, ignored.

but if i ran away to distant rooms,
would my return kill the other violets in bloom?
my poetry sings
by Amanda Berry
Vassar College, Sophomore

like a moth
cought beating its brown
wings,

four am third floor,
stopping for nothing

and no one,
never coming close to
the ground, hovering

in those magical liminal
spaces along the
ceiling,

near the light bulbs
and the broken fan
with its blades hanging

limp and unused,
like a unused,
like a left hand
training

itself to not be
silent.
you start asking

“hey,
what are you doing
here?” and you wonder if the moth is trying to tell you something.
It didn't fit. No matter how hard I tried, all the supplies I attempted to pack refused to stay put in the leather knapsack. Even though I saw that I wasn't making progress, I had to keep going just to make sure she would be ready.

“I think that should be enough.” I turned my head and was surprised to see my mother standing in the doorway of our small one-room house. “You really are the most stubborn kid I know, Astor.”

“Sorry,” I responded. “I just can’t believe that they’re not giving you anything before you leave.” She stepped away from the doorway, closing the door behind her, and got closer to me, crouching down by the bag.

“I know it may seem unfair, honey, but I volunteered for this,” she explained. “I’m honestly surprised they’re letting us go through the third layer. Stuff has been getting pretty out of hand up there.” As she spoke, I picked up the various frozen foods, batteries, and clothes that spilled out of her bag. After hearing that, it reassured me even more that I was doing the right thing. I couldn’t let her leave unprepared.

“That’s exactly why we need to pack all this stuff,” I responded. “Issac told me that the other layers have a lot more monsters than we do. I couldn’t find much to help with that, so I’ll look around with him tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, they wouldn’t send us out there completely defenseless,” she said looking at me with a grin. “They’re sending some guards with us, so it won’t just be Mr. Troy and the others. And even if it was just us, we would find some way to get through it. We’ll be fine, ok?” Her grin changed to a smile as she ruffled my hair.

“Alright,” I chuckled.

“Plus, I don’t know what this frozen chicken is going to do to one of them.” She picked the bag up, taking it from the middle of the floor over to the wall. “Come on, help me put some of this stuff back.” At first I was a bit hesitant, but I swallowed my pride and helped her start putting stuff back one by one.

We decided to take everything out of the bag first and then figure out what she would need together. Seconds turned to minutes, minutes into what felt like an hour, as we got everything together for her. As we finished up, we could feel the entire house beginning to shake. The ceiling lamp that illuminated the single room home began to swing violently until it all suddenly stopped.

“Goodness, those things never learn to quit do they?” Mom said. I looked at her, surprised at how calm she was.

“Was that the monster?” I asked.

“Unfortunately,” she responded. “But we won’t have to worry about those kinds until we get to the very top of the Atlas.”

“They must be big if they can tunnel through solid rock like that.” Shaken by the whole thing, I sank to the floor leaning my back against the wall, terrified that something that big could be
living in the Atlas with us. That something that big could find Mom.

“Do you really have to go?” I pleaded. “I promise that I can find more work to do. That way you don’t have to leave the city so often.” She let out a sigh and looked me in the eye.

“I know it’s scary, Honey, but we need the money,” she responded. Her gaze was stone cold and serious. I knew I couldn’t talk her out of this. “Whatever we find up there is going to get us so much more than a job investigating sectors we’ve already cleared out dozens of times. Those people below us will buy any relic if we say it came from the surface. All we have to do is get a little bit, and we’ll all be able to live comfortably for a long time. We can live comfortably, Astor.” She pulled me tight to her side and started motioning with her hands. “Imagine living in a house with more than one room. More than one floor, like Rebeeca’s house.

You like her house, right?” I regretfully nodded, knowing that I was fueling her motivation. “I know you do, baby. I will do anything for you no matter what, so promise me that you won’t worry.” As she finished her last thought, she turned me back towards her, eyes tearing up and held me. “Please Astor, promise me.”

“Yes ma’am, I-I promise.” She let me go and stepped back, wiping the forming tears from her eyes.

“Good,” she replied. “Thanks for helping me. I know it’s late, but I’m going to start dinner. I saw Issac on my way back, so he might still be outside. Go out and play. It’ll be awhile.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said. I put on my shoes and hat, stepping towards the door. As I turned one last time towards my mom I saw her shaking, tears falling from her face. Not because she was angry, but because she was scared. I stepped out of the house.
Lost souls
by Jalen Jones

As I continue on my journey for greatness, I can feel the weight of somebody else’s actions pulling me down. Down into a deep series of tunnels, a labyrinth with no exit. I stop and look around me, appreciating the fact that I’m not the only one on this quest. People with many different faces, but all alike in one way. Their dark skin illuminated in the torch light. Yet instead of trying to find a way out of this maze, they begin to fight, letting their misguided rage transform this place into their inevitable tomb. I cover my ears, my eyes, my mouth. And just as quickly as I was dragged down, I’m pulled out, unable to save the lost souls trapped, lingering for their real purpose.
I remember porcelain stacked cabinets.
I remember huge windows that made my dining room table look like the sun, or the horizon.
I remember my favorite chair, right next to the window.
I remember my mug cabinet.
I remember slammed cabinets.
I remember loud microwaves.
I remember being told to walk quieter.
I remember the shaking hands.
I remember not holding cameras.
I remember desperately needing a new phone case.
I remember my mugs,
an invisible barrier separating my mom’s from mine,
transparent but all the more real because of it.
I remember when I dropped a mug and it didn’t break,
it didn’t break
opaque acceptance
its handle cradling my palm slammed cabinets
hot tea kissing my lips during thunderstorms shaking hands
warm tea spilling down my shirt banned
hands.
I remember sugar on the counter, raking and sifting through the paper bag,
honey clinging to my spoons,
where too hot knuckles from where the mug and the handle met sipped, simmered,
shook.
I remember dipping my fingers into scalding hot water.
I remember my “Love” mug with love written three times.
I remember wishing that I was the teabag.
I remember warmth and
I remember that I’ve never broken a mug.
It was dawn. The sound of swords clashing usurped the forest’s sweet melody, dwarfing the chirping of the birds and the snapping of branches. Faigel flexed his hands around the hilt of his sword and readied for strike. He brought both hands down and heard an ugly crack.

... Faigel’s muscles screamed for air.

“Galena, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it!” he yelped, narrowly avoiding a side swipe.

“Sorry for what?” she teased.

“I’m sorry,” he dragged out the vowel, “for being better than you.” As he spoke, he swiveled his wrists and circled Galina’s sword with his own, making it fly into the air. She leapt back. When she reached the ground, she squatted and then leaped. Faigel’s eyes were drawn to the sky where Galina’s tan-clad frame seemed to fly. Rushing wind pulled previously loose wisps of her hair back into her ponytail and pulled her clothes taut. Her legs were spread in a running stance, and her arms stood erect at her sides. The sword drew closer, and Galina whipped her arms forward to catch it. She grabbed it and clattered to the ground. She picked herself up, placing the sword back into her belt loop.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she started.

“You started the fight!” he defended.

“Firstly,” her voice was laced with venom, “you decided to join the duels. I refuse to let you die for the King’s entertainment. I made a promise to your aunt, and I intend to keep it.”

“I’m not talking about this again.” Faigel placed his sword in its holster and began to walk opposite Galina, further into the town. “I’ll find someone who’ll fight me without hesitation,” he paused, “and definitely without talking.”

The town glittered with activity. Carts full of trinkets, fish, and swords clogged the dirty pathway. The stench of salt and fish hung heavy in the air. Although, if you live somewhere long enough you can become accustomed to any smell. He clutched his money tight as he entered the market. Beggars and sellers began to speak in harmony: the song of the market. The song of near poverty. A cacophony of sellers’ voices rang out with prices, each price lower than the rest: twenty num, fifteen, ten. His stomach yearned, seemingly dragging his body towards a cart of freshly steamed tilapia and whiting. Faigel looked longingly at the cart and pushed his hunger away, ignoring his need as if it were a persistent gnat or a blabbering child.

“Focus,” he thought.

He knew he’d reached the edge of his town when the pungent smell of fish, sweat, and bodies faded into the distance. The familiar scents of his hometown hung like a curtain or veil. He persisted, drawing back the curtain and peering to the other side. The Arena was built of limestone, now darkened and weathered by emerald- and olive-colored invasive mosses and torrential coastal storms. A simple oak
drawbridge with metal reinforcements lay open, leading into a dark winding stairwell. The moss covered it more tangibly here, weaving through open patches where the metal did not cover the wood. He turned his eyes to the top of the arena, further stalling going inside. Blood red flags swung from each turret. They cast a deep shadow over the town, an eternal symbol of the King’s methodology. A clear, crimson warning for anyone who dared to question their position underneath the King. The walls stretched endlessly between them, an inkblot on a mostly blue and green horizon. Faigel heard Galina’s voice ring in his head, questioning his actions. “What the hell IS wrong with me?” he echoed softly. He shook his head, “No. I can do this. I have to do this.” Vowing to return to his family and his town, he stifled his fear and walked through the archway.

The coliseum that followed teemed with movement and sound. A sea of reds, blues, and purples flooded the ascending, rounded seats. Each member of the audience sported a golden crown of thorns. He watched some smaller children play catch with their gold ringlets. “If I was anyone else, I’d have stolen one by now,” he sighed, wishing he ranked lower on the moral compass rather than ranking low in class. Another crowd formed in the center of the arena. As the mass came into view, he felt at ease.

They all wore the same tattered clothes and had the same look of awe on their faces as he did. They whispered to each other while gazing towards the King’s platform, afraid to take up space, or sound even, in the face of royalty. In the face of the tyrant King. The least crowded part of the colosseum was the King’s platform, resting at the highest point of the theater. They were all there for, undoubtedly, the same thing: a chance to live in the King’s court as his bodyguard. A way out of this meager existence. The chatter seemed endless until the King arose. His presence rolled over the crowd, a wave of silence washed over both the poor and nobility. The rich sat; the rest stood.

He stepped into the light. “Win. Pull yourselves out of the dregs of poverty, or die in filth,” he spat.

While the nobility wore gold ringlets, the King was made of it. He wore white robes with gold embroidered detailings, gold jewelry, and gold painted lips. His opulent lips upturned into a sneer as he retreated back into the shade of the royal platform.

Loud trumpets announcing the beginning of the duels remind him of his upcoming dilemma. Which could he live with, murder or meager-ness? He had no time to ponder. A palace worker tugged him into the registration line, suckered him into giving them his life’s savings for a life he may lose in an hour. “Maybe I should learn to listen,” he reflected again upon Galina’s words. “It’s too late now,” he supposed.

The same palace worker from earlier stood on a nearby crate, gruffly yelling over the restarted chatter of the arena, “Who’s first?”

Everyone’s hands were firmly rooted to the ground. Adrenaline pumped through him, filling his vacant body like an empty vase or a bath in the process of being drawn. He uprooted his arm and held it mighty in the air. Everyone turned to him, scanning him vertically and seeing a brown, malnourished boy with magma for irises and tan-brown patchwork clothes. They began to volunteer with, in their minds, assured victory.

He was ushered to the center of the stage. He faced the multicolored crowd, who shone bright
in the overhead sun - rubies and amethysts. He heard a heavy footfall behind him, and the crowd roared in applause. Faigel turned his head and gripped his sword’s handle, readying himself for the fight of his life. The fight that would make his life matter, that would make his life worth something. A woman approached: her black hair was tied into a messy ponytail. She was dressed in loose, ceremonial clothing with a veil over her eyes.

“Why would a rich person compete?” he wondered. She faced the ground. Mahogany hands grasped an ornate sword handle. The trumpets blared once again, announcing the start of the duels. He could feel the audience watching and waiting for carnage. For blood to make the dirt floors of the arena muddy and thick like clay. The girl stood rigid. He kept his distance.

“I don’t want to hurt nobility,” he half yelled over the din of the audience towards the girl. He motioned to the gruff palace worker from before. “I can’t fight royals”.

“Then leave,” the worker rasped.

That wasn’t an option. The worker walked away, fumbling in his pockets for a cigar. Faigel unholstered his sword and ran towards the girl. She unhooked her sword from her belt loop, standing ready to counter. Faigel clashed his sword into hers, hoping to overpower her with his weight and force. Metal shrieked on metal—she did not budge. He moved his sword from up against hers and tried to strike her shoulder; she parried. They exchanged blows for a couple of minutes; she countered him with practiced ease, as if she’d known him forever.

“Who are you?” he panted out from exhaustion.

She didn’t speak.

“You don’t fight like a noble,” he hacked.

“That’s because I’m not,” she mumbled.

“What?”

She didn’t reply again, opting instead to clash their swords. He tried again to strike her, swinging his sword where her torso should have been. She ducked and hit his left leg with the blunt end of her sword. Faigel toppled into the dirt, his sword by his right. The dirt rose when he fell, sullying the hem of her pristine linen. The crowd cheered louder, chanting for her to finish him. To make the brown dirt into red clay. He fumbled for his sword to fight back. When he did, he felt cold metal press against his throat. He held his hands in forfeit, praying that she’d take pity on him. Hoping he could keep the promise he’d made to himself earlier.

After a moment, Faigel readied himself for the afterlife, muttering a quick “See you soon, Auntie,” and shutting his eyes. The press of metal moved from his throat. Confused, he opened his eyes and saw the girl’s now unhidden face.

“Galena?”
We struggle with our body images
While some call us fat
Others call us too skinny

When we get on stage
We are watched by millions
Of eyes
Watching our every move

We freeze and isolate ourselves
Because we know if we make one mistake
It could ruin our lives forever

The hate can get so intense
That we end up
Killing ourselves
To get rid of the pain we experienced

We struggle with
Our mental health
The nation that we live in
States that mental health is unreal
But everyone in this industry knows
That statement is far from the truth

Many of us have died
Due to the public’s nasty comments
And hateful actions
Yet nobody has done anything
To help those get out of this torment
This needs to be taken seriously
Because there are people that end
Their lives due to this issue

This is the industry through our eyes!
Vignette 1: Mi Familia

Hi, I’m Aloia, and I’m Colombian. Well, the rest of my family is at least. I was the only one to be born in the U.S. Yup, I’m one of those Latinas. It’s like I’m that one weird misshapen fruit that nobody wants even though it’s fine to eat.

I have three older siblings, making me the spoiled baby of the family. The oldest is my brother Mateo. He’s very protective of everyone. He’s like the second dad of the house. Always makes us his top priority in any situation. I wish he smiled more often though. He’s like a military soldier, who, always having his defense, never fails to drop it.

My second brother is named Joaquin. Joaquin the gamer. He says he’s famous and popular all over the world for his gaming videos. I swear this dude is delusional or something. Talking about his anime ‘waifus’. Whatever the higgies that means. (I’m not allowed to say heck or hell, so I say higgies instead.) My mom and I just don’t question him out of fear of what his answers will be. We just let Joaquin live his fantasy life. He’s a weird one. Just one sniff from him or his room will literally send you into a coma. He smells like one of those garbage yards that your trash goes to that’s been abandoned for years. Like I said. He’s a weird one.

And the last angel of the family is my sister, Lilliana. Well, more like a ghost sister. I don’t know her that well even though I’ve lived my whole life with her. It’s like we’re strangers. Just imagine one of your stereotypical e-girls but Hispanic. Half of her hair is bleached and dyed. It’s always a new color every week. She wears the whole rainbow on her head. Sometimes I think and laugh to myself about why I need to see a real rainbow when I’m actually related to one. All I hear from her room is what my tia calls ‘Música Del Diablo’. My tia always has something to say to Lilliana. She always says things like “Mijita porque escuchas esa musica. Es del Diablo.” Or like “Lilliana porque te vistes asi! Te ves como esos niños deprimidos!” Yup, that’s my tia. Luckily, she doesn’t visit us that much cause she’s ‘too busy’ even though we all know that our mama and her just don’t get along.

My abuelita always told us stories of them from when they were little. I remember this one story when mama was three and my tia was five. Abuelita would always say that tia would push mama out of her tricycle and just take it. Mama would always cry when this would happen. Because she was crying, my abuelo would come and pick mama up while abuela would spank tia with a wooden spoon or her bare hand. Abuela called it discipline, but my abuelo saw it as abuse. Abuelita never listens to him. It
drives abuelo crazy, but thankfully she married someone patient or else she’d probably be soltera. At least that’s what mama would always tell us when we bring up abuelita in a conversation.

Mi papa’s side is more of a rebellious family. Papa grew up around guys mostly. He only has one younger sister; the rest of his siblings are boys. Besides Maria, his sister who is such a buzzkill, papa and his brothers would always go out and do a lot of daring stuff. Papa would always tell me to go and live my life cause life is short. I guess I spent more time worrying about my life than actually living it. I once saw a quote that said, “Don’t exist. Live. Go out, explore. Thrive.” Yeah, I didn’t exactly follow that quote for a while.

Vignette 2: La Ciudad

I live in a little city that is infamous for being one of the most dangerous cities in the U.S. Yeah, yeah, I know what you’re thinking: “You poor child, what a dangerous city to live in.” What a facepalm. Don’t waste your breath, and save your ‘pity’. I’d rather live here where I learn how to defend and do stuff myself instead of being some helpless rich kid in Los Angeles who will most likely end up on Dr. Phill. But me and my family didn’t always live there.

Mi mama y papa lived back in Colombia where my other siblings were born. They were forced to leave their home and the life they had there. Bogota wasn’t a pretty place during those times. Papa would describe it as an early apocalypse since it was before the 2000s. He would describe what it was like in Bogota back then. He said there was violence in every corner and nobody could be trusted. Not even your closest friend. When you walk out of your house there, you walk out of the warmth and into the cold winds of the arctic. “Always prepare for the worst,” he would say at the end of all of his stories. Relatives who I didn’t even know about have died. Literally every crime you could think of was happening even worse in Bogota. Blackmail put my family in danger and forced them to leave their life and family behind.

Luckily, my papa had a work visa, and my brothers, sister, and mama could go to the U.S. legally. I know you were questioning whether we were legal or not. Surprise! Not all hispanics are illegal! Congratulations, you learned something new today.

My family moved into a suburban area. It was different being the only hispanic family in a white community. One family was definitely not like the others. We all stood out. Lilliana never liked the change of environment. Maybe that’s why she became rebellious, or maybe it was just my papa’s genes. Lilliana hated the U.S., but I never understood why until I heard the story. About five years later I appeared. Born in a safe place just like my parents wanted. I learned english faster than spanish. I made a lot of friends growing up. Our neighbors were so nice and kind to us. I was surrounded by white folks. The hispanics in my life at the time were my family, and that’s all I needed in my perfect life.

Sixteen years passed by, and we moved. Again. It was a bittersweet feeling, I will admit, but all I had in mind was “Ooo new friends! Can’t wait!”
I got in the car with my pink suitcase and a soft gray koala mama gave me when I turned five. I’ll always remember what she told me when she gave it to me. “Just like a koala cares for her kids, I will keep you close to my heart always.” Cheesy, I know, but sometimes the cheesy stuff shows how much someone cares. Joaquin and Mateo sat in the back seat while I sat with Lilliana in the middle. Papa was in the driver’s seat, and mama was seated next to him.

“You excited to go to our new home?” I asked Lilliana. She was wearing a black beanie that read ‘Bad Hair Day’ with some of her black hair covering her face while having earbuds in. Lilliana faced in my direction and gave me a disgusted look then turned away to look out of the car window. Was it something I said?

It was only an hour away from my original home. As we drove to a place that I would later call my new home, I saw the trees in the suburbs turn into buildings in the city. Wait…a city? Row houses were everywhere. So close together. Nothing like the houses back where I came from. There were no big front or back yards. The people here looked so depressed. In the suburbs, it was so happy, with blue skies, green grass, and the sun smiling down at all times. Instead of that lovely paradise, the clouds covered the beautiful blue skies 24/7. The sun shines still but with no meaning. It looks more tired than happy. Probably because the poor thing is trying every day to spread happiness but nothing seems to be working. Certain places that we drove through reeked of marijuana and other weird scents. In the suburbs, it would smell like a field of recently bloomed flowers of roses and lavender. There is trash everywhere here. This place looks like a whole junkyard. Before we moved, I looked at pictures of the city we were moving into and it looked beautiful with reflective tall skyscrapers and a crystal blue bay. It had rainbow vibrant colored houses and people who had bright smiles on their faces. This dump looked nothing like the photos I saw online. Well, you can’t judge a book by its cover, right? Maybe the people here are wonderful and nice as my old friends and the neighbors are as welcoming as the others were.

Vignette 3: La Puerta Verde

“We’re here!” I heard my papa say as he pulled over. I opened the door and got down from the car excitedly. “It’s the one with la puerta verde.” He says. A green door? I looked at the other houses, and the other doors were a dirty white, and the gray bricks were uniformed in a pattern. Then at the very end of the corner of the block, I saw an emerald green door with a dark blue outline. Well, I guess we’re gonna stand out again.

The moving truck came right behind us, and the driver parked the vehicle outside of our new house. I guess this is our new home.

“Dad, out of the houses you could’ve bought, you got this greendoored house in the middle of a dangerous city?” Lilliana said. She looked more annoyed than usual.

“Hija, come on give this place a chance. It’s a beautiful house trust me. Also, we got the best house on the block. Oh and by the way I’m papa, not dad.”
Lilliana just rolled her eyes and said “Fine.”

Lilliana did have a bit of a point though. Why did mama and papa decide to move, and why here of all places? Mama gets out of the car along with Joaquin and Mateo. Mateo has an emotionless, serious face as always, and Joaquin is not even paying attention. He’s got his big nose in his phone again.

“Mijito, guarda tu teléfono por unos minutos please,” mama said, her arms crossed giving him that look that all sons, daughters, and husbands fear.

“Fine mama,” he said, doing the same thing that Lilliana did. Papa got the new keys out of his pockets and unlocked the green door. It felt like one of those slow-motion scenes in a horror movie when they open a creepy door that the character thought they heard a sound from. Why am I scared? I shouldn’t be scared. I should be excited and happy that I’m in a new environment with so many options and new things to try. The green door finally opens.
I remember
by Makayla Jefferson

Baltimore City Community College, First Year

I remember the space.
I remember the sound.
I remember the people.

I remember that space,
kinda small,
Too full of emotions and hormones.

I remember that sound,
Always kinda loud,
Always full of laughter.
Sometimes screams.

I remember the people,
The love in a room,
No more,
no less.

I remember.
I remember what I don’t need to.
I remember without a reminder.
She walks through the world
Her mind in overdrive
Heart beating out of control.
Existing mindlessly is not in the cards for her.
She can’t turn it off
That isn’t who she is
Who she was born to be.
So instead, she listens.
Listens to the sounds of the world.
There is no such thing as safety for her.
For when she is at peace with the world,
She is at war with herself
Everything internalized.
Because when she walks she realizes
The world is nothing but closed space
Causing her mind to go into overdrive
Her heart to beat out of control.
You see the sparks fly from your rapier as you get pushed back by your opponent’s attack. Sweat falls into your right eye, and you squint, keeping the other open for your fight.

Your opponent pauses her attack to gloat. “Is this all you got, Perry?! I thought you were the top fighter of this sector!”

The crowd is cheering, screaming at the top of their lungs. They want to see your insides splattered on the cobblestone battlefield. Your opponent’s banter has hyped them up even more. She rushes towards you, her sword glistening in the air as it rises up. You see a tear fall down her face. Your rapier glows purple—you’ve activated your sword skill.

What now? You won’t make it in time. You aim for your opponent’s abdomen, maybe she’ll bleed out before you get hit. You’re hopeful. Her sword comes crashing down into your collarbone. Pain shoots throughout your entire body. Darkness clouds your vision, and you get cold. You feel nothing but pain as your body falls. She catches you, holding you close and whispers “I’m sorry. I love you.”
Kieran stretched as he looked at his alarm. It was 7:30. He scrambled out of his sheets, rushing to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror. His rat tail/mohawk combo suffered from extreme bed hair. He only had fifteen minutes to get ready, so he got ready quickly. He walked into the living room, pressing a button on the wall. The wall opened up, revealing a tunnel. He fast-walked through the tunnel, flicking a switch as he got to the end. A room lit up, bright white lights filled the ceiling.

There were guns hanging along the walls. M4s, MP5s, AR-15s. You name it, he probably had it. He went up to his pistol section, grabbing a Glock 17. He inspected it, making sure the chamber was empty and the safety was on. He inserted the magazine, then put the gun in his back holster under his shirt. He walked to the end of the workshop. There was a black and white shrine. On the shrine leaned a sheathed sword with an intricate and beautiful embroidery all around it.

Kieran grabbed the sword and strapped it to the left side of his hip. He looked at his wall of information. Multiple pictures of a high-school-aged girl were hung up. Walking routes, favorite places, addresses. They all were there. “CONTRACT” was written in thick dark ink above all of this. He then turned around and left the workshop, the revealing wall closing behind him as he left the tunnel. He looked around the house one more time and sighed.

The alarm rang at a volume loud enough to wake an entire sector. Remi groaned. The alarm kept ringing. It was almost like it got louder every second. Remi groaned even louder. She hit the alarm, raising her head to look at the time. 7:30. Her eyes widened. She attempted to get out of bed, but she was cocooned in her own sheets. She tried to roll over, but she fell onto the floor. Luckily, her pain was thwarted by the large pile of dirty clothes that had amassed during her stay this semester.

She unraveled herself out of the dreaded sheet cocoon, rushing into the bathroom. She looked into the mirror, her once captivating crimson red hair now bed-ridden. She only had fifteen minutes to get ready, so she got ready quickly. She walked into the living room, searching for her phone. She couldn’t leave without texting her father. Remi searched and searched until she finally found it under the couch cushion.

Remi’s roommate yelled as she had burned her forehead on Remi’s own hair curler. Remi sucked her teeth as she started to text her father. “hey papa, i hope ur okay, i’m sorry about yesterday, didn’t know u would go on a date with someone that ugly. choose better women. I’ll see you tonight,” she aggressively texted. Remi took one last look around her dorm room and giggled.
The morning air was cool, not cold nor humid. Kieran walked down the street. As he was walking, people murmured about his appearance. Kieran was dressed how a champion of the sector should be dressed. Dark clothing, weapons always on their person, military beret. It wasn't out of the ordinary for him to get looks sometimes. It didn't bother him, although they kept their distance as they walked by him, like he was some sort of disease.

Kieran kept his pace towards the local high school. He had business there. A sharp pain hit his right side. He turned and winced. He looked around to see who or what attacked him. He looked down and saw a teenage girl on the floor, rubbing her own head and groaning. The girl looked to be an apprentice mage. She wore a uniform that was associated with the school he had business with. Kieran stared at her, as if he was trying to affirm something. The girl looked petrified. She quickly stood and bowed, apologising, and started to run. Kieran assumed she was late to school.

Remi ran as quick as she could, the once cool morning air now freezing cold as she ran at a pace that track stars would cry to. She was almost to the school when she crashed into a wall. Or at least she thought it was a wall until she looked up. Remi's face went pale. She had just run into a champion of a sector! Millions of thoughts ran through her head.

Would she be punished? Would he use this as an excuse to take advantage of her? Would she be tied up and violated like in her fanfic—Remi shook her head clear of all of those thoughts. She instead quickly rose and bowed, hoping that would suffice. She then took off at a speed that would embarrass Barry Allen.

Once Remi got to school, she rolled her eyes. Everyone was talking about tomorrow's Satya Champa Champion event between Sector 7's champion, Perry Ghorliado, and Sector 4's champion, Yuri Tizo. It was common knowledge that they both were lovers and that they were both being separately backed by two of the richest people in the Gatlon region. This situation seems like it was pulled right out of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Kieran stood across the street from the school's entrance gate, watching the students as they hurried to class. He waited for the girl who had bumped him earlier, but she had already come three minutes before he even got there. He looked at his watch, 7:51. He was too late. He sighed, going to his next arrangement.

Kieran sat at the table in the local café. The entire café was looking at him and his cohorts. Subtle elevator-esque music played while everyone around him pretended not to stare. Sitting across from him were the champions of Sectors 4 and 7. The three discussed how to avoid tomorrow's event, as the Satya Champa Champion event was a battle to the death, and who would want to kill their lover? Perry suggested killing their respective sponsors, but Yuri pointed out the flaws in his plan, stating that a champion was not supposed to kill for their own personal gain.

Yuri suggested that they should not show up to the SCC at all. Kieran nodded in agreement. He looked at his watch, 6:20. They'd been talking for eleven hours. He stood up, patting Perry's shoulder and kissing Yuri's forehead. He
wished him luck. Unfortunately, that was the last time he’d see his childhood friends together.

It was 6:30, and the sun was already gone. That’s what happens when it’s winter. Remi was used to it by now. She walked at a sluggish pace. Eating a honey bun while walking is hard work. She was on an empty street, so she made sure her defense spell was up as she walked. She hummed happily. She flinched at the activation of her spell. She was startled enough to drop her honey bun. She then turned around to see who initiated the attack. No one in sight. She walked towards a metal object lying in the middle of the street. Maybe that’s what hit her.

She picked it up. It was a Bowie knife with an intricate and beautiful embroidery that surrounded the hilt. The embroidery started to move. It made its way up Remi’s arm, almost as if it was a curse. Remi then quickly realized that this was an immobilizing spell. Remi attempted to cast a counterspell, but her body went limp, and she fell to the ground. Kieran materialized out of the air. It was like he WAS the air. Remi was horrified! It was the champion from earlier. How did he find her? Did he put a tracker on her? What if he gets to her father? Remi shook those thoughts out of her head.

Kieran unsheathed his sword. Remi didn’t expect a quick death, but she at least would’ve wanted to be unconscious before she died. Remi moved her wrist. The spell was wearing off quicker than usual. Maybe her original defense spell is cracking down on it. Remi waited until Kieran got close enough, then she quickly got up, leg sweeping Kieran in the process. He fell, surprisingly.

Remi kicked the champion’s sword out of his grasp. It landed fifteen feet away. Kieran grunted and looked at his watch, 6:41. He had twenty minutes. Remi grabbed him by his shirt and hoisted him up. She had obviously activated her strength spell. Kieran side-kicked her in her left ear. Remi yelped, letting him go. Kieran stood firmly on his feet as Remi rushed him. She had the Bowie knife in her hand. Kieran blocked the knife attack with his left forearm, simultaneously pulling out his pistol with his right hand.

Remi’s eyes grew big. She saw the gun, but had no time to react. He was just too fast. Kieran’s face was rested. It was like he caught his prey, but did not enjoy his fill. “It’s just business,” he reaffirmed to himself. A crack rang throughout the empty street. Blood spurted diagonally across Kieran’s chiseled face. He remained calm. Remi’s body seemed to have frozen in time, but then it finally fell back with an audible thud.

Kieran dropped the pistol. His shooting hand was visibly shaking. He walked over to the once lively body, attempting to maintain his composure. “It’s just business,” he repeated. He bent down over her body, picking up the Bowie knife. He noticed that her previously cheerful eyes were full of fear but devoid of life. “It’s just business,” he repeated. Kieran broke into tears. The once emotionless champion, now engulfed in tragedy.
Cold, crisp, and cooling droplets ran down their face.
Sun rays shined oh so brightly on their back.
In the wet, water-stained grass is where they’d race.
Who cares if they were of a lower class?
Their smile would light up a room, outshining the hot force of a sun,
Pearly whites memorable like a baby’s first words,
Kane, their name escaping from their wife’s lips,
A fair skinned child resting its small bosom on the porch, its eyes beaming with life.
Their child’s youth made them quite uneasy, teeth gritting and stomach churning.
Thunder rung in their ears, the small child scurrying behind its mother.
Life seemed inevitable, and yet death felt like a memory.
Even so, the memory circulated as a stalker does.
I’ve always felt like things in life are predetermined. For example, from the moment you meet someone you only have a certain number of interactions before it’s over. The phrase ‘your days are numbered’ has always run true to me. From the moment I met him, I knew that our time was limited. We would only have a certain number of ‘hello’s, ‘I love you’s, hugs, kisses, laughs, conversations, and goodbyes until it was over. Then we would be strangers again.

May 20, 2020
I am completely heartbroken. My 15-year-old heart has been shattered into pieces. The boy that I was in love with (who we’re going to call Apple) and was planning a future with (in my head) broke up with me yesterday after 18 months of dating under the notion that he didn’t love me at all. To make matters worse, he doesn’t think he ever loved me. And the last year and a half of my life has been a lie.

All the ‘I love yous’, ‘trust mes’, ‘we’ll be okays’ were all lies. I can’t help thinking that this is my fault. There must’ve been something I could’ve done to make him stay. Given 120% instead of 110% and hoped that was enough for him to love me or enough to make him want to pretend to love me.

It was that stupid book, and to think the instrument of my breakup sat in my house for months. The book was filled with 75 days of me writing (February 29–May 14), starting the day I got the book and ending on his birthday. I keep a written diary, and from time to time I sent him pictures of the entries, allowing him into the most vulnerable part of my life. I could tell that he liked reading my entries so I decided to make a gift to mock that but just a little different. Instead of diary entries, I wrote love topics and special things in relation to us. It sounded like an amazing gift, right? Well, it was, and he loved it, but it made him realize that he was never in love with me and he never even knew what love was. It made him decide that he didn’t deserve me, so he broke up with me. It was this quarantine too, the space that was forced upon us added some unneeded tension in our relationship.

But I thought we would make it. It seemed he did too. Quite ironic.

I tried so hard to make this relationship work, and it has fallen apart. It’s all so surreal. I still can’t believe that it’s over.

I woke up this morning with swollen eyes from hours of crying that weren’t even close to being over. The break-up texts remain. Here come the tears again, dropping like rain, starting off as a drizzle, and turning into a downpour.

*Thought Pause*

I just don’t understand how time is moving forward, but somehow I’m moving backward. I’m doing all the right things, aren’t I? I’ve (mostly) gotten rid of everything he’s given me. I deleted
his number and our messages. I’m upholding the no-contact rule. And I’ve turned away two people whom I could potentially hurt emotionally because I haven’t healed first. For crying out loud I’m writing this story to express all of my feelings! What more am I supposed to do?

I know that it’s crazy to think that after a month I’d be completely healed from the heartbreak, but I shouldn’t still be this sad right? I’ve cried more today than I have in the past week, and I don’t understand why. Today was no different than any other day. I woke up early and started my research work. I woke up sad and upset, but I don’t know why. I wasn’t looking at pictures of us or reading something he wrote to me or even thinking about us getting back together. I was thinking about old memories and conversations that we’ve had. But I can’t help that, and it doesn’t normally make me THIS upset. Normally, when I think of a memory I have with him I get a little sad for a bit, but then I move on with my day. Today, however, once I started crying I wasn’t able to stop. I did myself no favors and started scrolling through videos of him and me. As you can imagine, I felt worse.

Honestly, I think what has me so distressed is that part of me finally understands what he said to me. Which means that we’re never getting back together and I am finally starting to accept that. So, the increase in crying is probably due to me letting go and being sad that it’s over. If he couldn’t love me then, what makes me think he’ll love me now? Even if he ever said those 8 letters again, would I ever believe him? I still trust him but definitely not as much. I will never trust him again, even if he never understood he was lying to me in the first place.

May 19, 2020—Our texts
Me: Are you going to break up with me?
Apple: I don’t know how to answer that question
Me: What do you mean?
Apple: I don’t know
Me: You don’t know if you’re going to break up with me?
Apple: I don’t know how to make sense of this situation
Me: I don’t understand what that means
Apple: How do you feel about all this?
Me: I’m sad but I love you and I don’t want to lose you
How do you feel?

May 19, 2020—My journal, a.k.a the stupid book (when I realized I was in love with him)
Day 12 of social distancing. The school district announced earlier we would be closed for two more weeks. Anywho, I’m following a trend with these entries. For today: when I first realized I was in love with you. It was April, and even for me, I was listening to an abnormal amount of love songs. I was smiling a lot more, and the days seemed brighter. Hell, even the nights seemed brighter. Seeing you every day made me really happy, but I just thought I felt like that because you’re my boyfriend and you’re supposed to make me happy. However, during Spring Break, I could not stop thinking about you, so I gave up lying to myself and accepted it for what it was. You were the first thought in my mind when I woke up and the last thought in mind before I went to sleep. I spent my time rolling around in my house listening to (and singing) “Can’t Help Falling in Love With You” by Elvis Presley. When we
came back from break,, I knew for sure that I
was in love with you.. I was so scared to love
you, Apple. I was afraid that you wouldn’t love
me back, or that you would only say those 8
letters because you felt bad for not saying it.
Well, I’m happy that it all worked out :)  

May 19, 2020—Our texts (continued)

Apple: I don’t feel this way
I thought I was in love with you, but if what
you wrote here is how love is supposed to be
then I’m not in love
Me: If that’s not how you feel then how do
you feel?
Apple: I think I started realizing once we got
out of school that I cared about you less than
I thought I did. Every once in a while when we
talked I could tell that you missed me so much,
and I realized that I didn’t miss you as much as
I should have. But I told myself quarantine was
driving me crazy and there was nothing wrong.
But today, and Friday...
I forgot about you.

*The mail hadn’t come yet, and the letter was
just sitting in the mailbox, so I went to rip it up.*
Apple: I will. Can we still be friends? If not,
I completely understand.
Me: I don’t know how to be friends with you
Apple: I understand. I’m really sorry
Me: Is there any chance in the future that
you’d see us working out?
Apple: I doubt it

*Second Thought Pause*

After and during that conversation, I cried
hysterically. Bawling on my knees, uncontrol-
lable sobs. My eyes were becoming heavy and
swollen because of all the crying. I didn’t take
breaks to breathe, so my chest was beginning
to hurt. I could barely see through my swollen
and tear-glazed eyes. About 30 minutes later,
my friends called me and I sent the screenshots
to our group chat. Two of my friends thought
that Apple was completely dickish. Another two
thought that it was good that he broke up with
me now and not later, and the other was split
between the fences of the matter. When I took
a break from crying, I realized how absolutely
nothing made sense. Here began my never-end-
ing confusion and my search for closure to a
non-answerable question.

May 20, 2020—Our texts (continued, again)

Me: I have a question to ask you for closure
and my peace of mind. After this, I won’t talk
to you again.

Did you ever love me?
Apple: I thought I did, but if love is how you
talk about it in the book, then I guess I didn’t.
I never felt that way
Me: If that’s not how you felt then how did you feel?

Apple: I really liked being around you, you made me really happy when I was with you, but when you weren’t there, you weren’t there. Does that make sense?

Me: Yeah that makes sense

Apple: I hope that someday you can forgive me but I understand if you can’t

Goodbye, see you whenever school starts again

*A little later that day*

Me: Hey I know you said goodbye and I said I was going to leave you alone but I’m so confused. After all of this, the least you could do is clear my confusion.

(Incoming questions)

How long have you felt this way?

So was everything a lie?

Did the book make you feel this way?

Were we not worth fighting for?

Apple: I’ve felt this way for a while, but I only really started acknowledging it since quarantine started, and I was lying to myself, so as a result, I did lie to you. The book made me realize that there was a much bigger gap in our feelings than I thought. I’ve felt this way for a year, without realizing it, and if my feelings haven’t grown stronger since then, I don’t think they will now. You are obviously so much more ahead of me emotionally and I feel like if we didn’t break up now we’d break up later, for the same reasons. The reason it’s happened now is because I can’t live misleading both you and myself like this. You deserve better.

Me: Thank you for answering my questions. I hope that one day in the future we can be friends, but I’m not ready to do that yet. Just one last question: do you regret us?

Apple: No

I regret hurting you but I do not regret our relationship

Me: Goodbye, Apple

Apple: Goodbye *******

*Third Thought Pause*

He never remembered the tiny details. I always had to retell them so that he wouldn’t forget. Naturally, I remember everything, from people’s birthdays to the snide comments that I would love to forget. I remember all of his immediate family’s birthdays, and he remembers none of mine. Fuck, he doesn’t even remember my parent’s names. I was always trying to be into things that he was into, and he never showed the same effort back. I looked up the history of soccer, started listening to 70’s and 80’s music, but he never tried listening to 80’s & 90’s R&B or Pop. I even started paying attention to F1 (the European version of Nascar basically). Did I mention Apple’s Spanish? He has never looked into a single thing I liked. Sure, from time to time he would ask me about the logistics of dance, and he would listen to me talk about TV shows and movies I loved, but he never actually wanted to learn about it. To be fair he couldn’t just watch movies whenever he wanted to because he has protective parents who monitor his screen time and choose what he can and cannot watch, so he was never really able to watch the things I asked him to. In retrospect, we didn’t have much in common. We weren’t into the same type of music, movies, or books, but we were into each other. In all honesty, I can’t remember why I had a crush on him. He never tried with me, and as
soon as things got too tough he threw in the towel and was done.

With him, it felt like I always had to do everything first. I asked him out, I held his hand first, I kissed him first, and I asked him on our first date. Looking back, it’s always been a one-way street of communication between us. This entire time I’ve just settled for his lack of effort and initiative.

**May 19, 2020**

Today was a year and six months. It was also the end. I don’t see us getting back together. This whole situation has been so abrupt like I truly wasn’t expecting it. My version of not expecting given that our relationship was teetering and nowhere near perfect was that it seemed like everything was fine a few hours, days, and weeks before it happened. We had planned Facetime calls because it was nice to have a schedule given our online schooling. For the past month, we had planned calls on Tuesdays and Fridays. Last Friday and yesterday (Tuesday), he had forgotten about the calls. He had forgotten about me, and he admitted it. It left me thinking, does he not care enough to remember? I cried for a while, and then texted him about it. Of course, he apologized profusely like he always does. He called me after that, but I didn’t respond and said I didn’t really want to talk anymore. I mean I had been crying for half an hour, so I didn’t want him to feel bad. To that, he said, “I’m sorry, I don’t deserve you.” Still distraught, I Facetimed a close guy friend who was worried he was planning on breaking up with me because saying “I don’t deserve you” is a bad sign. He reassured me that Apple wouldn’t do that, so I went to my online dance class.

Now, I overthink everything, and I felt so comfortable with Apple that whenever a negative thought came through my mind I would tell him and he would help me rationalize my thought. So I asked him if he was going to break up with me. I expected him to say no. I’ve just been having a rough time because of quarantine because I’m not very good at texting. I’d rather have in-person conversations. Instead, he breaks up with me, and it starts my never-ending search for answers to unanswerable questions.
The sky was on fire
The world is in flames
The city is scorching
Because you are defined by race, religion, ethnicity
And all those trivial things
From the time Christopher Columbus sailed across the open blue
To steal land from the only true Americans we’ve ever known
But what about the sound of a child’s laughter
What about the love you can have for a book
I wish the love we have for money
Was the same love we have for our brothers and sisters
I am measured by something I can’t control
My worth is told by one glance at the melanin in my skin
Is that wrong?
Because it’s all this world has ever known
I wish it wasn’t true
That it didn’t have to be this way
But that’s the world we live in
And something’s got to change

Bullets rain across the sky
And we watch as another unarmed black man
Is shot down by the boys sworn in to protect us
I say boys because no man could live with the blood of another on their hands
Did you consider his family?
His momma and daddy
What about the child growing up knowing her daddy went to heaven
Killed by boys who don’t give a damn
You think it would be easy
We know what’s right and what’s wrong
So why are Breonna Taylor’s murderers still walking strong
Who else has to die before you understand
Black Lives Matter
And innocent people are dead
Dear Future Soulmate,

How can I miss what I’ve never had? I’ll try to be brief and let these three simple words caress your cheeks as you think about what might be.

I miss you.

Your sweet kisses in the cold as the snow falls from the sky. Your goodnight cookies that you bring me in bed. The warm hugs from your strong arms shielding me from the hate in this world.

But I don’t know you. Not your gorgeous eyes or silky skin. I don’t care if you love dogs or hate books because you love me.

You love me.

Right now you may have a girlfriend who you swear is your forever, but she’s not. And I’m sorry if it hurts when you discover that she’s not your meant to be. I wish I could touch you and show you who I am, but I can’t because I haven’t met you yet.

Or maybe I have? Are you the boy who shoots paper balls at me in Algebra? Do you pass by me in the halls? Have you been a witness to my clumsiness and thought in your head, “She’s not your type.”

Well I am because you’re my forever. Maybe we’ll come back to each other as different people living different lives. And I’ll finally stop holding my breath, and a weight will be lifted off my chest.

But, please please please, when our paths finally cross and our time has synchros, don’t be disappointed. I may not have much, but one thing I have is too much love. And one day far or near, I’ll show you. Share. Give some of my love to you. One day, our day will be the best day of my life. I hope when the day comes you’ll be ready because I’ve been ready every day of my life.

But I have to ask myself, what if you never come and I’m waiting forever? I don’t know what the future holds for us, but I know we will be beautiful because, in a world overrun by hate and regret, we are together.

I have met you, loved you, fought you, but I will never regret you. I promise.

One day, we’ll be watching TV or kissing the children good night, and I’ll remember this letter. That day I will have known that I’ve found you and maybe I’ll dig it up from a hidden box in the attic and read it to you. Then you’ll laugh, but I’ll smile because you’re right here.

I hope you’re having a good day and you’re smiling with all the joy in the world. Just know I will love you forever. And when our eyes finally meet and our paths cross I’ll be thinking of you, no matter what.

Best wishes with all the love in my heart,
Your Soulmate
Untitled
by Lakeva Lewis

*Freestate Challenge Academy*

Don't believe my words;
they’re lies that I fabricate
to project a perfect life and
convince you I’m okay.

Don't trust the smile you see;
it’s a façade to conceal
searing pain, acute shame,
sheer heartache.

Don't get fooled by my laughter;
it is merely an echo
of hollow insides, yearning
for senses to return.

Don't get convinced by my clarity
and order, born in an attempt to
control the chaos and pacify
the storm brewing inside.

Don't be blinded by
the perfection I exude,
the courage I fake,
the innocence I feign,
the confidence I wear—
for I am broken.
The Distance Between
by Kaya Dia

Baltimore City College High School, Grade 12

My mother once told me that it is better to be distant from someone and hurt them than to be close to them and hurt them. I’ve always disagreed with that; separation and complete absence are both a thousand times worse than closeness. If you’re close to someone, then there’s a chance of repairing the damage. If you’re distant, then how will you ever help that person heal? She’d disagree with me if I told her this, so I never have. I’ve only ever told Valentine, and he agrees with me. We both know better than she ever would.

The only thing my mother and I ever agree on is the source of my name: I was named after a witch. Witches aren’t real, of course, but are simply the name mortals created for Mages, never knowing that those they accused innocent women of being were creatures of their own creation. My namesake is fictional, the great Serafina Pekkala of the His Dark Materials series. She was wise and regal, two things I wish I was, and brave and honest, two things I know I am. Serafina Pekkala didn’t hide or shy away from her concerns and fears. And neither do I.

Which is why, in this moment, I am thinking of what my mother said, experiencing the precise reason why she was wrong. I sit on the stairs of my high school, a place that ten years ago, I thought I’d never see again. Waiting for Valentine, I watch as on the other side of the walkway, Luke stands, much taller and ten years older than I remember him. He’s talking to a girl and a boy who share a class with us, smiling and shaking his head, the movement sending his locs across his cheek. His smile is still the same, bright and unyielding. His eyes are still the same oak brown; his skin is still the same amber, his cheekbone still marked with a faint scar from when he fell and cut his cheek.

But so many things are different: his voice, his laugh, even how he stands. And something else. I want to speak to him, to catch up with him, but he won’t remember me. He isn’t supposed to; ten years ago, before we left, my mother put a block on his memories of me, of my family. He was getting too close, my mother had reasoned, and we can’t trust mortals or be sure that they can survive the Otherworld if they somehow become a part of it.

I was eight then, so I couldn’t argue, no matter how much I wished I could. And I never knew why Valentine’s family left with us, not that it mattered—I was just glad not to be alone. As we drove out of town, I’d spotted Luke sitting on his front porch, wanting to wave but knowing there was no point. That was when I realized that distance was not better than closeness.

And now I’m realizing it again, a heavy ache like a set of needles plunged into me in my chest. Luke doesn’t remember me. He isn’t supposed to. And maybe he is safer that way. Maybe he isn’t. It doesn’t change the fact that the damage done is irreparable. That he’ll never ask me what my parents are saying when they’re speaking Spanish, that Valentine and I will never get to share stories with him. The distance has been
made. And it has to be kept. I know that. And I know that I’m afraid he’ll recognize me or Valentine and remember everything. Like my namesake, I can admit that fear. And that fear keeps me from talking to him like I wish I could.

All I can do is wish and pray to the Elders that Luke doesn’t recognize me, silently wishing we hadn’t moved back.

Why had we moved back? I wonder, not for the first time. My mother has always wanted us to steer clear of mortals; she thinks that it’s as likely for us to be a danger to them as it was for them to learn of us and be a danger to us. So why?

I don’t get the chance to think about it: “Serafina,” comes a familiar voice from behind me.

I turn to see Valentine coming down the stairs, dark hair tousled and chocolate eyes framed by gold eyeshadow that shimmers under the sunlight. I smile when I see him, relieved and comforted all at once, a rush of heat crossing my skin.

“Hey. Are you ready to go?” I ask when he reaches me, standing.

Valentine nods. “Mh-hm,” he replies, already halfway down the steps. Responses like this from him are common, even with his family. My mother always says that he’ll only ever speak when he needs to, but somehow I feel like he saves his voice for me.

I follow him, our shoulders brushing as we walk. I’ve mostly forgotten Luke and my wish to speak to him, but as Valentine and I walk away from the school, I glance up just as we pass him. In the strangest of moments, my gaze lands on him, finding that his had been on me first. Our eyes meet, and in the brief second it takes for me to pass him, I see it. The recognition in his eyes.

So much for him not remembering.

Remember...where do I remember her from?

A hand waves in front of my face, a blur of silver and ivory. “Earth to Luke,” says Nora’s voice, and I start, thoughts snapping back to the present.

“Hm?” I turn back to Nora and Ezra, the two looking at me questioningly. Seeing their expressions, I feel a little guilty—we’d been having a very in-depth conversation about the possibility of using room-temperature superconductors as an energy source before I zoned out.

“Dude, where did your head go?” Ezra asks, voice amused.

I shake my head, wishing I could give him an answer that makes sense. One second I was thinking about physics and playing Okami HD, and the next, I wasn’t.

It was weird—I looked up and saw one of my classmates—Serafina, I think her name was—walking off with a tall boy I’ve never seen before. It wasn’t like it’s the first time I’ve ever seen her, but for some reason, when I saw her this time, she seemed familiar. Even her eyes, a gold flecked amber that lifted to meet my gaze, widening when she saw me watching her, were familiar, like a distant memory. It’s like I knew her from before, even though Nora told me she’d only just moved here. Or moved back, something like that. I guess it’s reasonable to assume that maybe she only looks familiar because she used to live here. But that’s not it. Somehow, I know that isn’t it. Where have I seen this girl before?

Who is she?
“To truly spend time with goldfish, you have to be a goldfish.”

This is easy for you. You position your head directly above the fishbowl on the table in front of you, close your eyes, and will yourself into being a goldfish. Anyone else might have found this strange, but this was normal for you, an ability all your relatives had. Shifting, they called it, a being with the ability to change at will for any situation. That was what you were. More or less.

You find yourself falling for two empty seconds until you break the surface of the water with a splash. Water surrounds you, and your human instinct is to move your arms and legs through the water, but you aren't human anymore. You're a goldfish. So you use your fins.

You use your fins and swim through the water that you always thought smelled a little strange, but now that scent is as normal to you as the scent of rain. You swim in circles around the other two goldfish whose empty eyes seem to register your presence but not the fact that you aren't really a goldfish. You find this strange. Most animals notice. But goldfish aren't very smart.

They are cautious, though. They swim away from you like you've approached them with an axe, threatening to hack them into little shimmering pieces. They swim to the other side of the fishbowl, and you follow them, realizing that this bowl really is quite small.

The goldfish swim away again, leaving you in their trail of bubbles, their flame-like scales glinting in a way that says, “Stay away!”

You, being the sensible goldfish that you are, listen. You listen, but you aren't happy because this moment is beginning to feel too synonymous to your life as a human. No one ever wants to be around you. You may find yourself in a group from time to time, but in minutes, that group has left you before you can be a part of the conversation. Even when you are in a group long enough, no one listens to you. It's like talking to four brick walls, walls with the ability to roll their eyes and trade looks that say, “What is he doing here?”

It's been happening all your life. It used to make you angry, but now you're used to it. It's why you bought the goldfish. It's nice to have a living thing to talk to. But apparently they couldn't give two shits about what you have to say either. Like everyone else.

Your life is miserable, you realize. You're alone. You like to tell yourself that you're a strong, stoic lone wolf, but that's a lie and you know it. No one is ever around, and you aren't even sure why. What is it that drives people away? Or, just keeps them away because they don't have the chance to get close. You don't know. You don't understand anything that's going on in your life. The most you can do is just suck it up and accept the solitude. No point trying to be something else.
You breathe, close your eyes, and wish to be yourself again. You emerge soaked, the fishbowl exploding into a million little shards and flying across your apartment. The goldfish fall like two gold stars to the ground, landing with a wet slap. You look down at them, wishing you felt bad but only feeling irritated.

You should have bought a cat.
Confined in the darkest corner of your domain, unable to see, yet there is light. Not a single sound, yet silence is the sweetest noise. Not one being beside you, no one to laugh with nor defend. Millions of thoughts looping through your head without end. On your own yet surrounded by friends.

Cherish the time, savor the moment: this is specifically for your enjoyment. Relish each marvelous minute. This isolation is meant to lift your spirit. This is the time to reflect on your life, to forget all of the pain and strife. This time helps you feel comfort in your skin, makes you feel glorious, outside and within. It teaches you how to be strong on your own because you are never lonely when alone.
“Mom, get up we can’t miss our flight!” Alice shouted as she burst into her mom’s room at 3 o’clock in the morning.

Squinting her eyes as she rose from her pillow, Alice’s mom said softly, “Honey, relax. Our flight is not until eight o’clock this morning, and the airport is a twelve-minute drive from here. We have plenty of time.” She proceeded to lie back down.

Alice returned to her room but still was not able to lie back down. She was so excited about this particular flight. This was the flight that she, her mom, and her younger sister would be taking in order to move to a new country. They were currently living in Thailand but were moving to Paris permanently because her mom was starting a new fashion career. Alice was so excited about a new journey in her and her family’s life.

“Hey Papa, I know you’re smiling down on us. I love you,” Alice prayed quietly as she held a picture of her and Papa in her arms while she was about to pack it up. Alice’s dad had passed away three years ago when Alice was only twelve and her younger sister was just three. Her mom had been having trouble trying to support the family on her own until she was discovered by a big-time fashion producer that came to visit Thailand a couple months back. The fashion producer had seen one of Alice’s mom’s designs and fallen in love instantly. Her mom received weekly pays for her creations, which had been supporting the family.

This big-time fashion producer thought that it would be more convenient if she moved permanently to Paris to sell her designs. Alice’s mom agreed, knowing it would create a better life for her girls.

“Mom, I’m hungry,” whined Marie, Alice’s six-year-old younger sister.

“Alright baby, we’re almost at the airport. We will grab some food there.”

They arrived at the airport thirty minutes early.

“What do you think of this dress, Mom?” asked Alice, as she twirled holding the dress in front of her.

“It’s gorgeous, honey,” said Mom.

Thirty minutes went by, and the plane finally arrived. Passengers quickly boarded the plane as the rain came down heavy outside. This would be a twelve-hour ride, so they had books to keep them company.

“I love you guys, and I’m so happy to be bringing my girls with me to live my dream,” said Mom as she wrapped her arms around the girls.

“We love you too mom,” said the girls

They snuggled together for twenty minutes straight.

Mom and Marie fell asleep. Alice returned to reading her favorite Harry Potter novel.

The flight was now four hours in but still eight hours to go.

“You girls hungry?” said Mom.
“No,” said Alice. Marie nodded yes as she reached to grab the sandwich her mom was giving to her.

“What’s the first thing you girls want to do when we arrive?”

“Shop and explore the town of course,” Alice eagerly stated.

“PLAY!” shouted Marie as she threw both hands up.

“Halfway there, we are halfway there, everybody,” said the co-pilot.

“Mom, why do people die?” asked six-year-old Marie.

“What would make you ask such a question out of the blue like that, sweety?” Mom curiously asked.

Marie stares out the window a seat across from her for a minute. “I don’t know, just wondering.”

“Well baby, as long as you are here with me in my arms, you don’t have to worry about a thing. I’m always with you, ok?” says Mom. “Don’t you forget,” she adds, pulling Marie tighter.

Alice grins and playfully pinches Marie’s cheek “Love you, little one.”

“I love you too, big sis,” says Marie, as her big wondering eyes look up at Alice.

Just four hours left to go on the plane.

“Hey Mom, remember that song you used to always sing,” Alice says.

“Oh you mean,” Mom pauses as they all three look at each other and begin, “My little baby, don’t ever grow up. I love you. I love you so so much.” They all laugh.

“You guys are crazy,” says Mom.

They all take a small nap.

Last three hours on the plane.

Alice wakes and continues to read her Harry Potter book while Mom and Marie sleep.

One hour later mom wakes up, and Marie is still asleep.

“Still reading that book, honey?” asks Mom “Yup,” replies Alice.

Click! Click!

Alice hears clicking sounds that worry her; she taps Mom. “Mom, do you hear that?”

Mom leans over and replies, “Oh sweety, I’m pretty sure that’s nothing to worry about.”

“Alright,” Alice says as she returns to reading her book.

Five minutes later.

Pow! A loud sound erupts from the side of the plane as if it was just struck by something huge.

“Mom!” yells Alice.

Marie wakes up confused. “What’s going on?” she says.

“It’s alright, babies,” says Mom as she wraps her arms around her babies and holds them tightly.

The plane rumbles and shakes aggressively.

“Attention passengers, attention passengers, there has been a sudden failure with the plane’s engine,” says the flight attendant. “We ask that you stay calm and follow the emergency safety procedures.”

“Mom, what’s going on?” asks Marie.

“Sweety, just follow the procedures,” Mom says as she frantically tries to make sure Alice and Marie are in the correct safety position.

“Mom, we’re going to die,” whimpers Alice as she tucks below.

“No sweetie, no!” says Mom loudly.

The plane continues to plummet.

Mom says a prayer quietly. “Dear God, let me and my babies make it out of here safely.”

The plane, falling at a fast rate, finally hits its landing.
Splash! Loud quakes of water all around.
The plane crashed into an open ocean of water.
Many passengers with their life jackets on follow the safety precautions to exit the plane safely and alive, though not every passenger made it.
Alice rises from the plane safely. She gasps for breath while looking around. No sign of Mom or Marie. “Mom, Marie where are you?”
Still no sign.
She swims back under only to see that Mom is still moving, but Marie’s life suit is still attached to the seat of the plane. She tries to go back under to help, but her Mom waves for her to keep going.
Mom tries and tries to pull six-year-old Marie up. “Come on, baby, come on,” she says. She will not go up until she has her baby. Mom has taken many breathing classes and has incredibly strong lungs, so she is able to maintain her breath for quite some time.
“Baby, please,” she says. Meanwhile Alice is still at the top, panicking like hell. Thoughts racing through her mind, she decides to swim back down. She approaches the plane to see Mom swimming back up dragging Marie’s body with her. They reach the top, and Mom takes a huge breath.
“Marie! Marie!” they scream while holding her body and tapping her face.
“Come on, baby. Mama’s got you,” says Mom as she holds her in her arms.
“Please God, don’t take my baby sister,” Alice prays quietly to herself. “Come on, come on,” she says.
Marie is completely unconscious. They hold her tightly as they wait for rescue.
The emergency rescue people finally arrive and gather everyone. There are people all around working to help everyone.
Pump! Pump! Pump!
The workers push on Marie’s body trying to get all of the water out. They perform CPR, and there is still no sign of breathing from her.
“I’m sorry, ma’am, but...” says a worker.
“No, no, no—that’s my baby,” says Mom as she cuts them off before they could finish their sentence.
Alice walks over and kisses Marie’s forehead. “I love you.” A tear sheds from Alice’s eyes.
“No!” screams Mom. “That’s my baby.” She’s holding onto Marie’s body and panting. “Please, no!” she shouts. Alice walks over and puts her arm around Mom for comfort.
The workers give them their time before taking the body.
“This is not how I envisioned our travel,” says Alice as she and her mom hugged while the sun sets behind them.
“Sometimes things happen that we don’t expect.”
I Remember
by Elisabeth Paulk

Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Grade 11

when i remember
i try to forget
no more tears
and late nights
no more guilt
and overthinking
move on i say
escape i command

when i remember
i run in fear
forgetting never
happens
crying never
relieves pain
only causes more
aching and screaming

when i remember
i struggle to sleep
scared of
bad memories
haunted by
nearly everything
if only time travel existed
i think i could rest
Monsters
by Elisabeth Paulk

Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Grade 11

monsters come through the floor
and grab me with their cold limbs
dragging me to a hell of
blizzards and hailstorms
and I stay there
it feels destined
until the monsters release me
and I come back

no one misses me
my days are spent
barefoot and naked
longing for winter’s return
and to feel numb again
needing someone who
cares enough to stay
I lay there waiting
for the monsters

and when
the monsters return
and embrace me with dead arms
they hold me close
so I can
feel their frigid breath
on my lips
they pull me back there
back to my frozen paradise
with mesmerizing hills of death
this time I stay
Weird to use singularly.
I can’t throw with it because it feels weird and
it goes the distance & height of a young child. It makes me feel younger, but in a bad
way.

It helps me carry boxes or other things.
But I can’t write with it either. It feels loose and odd to do.
When I put my pen or pencil to the paper, it feels like playing a video game with loose controls.
It results in the handwriting of a first grader.

But it helps with playing video games and eating and exercise. I wave, thumbs up,
and make signals with it. It helps me craft, build, and explain or communicate to others.
It is important to have even if it’s not the stronger or dominant one. But it’s helpful and great.

It’s not a tool, but a tool grasper. It’s not just something to have, but a gift. It’s not a thing, but a
thing to be grateful for.

It’s my right arm and hand.
I’m stressed. Stressed about what my second piece will be. Stressed about what my first video will be while watching one on mistakes other Youtubers make so I can prevent that. Stress is not a good feeling, not good to have, but you’re basically born with it. Stress is the main weakness people can have. It’s hard to overcome and deal with like Spiderman vs Green Goblin.

Stress is the main reason people don’t say things straight out. They think it won’t work out, it won’t go right, it won’t make a difference, but we as people don’t know that. Don’t think about the down side or it will lead to stress. Stay positive. Positivity builds up, but stress tears down. Stress is bad, frustrating, confusing, painful, and most of all, a weak spot.
Monsters In My Eyes
by Gerard Johnson

*The McDonogh School, Grade 10*

When I was young, I learned from Maya Angelou’s poetry and Basquait’s images not to let monsters frighten me.

Last year, I went to the *Monsters and Myths* exhibit at the BMA where the surrealist paintings welcomed my thoughts.

Reflecting on the paintings and aestheticization of politics, I realized the intersection between art, fascism, and totalitarian states.

The paintings that spoke to me were Picasso’s *Minotauromachy* and André Masson’s *Pasiphae* and *Tauromachy*. Max Ernst’s *Fireside Angel, The Barbarians*, and *The Horde* also left a lasting impression on me.

**Etymology:** Monster originated as a word for “divine omen or warning.” It is from the Old French *monstre*, from the Latin *monstrum*, a derivative of the verb *monere*, “to warn.” English derivatives of *monstrum*, some of them reflecting a later sense of *monere*, “show, inform,” rather than the original “warn,” include demonstrate, monstrance, muster, and remonstrate. And from *monere* itself comes...monument.

**Definition:** Monster (Noun): (1) A fabled animal combining features of animal and human form or having the forms of various animals in combination, as a centaur, griffin or sphinx. (2) Any creature so ugly or monstrous as to frighten people. (3) Anything unnatural or monstrous. (4) An animal or plant of abnormal form or structure, as from marked malformation, the absence of certain parts or organs, etc.

**Monsters in Political Thought**

According to Thomas Hobbes, the Leviathan represents the sovereign power of the state. This entity or beast is necessary to mitigate the random evil, chaos, and anarchy of the state of nature. The Leviathan also commands subordination in exchange for protection.

For Machiavelli, the Prince functioned best when he could channel his inner centaur.
For Nietzsche, “the state is the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also; and this lie creepeth from its mouth: ‘I, the state, am the people.’” At best, managed by the blond beasts.

Consequently, our stateside bridgehead to monstrosity, animality, and enslaved beasts is echoed by Thomas Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers when we learn, “West Africans, their frightful color, their low culture and stunted intellectual development, their libidinous practices and shocking lack of modesty by European standards, their primitivism, their savagery? Was not Africa a ‘dark continent’ filled with strange monsters and unnatural acts?” (Robert Westly)

**Historical Knowledge, Rejoinders, Reversals and Affective Beats**

“Only herein do they differ from other oxen, and further in the thickness and hardness of their hides. The Garamantians have four-horse chariots, in which they chase the Troglodyte Ethiopians, who of all the nations whereof any account has reached our ears are by far the swiftest of foot. The Troglodytes feed on serpents, lizards, and other similar reptiles. Their language is unlike that of any other people; it sounds like the screeching of bats.” (Herodotus)

Fortunately, there are rejoinders that “cast the working class in the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by enslaved ancestors rather than the ideal of liberated grandchildren.” (Walter Benjamin)

How animal go no seyy slave trade don pass.
Ahaand.
Dey one dash us human rights.
Animal must talk to human beings ...
Human rights nah my property.
Dey one dash us human rights ...
This uprising will bring out the beast in us. (3)
The KKK. My argument.” (Fela Kuti)

“Now, who’s the real thugs, killers and gangsters?
Set the revolution, let the things bust and thank us
When the smoke clear, you can see the sky again
There will be the chopped off heads of leviathan.”
(MF DOOM)

**Back to Baltimore’s Behemoths?**

“The essence...has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a phantom objectivity, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.” (Georg Lukacs)

State sovereignty represents biopower in Baltimore. According to Michel Foucault, sovereignty is inherently racist and depends on biopower that determines who lives and who dies with toxicity and who is made to live and “create living matter to build a monster and ultimately to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive.” (Foucault)

Unfortunately, we live through images such as Healthy Holly. Luke Broadwater’s reporting on Healthy Holly reminds us of the images of creatures we have to endure. Broadwater’s political
journalism, made with burnt orange and black eagle eyes, comes in like a wrestler. Broadwater saw through the caged Cathrine Pugh even though he resisted the temptation to demonize her because despite the toxicity of the Healthy Holly scandal, Broadwater could see through the smog and still see her as a citizen in violation of the law. Also, Broadwater’s political journalism is in line with Stuart Hall’s rejection of moral panics which demands that we see “the ideas and social images of crime which have thus been embodied in legal and political practices historically provide the present horizons of thought in-side our consciousness; we continue to ‘think’ in crime in them- they continue to think crime through us.” Again, they continue to think crime through us. For example, in Soderberg’s and Woods’s I Got a Monster, we see Baltimore’s new Leviathan and its complex agents. Soderberg and Woods ethnograph multiple monsters and substantiate Walter Benjamin’s critique of police violence. Through outstanding reporting, we find how Baltimore’s Gun Trace Task Force became the embodiment of Walter Benjamin’s observations on police violence and law enforcement:

the law of police really marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections within any legal system, can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain. Therefore, the police intervene, “for security reasons” in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists...Its power is formless, like it’s nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states. (Benjamin)

**Profane Illuminations I**

In my W.B.S seminar, when I asked Broadwater about Pugh he stated, “I do not think she is a monster, she is complex.” As a follow up question, I asked him, “How would you compare the illegality of the Gun Trace Task Force with the Healthy Holly scheme? He replied, “I would not consider Pugh to be a monster, but the men in the Gun Trace Task Force are monsters.” Then we learn that Jenkins, the head of the Gun Trace Task Force himself, becomes a monster. “In his hunt for ever bigger off the book heists, Jenkins had become a monster in a minivan.” Only to find out later that the Arendtian Honorable Judge X, who also happens to be a protagonist of I Got a Monster, declares, “The evidence in front of me is that Mr. Shropshire continued to sell this poison to other people’s parents and other people’s children, affecting many, many other lives during the course of his criminal activity. Does that mean he is a monster? Of course not ... But it is also just inescapable that he, again, has participated in a very dangerous and destructive activity for many years.” In a similar vein on a much larger and principled scale, Hannah Arendt refused to call Adolf Eichmann a monster.

**Ethnographing Monsters**

Men committed unlawful acts, but they are not monsters. It is dangerous to interpellate men as monsters. Once we do, men become unrecognizable enemies distorted beyond all recognition and become monstrous foes. Our legal system should not be based on the destruction of enemies or foes. In fact, I believe, as Judge X said, that Shropshire was not a monster, and on a larger scale, I am forced to think with and against Hannah Arendt that Eichmann was not
a monster, he was merely a man before the law. Literary devices and the irony of master tropes need to be reckoned with. It is ordinary for the culture industry to peddle monsters, myths, khaki cupidity, and stereotypical stupidity. To ensnare dark monsters in zoography is good for the culture industry and business.

**Minding Monsters in I Got A Monster**

“Monster—it was one of Jenkins favorite words, and horrific title applied to dealers worth robbing...”

“Jenkins was both a connoisseur of crimes and a practitioner logging long hours monitoring the ‘private’ conversations of monsters...”

“Jenkins had found a monster: Damon Hardrick, ‘fucking baller,’ according to Jenkins...”

“Jenkins gave Rayam the name of a monster ‘This dude at least good for two hundred’...”

“This is my life. Don’t lie on me like that.’ Rayam walked off. He looked ghoulish in the flashing red lights of the accident investigation car. It was almost dark now, the sky a fulgent purple...”

“The suppression hearing and the Franks hearing, if it was necessary, were set for Halloween. A perfect day to confront monsters...”

“GTTF took on a mythical quality. The department had a history of changing the names of plainclothes squads when they got in trouble. OCD becomes VCID becomes VCIS becomes SET becomes SES. This scandal was of a different order of magnitude. The GTTF would not disappear.”

“When Jenkins used the word monster, he was talking about scale. A drug dealer was a monster in the same way a truck was a monster. Something bigger, better, extraordinary...”

**Profane Illuminations II**

“[Bmore] metropolis, the Bridge brings apocalypse Shoot at the clouds feels like, the holy beast is watching us...” (Nas)

“You think it is only God who sees the soul? ... He could not believe that he made this portrait, yet there was his own name just as he had painted it. This is monstrous. It’s beyond nature. Beyond reason. What does it mean?” (Albert Lewin)

“This space of all-seeing power, where one sees without being seen, is often described metaphorically as the space of the gods... It was almost like they were ants down there, predictable in their behavior to some degree of mathematical probability, no more aware of the Predator’s presence than the Almighty watching them... ‘I felt like God hurling thunderbolts from afar, and I truly felt a bit like an omnipotent god with a god’s seat above it all.’ Such turns of phrase are a common trope in commentary about drones.” (Hugh Gusterson)

“There are three levels of extreme paramilitary waste flying around in Baltimore skies this weekend ..To watch a bunch of dumb
planes fly through the air is just maddneing.”
Brandon Soderberg

In closing, the militarization of culture and the hunt for monsters according to Soderberg and Woods does not cease with judges and police because there are war machines in our midst. We are left to believe that monster spirits like an anti-christ can mutate and cannot be permanently destroyed, but only subdued and restrained by a legal katechon and not civil society; here we are reminded of Walter Benjamin’s ominous warning about the angel of history.

“This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.” (Benjamin)

“We still here representin’ dead or in prison with ghetto scripture.” (Cormega)
I remember a loving embrace and the smell of cigarette smoke.
I remember crab gumbo on my aunt’s porch, a hot summer’s day.
I remember your smile as you beat us at another mini game on Wii play.
I remember chocolate milk, a small cot, and your shack house in Mississippi.
I remember overwhelming grief at 10 years old and not knowing how to escape that feeling.
I remember your funeral at Antioch Baptist church and my older cousins making me kiss your cheek. It felt cold and like someone I didn’t recognize.
I remember the summer where we had to take naps.
I remember the amount of complaining we did when you made us go outside for a set amount of time. We sat in the garage and said so many things.
I remember when you went bald and how the illness took the hair that was your crown.
I remember self-harming for the first time after your funeral and thinking that heaven would be better than here.
I remember feeling depressed for a long time but not knowing how to name it.
I remember feeling bad when people told me not to cry on your anniversary and how I thought not feeling sad was almost like not remembering you at all.
I remember graduating 5th grade and you weren’t there. And high school. And college.
I remember that you would want me to live everyday to the fullest and to the best of my ability.
I remember that you loved us so much, and that’s one thing that I’ll never forget.
Hunger
by Brandi Randolph

Dear You,
You weird creation inside me, near the small and large intestines. I want to apologize to you for all the pain you had to endure. It all started when someone you cared about called you fat, and then it spiraled from there. You were skinny then; now you have expanded and gotten healthier. I’m proud of you for that. Once a consciously-starved form of tissue and acid. To feelings of joy when full. I’m sorry that guilt creeps into the host’s head after a couple of days. You’re full of the come-ins and flow-outs. Of the sustenance that resides in you. You have seen torn-apart and spit-out days. You have known you-are-okay days. Once a punching bag for anxiety nights and a lonely and desolate vessel, I forgot how to love. I’m proud you’re not now. One day you will swell and become a home for another and their father’s kisses. I promise to continue to try to keep you healthy and love you the way you deserve too.

Sincerely,
Me
“Deema! The kids! Are they okay?” He looked around frantically trying to find his curly blonde wife and children. They were his life. If he lost them, he didn’t know what he would do with himself.

“They should be,” Heed started to explain before Juul grabbed Agual by his shoulders. He held the panicking man and growled out in annoyance, “Sit still you fool! You still have a head wound and can barely stand. Now is not the time for your dramatic heroics!”

Agual flinched back as he grabbed his head, as if the reminder had physically caused his head to throb even harder. Juul left the two males to talk as he made his way up the stairs.

“Don’t worry, my friend. Juul is going upstairs to check up on them. Let’s get you on the couch to rest up for a bit,” he overheard Heed say as he made it to the second floor.

Juul looked around the empty hallway, and his eyes landed on the one door that was open. Walking inside with his sword drawn, he almost immediately let go of his defensive stance as he rushed over to Deema. She was groaning in pain from what appeared to be a head wound. Juul looked her over and realized it was her only injury, not even as bad as Fance’s. He made quick work of patching her up before taking a step back and trying to speak to her.

“Deema? Can you hear me?” His voice was softer than what most thought possible for the ole retired duelist. Deema blinked a couple of times as she finally looked up to see who was speaking to her.

“Juu,” she whispered, and he held back a sob.

“Yes, I’m here, Dee.” With his hands up to show that he meant no harm, he couldn’t help but look into those vibrant blue eyes. He could see how dull they looked now, like she had aged a couple of years since he last saw her. Her blonde hair was matted with dried blood, and she looked pale.

Sirl and Nul came upstairs to see the two of them on the floor. Sirl looked over to the crib to see Ace Fance. It seemed the youngest runt was missing. Watching Sirl’s movements, Deema turned to look over to the crib as well, and her breath hitched; it felt like the world was coming down and crashing onto her shoulders as she let out a broken sob. Her heart felt heavy as she stumbled to get up, swatting away Juul’s arms as he tried to help. Ace was looking around to see these adults. His throat hurt as he tried to let out a cry, but he could only manage to whimper in fear. His brother was gone. A weird looking animal with large floppy ears took his brother while he was sleeping. The weird animal thing had left Ace to sit and whimper out to the room, in hopes of someone hearing him. He felt so scared and alone and he just wanted to be held.
“Acces?” Deema’s voice rang out in the nursery.

Where Acces normally slept was now empty. His favorite stuffed panther, named Yooli, was missing a leg, and his favorite blanket was gone. Deema backed away from the crib while clutching her head. The three men could only watch as she broke down. It broke Juul to see the woman he cared for so deeply break down in front of him, knowing he could do nothing to help. Tears streamed down Deema’s face as she continuously muttered, “No, no, no, no, no!” The mutters eventually rose in volume until she was screaming in anguish.

Nul took a small step towards her, her blood was rising significantly as her emotions took over her judgment. Skin turning red with hot anger and fear, her hair started to rise as her teeth, along with her nails, began to sharpen as her creature side started to show. “Deema—”

She ran past him and into the hall, stumbling a bit as she clutched to the wall as she made her way to the stairs. “Acces!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Downstairs Heed and Agual looked up to see Deema frantically running around.

“Dee?” Agual asked softly.

Deema turned her head. “He’s gone, Agual! He’s gone!” A broken sound came from her mouth as she clutched the panther to her chest. She’d scooped the small stuffed animal out of the crib without even realizing it.

Heed couldn’t help but ask, “Who’s gone, Deema?”

Deema’s head spun towards Heed so fast he thought she might have had whiplash, “Acces! Acces IS GONE!”

At that Agual jumped from his seat screaming, “What!?”

Before anyone could say or do anything, Deema ran out of the house as she started calling for her green-eyed child. In her blind panic, she hoped if he heard her voice he would call back out to her like he always did. Just like when they played together in the backyard, but deep down she knew that wasn’t going to happen. Juul and Agual ran over to the weeping woman to catch her as she fell to the ground. She was still in her other form, but they didn’t care. They might not like each other, but they certainly both cared for the blonde-haired woman being supported by their arms alone.

She hugged both males close to her as she let out her wails of anguish.

“Where’s my baby Agual? Where’s my baby? My baby, my baby, my baby,” she kept saying as both males tried to hold it together for the broken-hearted woman. Agual was silently crying but didn’t make a sound as he tried to be strong for his wife. Juul was at a loss for words seeing his best friend like that, but he could feel her pain. When he first got a picture of Acces, Deema sent him a letter explaining that he was Acces’s godfather. He had been over the moon. He might have struggled with distinguishing and outwardly displaying his emotions, but Acces and Deema were the only two that held a place in his heart.

A tear even managed to roll down his face as he heard those unanswered questions fall from her mouth.
Life
by Lucaya Henfield
Margaret Brent Elementary/Middle School, Grade 8

All good things must come to an end, I know,
Like a favorite movie or a book.
   It’s not fair, I know.
I know that life can, and will, take something you love and care for
and then steal it away.
   Just like that.
   Gone in an instant.
Like a snowflake disappearing in the palm of a hand.

But still, it’s not fair.
It’s not fair that people think that they have something
that they believe will last forever,
   and then it’s gone.
   It’s not fair.
   Life isn’t fair.
Nothing is ever really fair,
even when it seems like it’s fair.
Blue
by Lucaya Henfield

*Margaret Brent Elementary/Middle School, Grade 8*

Blue can be as calming as the morning sea breeze,
But as powerful as a tsunami in a summer storm,
As pretty as the most exotic bird,
As moving as a song,
As soft as a cloud.

Blue is bold, balanced, and beautiful.
First Day of School
by Maha Saleh

Reginald F. Lewis High School, Grade 9

When I came to the USA, it was hard for me. I tried to be confident and I will not be fearful, but when I signed up in the school on my first day of school in the USA was really hard. I was fearing, and I didn't like to do anything. I decide to withdraw from school, leave the school because I don't understand anybody and nobody understands me. I was crying every day and I decided to begin with learning English by myself because I was not getting anything from my teacher because I want to learn fast and my teacher teach me like a child. I want to be able to talk with my teachers and my friends, but I couldn't learn fast. But when I start to follow learning like a child, that was helpful. I was feeling shame and uncomfortable when I am talking. I thought I am wrong and nobody understand me, but after a week I got better and I realize that I can be more. I started to learn on Youtube and on Duolingo. I looked for many resources to learn as soon as possible, and I got much till now. I remember my first day and, when I was crying, I decide to not be afraid of anything from now on and always help people because I really do believe that the more you give the more you get.
Art class had become torturous for Virgo. Now that she was a junior, she had to endure long hours in Mr. Rose’s studio, which had been fine when Virgo was younger, but now she didn’t want to disappoint him, and she knew the longer she spent in his class, the more time he had to study her declining moral character.

But recently it had become harder to stay awake. Since Virgo ate almost nothing, she had no actual energy to use, and Mr. Rose’s class being the last one of the day, she started falling behind on her panels because she would just fall asleep. The bell would startle her awake, and she would bound out of the classroom as fast as she could before Mr. Rose could get to her. Today he got her in a trap.

“Alright class, remember to finish up the color studies for submission! Digital students get ready to start. Also, Virgo, can you hang back for a second.”

Shit. He got her in front of the whole class. She felt her face flush and burn with panic. She tried to hide her panic by shrugging the sleep off her shoulders slowly and yawning, acting like everything was no big deal.

“I finally caught the elusive Virgo.” Mr. Rose smiled kindly, making a Pokémon reference that he and Virgo bonded over the first day of freshman year.

“Hi Mr. Rose,” she said, not looking up from her portfolio that she was trying to organize in a desperate attempt to fool her teacher into thinking she had been more productive than she actually was.

“How have you been feeling, sweetie?” he said kindly, sitting on the art table next to hers. Her eyes darted up with the same angry expression she had given Charlie earlier for asking the very question and muttered a simple yet fierce “fine” before turning her attention back to her portfolio and incomplete slides.

“Virgo, I’m worried about you,” Mr. Rose said, unamused by the teenager’s sass. “I know it’s been difficult since your mom died, but you sleep all the time and you look like hell. You’re behind in all your classes, and you haven’t gone to Miss Crystal’s first period in almost a week.”

At this point, Virgo was studying her fingernails. She noticed Darius had stopped speaking and looked up.

“Am I free to go?” she said angrily.

“No, I’m not done,” he said slightly annoyed. “Virgo, talk. Talk to me. What’s happening with you?”

“I’m on my period?” she tried, wincing in an attempt not to laugh.

“Try again,” Mr. Rose said, slightly amused, pushing his glasses back to the perfect resting spot on his nose.

She groaned and slumped down into the art chair.

“Virgo, it’s me or it’s Miss Hall.”
“It’s Miss Hall no matter what. Y’all are mandatory reporters,” Virgo said, smirking at her teacher.

“Ah-ha!” Mr. Rose exclaimed. “You admit it,” he said, lightly tapping his hand on the table he sat on in victory.

Virgo groaned in defeat as she picked at her fingers, avoiding his desperate eye contact. She clenched her jaw as she felt his eyes burn into her skin, how he must see everything. He must. He must see the skipped meals, the parties, the endless naps still not being enough to curb her exhaustion, the deadbeat, depressed dad who never came home anymore, the cigarettes on the fire escape, the burning obsession with being thin enough, the tears, the nights spent missing the dead mom, the endless hours of just sitting in the bathtub in nothing but her black lingerie trying to see something, anything that made her beautiful. He must see her panic when Miss Visage met with her to talk about her dad and how he was arrested again last night, and he must see the Uncle in Michigan who wants to take her away from her entire life in New York. But, of course, he didn’t see any of those things, but she wished he did, so she didn’t have to say any of them out loud.

“Virgo?” he said patiently.

“Hm?”

“What’s going on with you?” he said, his sad eyes looking for hers. She knew what he was doing, and yet she wouldn’t allow their eyes to meet because she knew she would burst into tears.

She tried to quickly calculate her answer. To give one that was significant enough to justify her recent change in demeanor but not enough for Mr. Rose to drag her down to go talk to Miss Hall.

“It’s just my mom is all,” she said, biting the inside of her cheek fiercely as to not allow any tears to even start to flow. “She really liked my art, and now that it’s like... getting closer to our college submission projects I just feel like a lot more pressure cause I want to do really well for her. But it’s also hard because I’m mad at her for dying,” she said quickly and without much emotion.

Mr. Rose frowned sympathetically and stood up slowly. “Can i give you a hug?” he asked.

“No. I really don’t want to cry because I think if I start I’m not gonna stop,” she said giving an awkward laugh, not believing the words had actually left her own mouth.

Just then Lem came into the room. Virgo had never been more relieved in her life.

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you, bitch! Miss Nicki made me retake a French test that I failed,” Lem said, shaking his head, complaining to Mr. Rose

“Oh god,” Virgo whined, shrinking into her chair. “I completely forgot about my meeting with her.” She was visibly frustrated at herself and Mr. Rose, who had thrown off her schedule of avoiding everyone and everything.

“I’ll talk to her,” Mr. Rose said, patting her head reassuringly, almost stifling his laughter. “Finish your goddamn color study tonight!” he said sternly, but in a way that made Virgo feel at ease.

“Okay,” she laughed, packing up her stuff, getting ready to go back to the comforts of Brock’s apartment.

“Virgo,” he said seriously. “I’m being serious! I’m emailing Brock.”

“Okay, Dad,” she said sarcastically, laughing as she left arm in arm with Lem.
Cold. Everything is always cold. But the kind of comforting cold. The kind of cold that burns your eyelashes when you go out in the snow. The cold you feel as the ice water dribbles down your chin on a hot day. The kind of cold that you feel when you're lonely but not sad about it.

Cold is when I can hide
hide in my hoodies
and sweats
tube socks
and sneakers
and hide away, and feel like everyone else.
I'm still cold, but it's nice
the nice kind of cold
the cold that comes with success.

Because being warm is scary.
Because warm is tank tops and tiny shorts and ice cream cones and swim suits.
Because warm is swimming pools and diving boards and beaches full of eyes.
Warm is picnics and last night's texts and you'll never guess what he said.
Because warm is look at what you'll never be.
Warm is look at me, tell me how good I look, look at how many more friends I have.
Warm is time, time we didn't have before, time for car rides, and late night talks that birth the breathless I love yous.
Because warm gives us time for growing up too fast together, getting high on your mother's porch, the meaningless sex, me thinking I'm in love and opening up and you only managing a I think you look pretty because all you wanted was a summer fling and not a psych case of a girlfriend and all I can do is cry and wish the cold would come back faster.
Warm is a failure.

“It’s so cold in your room,” I hear my dad say. If only he knew.
Alone
by Mazira Finley

Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Grade 11

Alone I am. Alone I sit. Wondering why the world knocked me out of the fun. Alone, alone I chose not. A boyfriend at least 30 miles away from me I may not hug or hold. I feel alone and cold, society said u aren't what we are looking for... try again please. Why? I’ve must have tried 100 times in my 16 years of living, and I’ve been denied a spot every time... I choose not to change for a place where people are given to look a certain way, to not do certain things, and to act as if they are hooligans.... why must I? I am here to show that the world can be different, the world isn't filled with nasty, heartless people. Maybe I’m just not cut out for the team, so I look for a way to get off the bench... but maybe I need some healing... instead of trying to prove my worthiness to people who suffer to try everyday to fit in... maybe I need to just realize my worthiness... I’m stuck tho, I’m lost. I feel still... my heart from trying isn’t as warm as it used to be... my head no longer thinks straight from trying to get others approval... maybe I’m sucked up in the vacuum like all the other trash... I’ve done it to myself tho. Yeah, all I do now is sit home and play fortnite and jam Billie Ellish in my headphones... Alone, alone I sit. Waiting for a person to say let’s go to a movie... but no, let me get the answers for the homework... why you do... let me stop you right there... please don’t judge what you see or what I say... you left me alone, alone I must stay.
The forgotten land
by Javonte Patterson

Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Grade 9

In a land of distorted fairy tales
a life I will never know
a twisted broken mirror
something without love

In a place of tearful dreams
an endless hellish curse
a fortune teeming with lies
another heart dies

In a world of beautiful memories
where life goes cold
where sadness shall be old
where the dark abyss grows

In this forest of ended stories
and happiness only a myth
only cypress shall bloom
angels cease to exist

And this land will fall deeper
into sorrow, into despair
and this will never change
because no one truly cares
The fall of snow can be heard in the space I stand.
A room full of memories swirling just out of reach.
They all are categorized with different colours, but I cannot recall how.
But I can clearly see that those memories are coloured with black.

And the snow melts into rain.
Another voice,
one younger, but not of mine,
Whispers

And so, will you travel through the mirror?
Challenge your actions, words,
The moments that brought you to this place?
The voice echoed through the void.

I watch as a black memory drifts down to where I stand,
And like a wide window I can clearly see that moment in time.

You may only guide yourself to the right decisions, only a small voice in their head.
No interaction will you two have.

I take my warnings and walk to the memory, ready to step through. But unready for what awaits.
Do I really want to see them again?
That one who has already stolen so much from me.

And the last raindrop falls,
But not from the endless blank sky.
波のレンガ (Renga of the waves)
by Javonte Patterson

Stone
hard, unbreakable, and strong
yields to the water.

And the rivers carve the canyons;
we need it to survive.
And the water gives us strength
but can also take lives.
It’s moldable, flexible, fluid.
It can take any form,
from harming hail and blinding mist
to the raging thunder storm.

The rushing waves
engraved the land
and gave to us the world
we are enslaved to.

But also the world we are free to explore.
My mom named me Mallory for a reason, not because the name sounds angelic. She named me Mallory because it means unlucky and unfortunate, like she’s been calling me for nineteen years of my life. I was born in March, on Friday the 13th. Of all months and all days, I would be born on the day of a horror movie, and of course it would be thunderstorming. My mom told me I was small and fragile. I was very skinny and pale as a ghost covered in blood. She said I was kind of scary to look at, and she wouldn’t hold me or smile until they wiped my blood-stained body. My ribcage was visible, and if you looked closely at my chest you could even see my heart beating. I didn’t cry once, even when they weighed me by placing me on the ice cold scale, probably as cold as a refrigerator. I was 1 pound and 2 ounces, which was very low, lower than the usual weight of a baby, 5 pounds and 8 ounces.

The doctor said I had a low possibility of living too, but by God’s miracle, I did.

When my mom told me about what happened, I ordered a silver cross necklace from Amazon. Mom was wondering why I ordered a cross necklace because we never went to church, we weren’t religious, nor did we have any religious beliefs. I told her that if it weren’t for God, I might not be alive today. Which I’m sure she could care less about. “We should thank him for every day that he’s blessed us with.” She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Okay, Mallory.” Sometimes when I was praying, whether it be before I went to bed or before I ate dinner, I would ask God why my mother had named me Mallory and why she saw me as an unlucky disappointment. I mean, sure, sometimes things happen coincidentally, but that can’t explain everything.
My Dad is Mr. D
by Dahlia Barclay

City Neighbors Hamilton, Grade 8

"Losing is a prize in itself. It just shows how persistent you are at achieving goals."

Ran Emilia Christine. Height: 4’11”. Weight: 90.5 lbs. Parents: Sherry Pamela Christine, father unknown. Ever since I was a little girl I loved to run, even when I was being born. Sherry told me as I was being delivered my legs and my arms were moving as if I were running. That’s all I could ever think about was to run, beads of sweat running down the sides of my face. My muscle-toned legs carrying me across the field, like how most birds have wings that carry them so far up and away.

"Losing is a prize in itself. It just shows how persistent you are at achieving goals, Ran.” Those were the exact words my father whispered in the tape recorder. They felt calm and soothing, like walking on a beach, gulls squawking, flying above the peach-colored sky, the tide pulling onto the beach and pulling out. I’d never met—let alone knew—I had a father until I listened to his deep gentle voice, the kind of voice you hear on National Geographics or animal documentaries. Sometimes I would play the tape recorder endlessly for hours, the same quote being repeated. I’d listen to his voice so much I’d cry or dream or use every 11:11, 12:12, or birthday wish I had, but I should’ve known.