

THE PODIUM FOUNDATION

PODIUM JOURNAL 9

The Literary Arts Journal for
Richmond Youth



I Podium

"When I first went to Podium, I didn't go in the room.
I kept walking passed it thinking, should I go in?
When I performed my first piece, I cried afterwards.

Podium didn't belittle me.

They asked how I felt after reading.

It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders and all of
my emotional barriers were removed.

Podium is a family."

Oneisha, Huguenot High School Alum



A GENTLE SIGH

REY F.

THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

THE SUN SETS OVER FRACTURE, CALIFORNIA, PAINTING THE SKY IN A LAVENDER HUE. LARGE, WHITE, TRIANGULAR GLYPHS HANG IN THE SKY, MAKING THE MANY STARS SEEM SMALL AND IRRELEVANT AGAINST THE MAUVE BACKGROUND. FRACTURE IS AN AVERAGE SIZED TOWN, WITH A LARGE MAZE OF SUBURBS AND APARTMENTS TO THE NORTH. THE TOWN HALL, FRACTURE COMMUNITY PARK, WITH ITS WILLOWS AND DUCK PONDS, AND OTHER PLACES OF RECREATION, ARE TO THE EAST. TO THE WEST SITS THE BEACH, BASKED IN PURPLE LIGHT. LAZY WAVES LAP THE SHORE. BELOW THE SURFACE LIE GROVES OF KELP, SWAYING WITH THE EBB AND FLOW OF THE OCEAN AND HIDING WHO KNOWS WHAT.

A YOUNG COUPLE SITS ON A TOWEL BETWEEN THE DUNES, WATCHING THE GLOWING SUN MELT INTO THE SEA. THEY HOLD HANDS AND EAT ORANGE DREAMSICLES; THEY ARE HAPPY. ACROSS THE TOWN, A WHITE-HAIRED GIRL SITS ON THE ROOF OF HER PARENTS' HOUSE, LISTENING TO THE PLAYLIST HER GIRLFRIEND MADE FOR HER THROUGH HER EARBUDS. SHE CLUTCHES A STUFFED BUNNY IN HER ARMS AND HAS A CREAM-COLORED BLANKET WRAPPED AROUND HER. SHE SIGHS. ON MONDAY, SHE KNOCKED THE SCREEN OUT OF HER WINDOW, SO SHE COULD SIT OUT THERE WHEN SHE'S SAD. SHE SIGHS AND LOOKS UP AT THE TRIANGULAR GLYPHS GLOWING WHITE IN THE EMPTY SPACE OF THE ATMOSPHERE, DETERMINED TO SOMEDAY FIGURE OUT WHAT THEY ARE.

ZIFE

KENNIJAH W.

JOHN MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

LOVE IS A BOOK HIDDEN IN THAT DUSTY, UNATTRACTIVE BOOK CASE. THAT STUPID BOOK IS HARD TO FIND EVERY TIME I LOOK FOR IT. THE BOOKCASE ALWAYS SHAKES, AND THE WRONG BOOKS FALL IN MY HAND. IT'S VERY HARD FOR ME TO DROP THEM. I HAVEN'T FOUND MY OWN STORY YET, SO THE CLIMAXES IN OTHER, WRONG BOOKS KEEP COMING. DAYS PASS.

I'M UNHAPPY AND WAKE TO SEE THAT SAME LIBRARY, THE ONE THAT KEEPS JUDGING ME, DEPRESSING ME. I WALK INTO THE LIBRARY AND SEE A GIRL. SHE ISN'T MAD, SAD, OR HAPPY. SHE IS JUST OKAY, HOLDING A BOOK IN HER HAND. I LEAN IN TO LOOK CLOSER, AND IT SAID ZIFE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS, BUT IT TAKES MY EYE. AS SOON AS THAT GIRL WALKS OUT, I RAN RIGHT TO THE COUNTER TO ASK THE LADY ABOUT THE BOOK. "I'M SORRY MA'AM, BUT SOMEONE HAS ALREADY CHECKED IT OUT."

I WAITED AND WAITED FOR ABOUT A WEEK, UNTIL ONE DAY, I WENT TO THAT SAME BOOKCASE AGAIN. SOMETHING TOLD ME TO LOOK HIGHER. I GRABBED THE LADDER AND WENT TO THE LAST SHELF AT THE TOP. I SAW IT, ZIFE. A MONTH LATER, I WALK BACK INTO THE LIBRARY TO RETURN THE BOOK. THAT SAME GIRL WALKS PAST ME AGAIN, NOW HOLDING A BOOK THAT READ, ZIFE 2.

**BLIND EYE
HANK B.
OPEN HIGH SCHOOL**

THEY COME IN DROVES, PILES, MASSES OF FLESH. EACH CARRIES A NEED. EACH AND EVERY. ALL ARE DEPRIVED OF WHAT YOU'VE GOT, THE COOL, THE LOVE, THE HEALTH. EYES BULGE FROM THEIR SKULLS, SKIN PULLED THIN OVER BONE, AND PAIN PLAGUES EVERY OUNCE. HELP, I'VE WRITTEN THAT TWICE OVER. THE LEAD IS PUSHED DEEP INTO THE PAPER, AND EVEN NOW, IT CONTROLS MY PENCIL AND WON'T LET GO. THEY TRY IT. YOU HEAR THEM AND THEIR DESPAIR, SIDE BY SIDE. YOU HEAR THEM FROM YOUR BARSTOOL AND YOUR HOUSE-SIZED POOL; YOU HEAR THEM. THEY SCARE YOU.

WHAT? SCARE? THEY NEED SO LITTLE OF THAT WHICH THERE IS SO MUCH OF, AND YET YOU SPARE NONE, AND THEY DIE. YOU PUSH THEM FROM YOUR ABUNDANT LUXURY AND MAKE THEM ROT.

DETENTION

KEYSHARERAH W.

JOHN MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

IN THE BACK OF THE CLASSROOM SAT A DARK-SKIN GIRL WITH FULL LIPS AND A FULL ON ATTITUDE. SHE SAT IN THE CHAIR AND PICKED AT HER THICK, DARK BROWN HAIR, TANGLED AND FULL OF KNOTS. IF IT WASN'T IN A BIG AFRO YOU WOULD THINK SHE HAD A BAD HAIR DAY.

"QUAERA?" THE BROWN GIRL LOOKED UP. IT WAS COURAGE. QUAERA ROLLED HER EYES; SHE NEVER REALLY LIKED COURAGE. SHE WAS ALWAYS SMART, ALWAYS STUDYING, AND ALWAYS PICTURE PERFECT, FROM HER TIGHT BOX BRAIDS TO HER BABY DOLL SHOES. "WHY ARE YOU HERE?" SNAPPED QUAERA. COURAGE WAS ALWAYS THE ONE TO BACK DOWN, BUT NOT TODAY.

"I'M HERE BECAUSE THE TEACHER TOLD ME TO KEEP AN EYE ON YOU," COURAGE STATED, A BIT TOO BOLDLY FOR HER OWN LIKING. QUAREA SMILES. "FIGURES. WELL, TAKE A SEAT. ME AND YOU ARE GONNA BE HERE FOR A WHILE," SHE LAUGHED.

JUST THEN, THEY BOTH TURNED THEIR HEADS AT THE SOUND OF THE DOOR OPENING. SCREAMING, "I HATE THIS SCHOOL!" WAS STAR, UPSET BECAUSE SHE WAS MISSING A DATE. AS STAR SAT DOWN IN FRONT OF THE TWO GIRLS, SHE COULD FEEL THEM WATCHING HER. "WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?" SHE SNAPPED AT COURAGE. ANOTHER WAVE OF BOLDNESS WENT THROUGH COURAGE. "A HO*," SHE STATED.

THAT SET STAR OFF. SHE HAD ENOUGH OF BEING CALLED SOMETHING SHE WAS NOT. JUST BECAUSE SHE LIKED TO DATE FROM TIME TO TIME DIDN'T MEAN SHE DID SO WITH EVERYONE. SHE LAUNCHED OVER THE CHAIR AND LIFTED COURAGE OFF HER SEAT. USUALLY, COURAGE WOULD HAVE BEEN TERRIFIED, BUT IN THAT MOMENT, SHE TOOK A GOOD LOOK AT STAR. SHE STUDIED HER FEATURES, HER CARAMEL SKIN, SMALL, YET SEDUCTIVE BODY, AND HER DEEP BROWN EYES. COURAGE REALIZED WHY BOYS LOOK AT STAR WITH LUST.

MR. MATHEWS, COMING BACK FROM THE BATHROOM, SCREAMED, "NO ROUGH HOUSING IN DETENTION!" STAR QUICKLY PUT COURAGE DOWN AND SAT IN HER SEAT WITH AN EVIL GLARE. "YOU ARE ALL IN HERE FOR A REASON. QUAREA FOR WALKING OUT OF CLASS IN A PROTEST, STAR FOR MAKING INAPPROPRIATE COMMENTS IN CLASS, AND YOU, MS. COURAGE, FOR FIGHTING WITH A TEACHER." MR. MATHEWS SMILED AN ODD SMILE, "GIRLS' DETENTION IS NOW IN SESSION."

NARROW ALLEY

GAIL L.

THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

SMALL, GREY SMOKE PUFFS CAN BE SEEN FROM A MILE AWAY INTO THE WHITE-STAINED SKY ABOVE. THE SUN ONLY BARELY PEEKS OUT FROM THE CLUSTER OF CLOUDS PARADING IT. IF YOUR EYES FOLLOW THE SMOKE, IT WOULD LEAD STRAIGHT TO A SMALL, WELL-LIT FIRE WHERE FREEZING HANDS DESPERATELY TRY TO REACH ITS WARMTH. COATS, SCARVES, AND PIERCING BLOODSHOT EYES ACCOMPANY THOSE HANDS.

AROUND THIS FIRE, THERE IS A VERY DIM LIGHT, AND YET FURTHER, NOTHING BUT COLD DARKNESS. A TINY LIGHT FROM A CIGARETTE LIGHTER MAY BE VISIBLE, EVERY NOW AND THEN. HUSHED MURMURS AND HISSES FROM STARTLED CATS CAN BE HEARD CLEARLY IF YOU'RE STANDING THERE YOURSELF. SIRENS CLOSE BY, WAIL SOON AFTER LOUD GUNSHOTS MAKE THEIR APPEARANCE. IT'S NOT SAFE HERE, BUT YOU DARED TO WALK THROUGH THIS SETTING AT THE START OF YOUR JOURNEY.

CLAWFACE

TRACY F.

THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

"THIS'LL BE DA LAST TIME YA' CROSS US AGAIN", SAID BETA-FLUFFALONI. "WAIT 'TIL DA BOSS DEALS WITH YA..." "B-BUT I. . ." BEFORE THE POOR WOLF COULD EVEN SPEAK, HE WAS CLAWED IN THE FACE BY ANOTHER BETA.

"SHADDAP!" HOWLED THE BETA-LUPUS. FLUFFALONI BEGAN TO SNIFF AROUND.

"IT'S DA BOSS..."

"HE AIN'T GONNA BE HAPPY", SAID LUPUS. JUST THEN, ALPH-KAPONE APPEARED, WITH HIS BLACK FEDORA WORN NEATLY AND HIS CIGAR CLOUDING THE AIR WITH SMOKE. HE WALKED TOWARDS THE THREE WOLVES. HE LOOKED AT THE WOLF IN QUESTION, ALPH'S EYES PIERCING INTO HIS SOUL.

"FOOL ME ONCE, SHAME ON YOU. FOOL ME TWICE, SHAME ON ME. FOOL ME THREE TIMES? SHAME ON THE MY PACK."

"BOSS, I DIDN'T. . ."

"SHADDAP!" LUPUS ROARED.

ANTORIOUS THE THIEF
ANTIONE F.
JOHN MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

AS I STEAL ANOTHER WALLET, I THINK ABOUT MY SISTER. I WONDER WHAT SHE'S DOING RIGHT NOW. IS SHE USING THE MONEY I COLLECTED EARLIER TO BUY US GROCERIES? AS I MANEUVER MY WAY THROUGH THE ENDLESS CROWD IN THE PUBLIC MARKET, I CONTINUE TO TAKE THE HARD-EARNED MONEY OF SWEATY MEN AND PERFUMED CLOAKED WOMEN. I OFTEN THINK TO MYSELF, ISN'T THIS WRONG? WON'T GOD SHUN ME FOR THE WAY I LIVE?

THOSE THOUGHTS ARE ONLY BRIEF. I PUSH THEM TO THE BACK OF MY MIND WITH THE SOUND OF A HUNGRY STOMACH AND A POCKET FILLING WITH CHANGE. A COUPLE MORE POCKETS, AND I'LL MEET MY QUOTA. AS I SWIM WITH THE FLOW OF TRAFFIC, I FLOW WITH THE MOVEMENTS OF A BEAUTIFUL, YOUNG LADY, AND AS I AM ABOUT TO MAKE MY MOVE AND REACH FOR HER PURSE, SHE SENSES ME. TURNING AROUND, SHE MEETS MY EYES WITH A GENTLE SMILE, AND I DO THE SAME. I MAKE SMALL TALK, SO SHE DOESN'T KNOW THAT I, ANTORIOUS THE PICKPOCKET, AM ABOUT TO ROB HER BLIND.

WE FIND OURSELVES ON THE TOPIC OF WORK. SHE TELLS ME SHE OWNS A BAKERY ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF TOWN AND IS OUT BUYING INGREDIENTS. SHE ASKS ME, AND AS I'M ABOUT TO LIE, SHE MEETS MY EYES AGAIN WITH AN INCOMPARABLE, BEAUTIFUL GAZE. I FIND MYSELF TELLING HER THE UNBEARABLE TRUTH, THAT I'M UNEMPLOYED. SHE LOOKS AT ME FOR A MOMENT, THEN ASKS, "HOW ABOUT WORKING IN MY BAKERY?"

THE SURGEON

CAT A.

LUCILLE BROWN MIDDLE SCHOOL

WAKE UP. MY EYES SNAP OPEN. I AM LYING ON A METAL BED IN A BRIGHT, STERILE ROOM. A TALL MAN IS STANDING OVER ME. HE IS THE ONE WHO SPOKE.

"STAND UP," HE SAYS. MY BODY MOVES AUTOMATICALLY, MY LEGS SWINGING OVER THE SIDE OF THE BED AND PROPELLING ME UPWARD. "SIT DOWN."

I SIT. MY EYES WIDEN. WHY AM I MOVING? I TRY TO STAND UP AGAIN, BUT MY LEGS WON'T BUDGE. "WH-WHAT'S GOING ON?" I STAMMER. "I CAN'T MOVE MY LEGS!"

THE MAN IGNORES ME, SPEAKING ANOTHER COMMAND INSTEAD. "STAND UP AND JUMP UP AND DOWN." AGAIN, MY BODY MOVES AUTOMATICALLY, AND I STAND UP.

I START JUMPING, AND IMMEDIATELY I FEEL A PAIN IN MY HEAD, A PAIN THAT PIERCES THROUGH MY SKULL AND NEARLY CAUSES ME TO BLACK OUT. I STUMBLE AND FALL TO THE GROUND. THE MAN SIGHS AND SHAKES HIS HEAD. "WELL, I GUESS WE'LL HAVE TO KEEP WORKING. NOW, GET BACK IN YOUR BED."

I GET BACK IN THE BED. "PLEASE, TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON! PLEASE!" THE MAN LOOKS AT ME COLDLY, SAYING NOTHING.

"PLEASE!" I SCREAM. "HELP! HELP MEEE!" THE MAN PUTS A GLOVED HAND OVER MY MOUTH, EFFECTIVELY SILENCING ME.

"GO TO SLEEP." I SUDDENLY FEEL EXHAUSTED. I GO LIMP AND STRUGGLE TO KEEP MY EYES OPEN.

"S...ST....STOP," I MUMBLE, BUT IT'S TOO LATE. DRIFTING OFF TO SLEEP, THE SURGEON'S COLD EYES ARE THE LAST THINGS I SEE.

SIREN

JENNOA F. AND AMAYA B.

OPEN HIGH SCHOOL

A FAINT CALL OF THE WIND ECHOED THROUGH THE AIR AS A LITTLE BOY SNUCK BACK TO THE TIDAL POOL TO SEE IF ANYTHING HAD HAPPENED TO HIS TOY. THE TEDDY BEAR HAD BEEN MOVED FROM ITS ORIGINAL POSITION, BUT THE BOY'S EYES WERE GLUED TO THIS BEING, EMERGING OUT OF THE POOL. IT LOOKED HUMAN, BUT NOT ENTIRELY. THE BOY LET OUT A GASP, AND THE SIREN TURNED TO FACE THE BOY. OUT OF EVERYTHING, THE SIREN'S EYES WERE THE MOST NOTICEABLE, FILLED WITH FEAR AND SADNESS. THE SIREN HAD LONG BLONDE HAIR, A WHITE SHIRT, AND AN ORANGE, HOLOCHROME TAIL. SHE QUICKLY PUT DOWN A LARGE SEASHELL BEFORE DISAPPEARING, LEAVING THE BOY ALONE, WITHOUT ANY CLOSURE.

HE FINDS HIMSELF BY THE OCEAN LATER ON THAT MORNING, SITTING IN THAT SAME SPOT IN THE SAND, FEELING HOPEFUL AND EXPECTANT. SEAGULLS FLY OVERHEAD, CAWING AS THEY SWOOP DOWN, AND BEARS SUBMERGE UNDERWATER, COMING BACK UP IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, A FISH CAUGHT IN ITS GRASP. HE ABSENTMINDEDLY TRACES SHAPES INTO THE DAMP SAND BENEATH HIM AND LOOKS OUT INTO THE VAST, BLUE LANDSCAPE. EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, HE THINKS HE SEES HER, AND STANDS QUICKLY, RUNNING TO THE EDGE OF THE SHORE. DISAPPOINTMENT AND IMPATIENCE WASH OVER HIM. A LARGE MOUND OF SEAWEED WASHES UP ON THE SHORE, LIGHTLY GRAZING HIS FEET.

HE SITS IN THE SAND FOR HOURS ON END, REFUSING TO GIVE UP HOPE. HE WATCHES BOATS PASS IN THE DISTANCE, FROM CRUISE SHIPS FULL OF PASSENGERS, TO FAR MORE MODEST VESSELS, WITH ONE OR TWO FISHERMEN EATING SANDWICHES AND MAKING CONVERSATION TO PASS THE TIME.

HE WATCHES CHILDREN SPLASH AND PUSH EACH OTHER INTO THE WATER ON THE FURTHER END OF THE BEACH AND SEES A HAPPY, YOUNG COUPLE WALKING ACROSS THE SAND TOGETHER UNDER THE SUNSET. BY MID-AFTERNOON, HE DECIDES TO QUIT. "MAYBE IT WAS JUST A DREAM." HE LOOKS INTO THE WATER ONE LAST TIME. SIGHING, HE TURNS ON HIS HEELS TO HEAD BACK HOME. BUT, AS HE TURNED HIS HEAD, HE HEARS A SPLASH THAT SOUNDS TOO CLOSE TO BE JUST A FISH, OR A SEAGULL, OR A LITTLE KID PLAYING. HE TURNS AND RUNS BACK TOWARDS THE WATER, A SPARKLE IN HIS EYES. HE SAW A LARGE TAIL STICKING OUT OF THE WATER, SCALES GLISTENING IN THE SUNLIGHT.

HE SMILES BRIGHTLY AND RUNS A BIT CLOSER AS THE TAIL FALLS SLOWLY, GRACEFULLY, BACK INTO THE WATER. AS HE WATCHES THE CREATURE DISAPPEAR, HE FEELS SOMETHING HIT HIS TOES AS THE TIDE WASHES OVER HIS FEET FOR THE BILLIONTH TIME. HE KNEELS DOWN AND PICKS UP THE OBJECT. A BRIGHT, TURQUOISE GEM, IT CATCHES THE LIGHT FROM THE SETTING SUN. HE SMILES EVEN WIDER NOW, REALIZING HE'S BEEN LEFT ANOTHER GIFT, THAT HE HADN'T BEEN DREAMING. REALIZING, HE HAS A NEW FRIEND.

ADDICTED TO A WORLD UNTRUE

IVY M.

HUGUENOT HIGH SCHOOL

IT WAS HER THIRD OR FOURTH TIME VISITING, AND I COULD TELL SHE WAS ADDICTED. MAYBE IT WAS THE FRESHNESS OF THE AIR, OR THE LONELINESS, BUT EITHER WAY, I KNEW SHE WAS HOOKED BECAUSE THAT'S HOW THEY GET YOU. THEY SELL YOU A LITTLE BIT, LITTLE TRIALS, SO YOU CAN TASTE HOW LIFE COULD BE THERE. YOU STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES OF HOW THINGS WERE.

I FIRST RECOGNIZED HER BY THE FALLS BECAUSE WE DON'T GET MANY RETURNED NEWCOMERS. NOT AS MANY AS BEFORE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TYPE OF SOFTWARE THEY HAVE OUT THERE NOW, FOR PEOPLE LIKE US WHO WANT TO ESCAPE FOR GOOD. I DON'T KNOW HOW THINGS WORK OUT THERE ANYMORE, AND I DON'T WANT TO.

THAT'S WHY WE LEFT. THE OUTSIDE WORLD WAS TOO INTENSE; ADDICTS FLOATING ABOUT EVERYWHERE. THE CHAOS IS WHAT DREW ME TO THE ABUSE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

"YOU'RE STARING AGAIN," MICHAH SAID. "AND IF YOU KEEP IT UP, SHE'LL SEE YOU."

"AND WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I CARE?" I SNAPPED BACK. "I'M A BIG GIRL AND CAN HANDLE MY OWN."

"NOMI, DON'T GET TOO ATTACHED. YOU DON'T KNOW HER, LET ALONE IF SHE'S HERE FOR GOOD."

I LET HIS WORDS FADE INTO WHITE NOISE AND TURNED MY ATTENTION BACK TO THE NEW GIRL, IF ONE COULD CALL HER THAT. FOUR TIMES IN THE SPAN OF A MONTH; ONE MIGHT CONSIDER YOU MORE THAN A NEWCOMER. MICHAH WAS STILL TALKING WHEN I JUMPED DOWN INTO THE MEADOW WHERE SHE WAS SITTING, CONTENT AND ALONE, SINGING TO HERSELF. I DIDN'T MAKE ANY NOISE WHEN I LANDED, SO SHE DIDN'T TURN TO FACE ME.

SHE FELT PURE, HUMMING TO THE GRASS AND COLUMBINE. HER SHOULDERS WERE SOFT AND FORGIVING, AND HER HAIR, SHORT AND CURLY. HER HANDS LOOKED AS DELICATE AS THE FLOWERS SHE PICKED, AND THEN SHE TURNED TOWARDS ME.

"HERE, FOR THE ONE THAT WATCHES." SHE SMILED, HER VOICE STRONG AND YOUNG. HER FACE HELD ROUND AND KIND FEATURES. THIS WAS NOTHING LIKE MINE, WHICH EXPRESSED FIRMNESS AND HOUSED DROOPY EYES THAT KNEW TOO MUCH.

"WHAT SHOULD I CALL YOU?"

I STOOPED DOWN BESIDE HER ON THE GRASS AND COLUMBINE, PICKED THE BLOSSOMS FROM HER FINGERS, AND SMILED. "NOMI."

"ZURI," SHE SAID.

IF THERE WAS A FUTURE. I HEARD IT ON HER LIPS THAT DAY.

FULL CIRCLE

KAVIN J.

JOHN MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

IN A FARM OUTSIDE OF SPONGE DESERT, THREE ESCAPED PRISONERS OF AZKABAN RUN ACROSS SPONGE MOUNTAIN. THEY COME ACROSS A CAVE WITH A MAZE MANY HAD LOST THEIR LIVES TO. AS THEY WALK THROUGH THE CAVE, CHILLS SHIVER DOWN EACH OF THEIR SPINES. A DEEP VOICE OVERCAME EACH OF THEIR MINDS. "DO YOU SEEK GREED, YOU SOULS OF ENVY? OR FREEDOM FROM DEATH?" THE PRISONERS PANIC AND START FRANTICALLY YELLING AT ONE ANOTHER. IS THERE A GLIMPSE OF HOPE IN SOMEONE'S VOICE, ANYONE'S VOICE? THE VOICE QUESTIONS AGAIN, "WHAT DO YOU CHOOSE?"

JAK, THE PRISONER TO THE LEFT OF THE GROUP, SHOUTS "WHO ARE YOU?"

THE VOICE YELLS BACK, "YOU DARE QUESTION MY AUTHORITY?" AND, IN THAT MOMENT, EVERYONE DROPS TO THEIR KNEES, FOR THE VOICE ONCE AGAIN OVERPOWERS THEIR BODIES. "I WILL SHOW YOU!" THE VOICE SHOUTS. JAK STARTS TO CONVULSE, SHAKING VIOLENTLY, WITH BLOOD STREAMING FROM HIS EARS. "I ASK YOU AGAIN," THE VOICE COMMANDS, "WHAT DO YOU CHOOSE?"

ANOTHER PRISONER MICHAEL, IN A PANIC, YELLS OUT "DEATH!" THE VOICE SCREAMS, "HAHAHA, WOULDN'T YOU BE SO LUCKY? YOU WILL BE FACED WITH THREE TASKS. YOUR FIRST TASK IS TO SURVIVE THE HEDGE PORTION OF THE MAZE."

JAK'S BODY SHIFTS AS HIS SOUL BECAME VISIBLE, BUT CLASPED IN CHAINS. HE SHAKES, "THIS IS AWFUL AND PAINFUL. DO THE MAZE. CONQUER." THE PRISONERS SLOWLY CREEP AROUND THE FIRST CORNER OF THE MAZE AND SEE A LARGE SHADOW. THEY HEAR A LOUD SNARL AND HEAVY FOOT FALLS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL. A LARGE, SCALY MONSTER CREEPS OVER THE HEDGE.

THEY SEE MANY BLACK EYES AND FEEL ITS HEAVY, HOT BREATHE. THE MONSTER SHOOTS A FIREBALL ABOVE THEIR HEADS AND STARES INTO THEIR EYES. MICHAEL FREEZES IN FEAR AS THE SECOND HEAD APPEARS OVER THE WALL AND REELS BACK. THE BEAST TAKES A STEP CLOSER, AND A THIRD HEAD APPEARS FROM THE MIST. THIS HEAD IS DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS. THE FLESH IS FALLING OFF OF ITS FACE, AND ITS EYES BURN WITH GREEN FLAMES. THE RATTLING AND CRACKING OF BONES SNAP IN PLACE TO LOOK DIRECTLY AT JAK. THE MONSTER GROWLS, "WHAT ARE YOU AND WHY ARE YOU HERE?" SHAKEN WITH FEAR, NO ONE ANSWERS THE BEAST. JAK COULD FEEL THE CHAINS ON HIS SOUL BEGINNING TO TIGHTEN.

THEY SEE MANY BLACK EYES AND FEEL ITS HEAVY, HOT BREATHE. THE MONSTER SHOOTS A FIREBALL ABOVE THEIR HEADS AND STARES INTO THEIR EYES. MICHAEL FREEZES IN FEAR AS THE SECOND HEAD APPEARS OVER THE WALL AND REELS BACK. THE BEAST TAKES A STEP CLOSER, AND A THIRD HEAD APPEARS FROM THE MIST. THIS HEAD IS DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS. THE FLESH IS FALLING OFF OF ITS FACE, AND ITS EYES BURN WITH GREEN FLAMES. THE RATTLING AND CRACKING OF BONES SNAP IN PLACE TO LOOK DIRECTLY AT JAK. THE MONSTER GROWLS, "WHAT ARE YOU AND WHY ARE YOU HERE?" SHAKEN WITH FEAR, NO ONE ANSWERS THE BEAST. JAK COULD FEEL THE CHAINS ON HIS SOUL BEGINNING TO TIGHTEN.

MICHAEL PANICS AGAIN, PICKS UP A BRANCH OFF THE GROUND, AND THROWS IT INTO THE BURNING, GREEN FLAMES. THE BEAST BARELY FLINCHES, "YOU MORTALS MAKE ME LAUGH." THE THIRD PRISONER, MAO, SPRINTS BACK THE WAY THEY CAME, BUT JUST AS HE RUNS AROUND THE CORNER, THE WALLS OF THE MAZE SLAM SHUT. THE CHAINS AROUND JAK TIGHTEN ONCE AGAIN. NOW, ALL THAT IS LEFT OF THE THREE, ORIGINAL ESCAPED CONVICTS ARE MICHAEL AND JAK'S SOUL.

MICHAEL LOOKS BACK AT JAK AND SEES HIM IN AGONIZING PAIN. HE SPRINTS TOWARDS THE BEAST, RUNNING RIGHT THROUGH ITS FLAME-FILLED HEAD. LOOKING BACK, HE WATCHES THE BEAST DISAPPEAR. JAK FEELS THE CHAINS SLACKEN AND LOOKS AT MICHAEL. "WHAT WAS THAT?" BEFORE MICHAEL COULD ANSWER, THE HEDGES DISAPPEAR. MAO, THE RUNAWAY PRISONER, HAD BEEN RAISED ON TO A PLATFORM. THE BOOMING VOICE RETURNS, "YOUR LAST TASK IS..."

MICHAEL IS STUNNED. HE LOOKS AROUND CONFUSED, "BUT, BUT, THERE WERE JUST HEDGES, AND A DRAGON."

"YOUR LAST TASK IS..."

JAK INTERRUPTS, "WHAT? WE DIDN'T EVEN FINISH THE FIRST TASK, AND THERE WAS NO SECOND TASK." THE VOICE OVERTAKES THEIR BODIES.

"YOU FOOLS! HOW CAN YOU NOT SEE WHAT IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU?" THEY HEAR A LOUD CRACK, AND FOR A SPLIT SECOND, THEY SEE THE INSIDE OF THEIR CELLS. "THERE IS NO FREEDOM FOR YOU."

THE SHADOW IN THE ROOM DRAWS UP TO THE CEILING AND DRIPS DOWN OVER THIS LOOMING, HUMAN FORM BEFORE SWALLOWING ALL OF THE SURROUNDING LIGHT. "YOUR SINS ARE TOO GREAT FOR YOU TO EVER RUN AWAY FROM. YOU WILL DIE HERE. YOU HAVE BEEN PUT IN THIS SIMULATION TO TEST HOW FAR WE COULD PUSH YOUR MORTAL VALUES. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT YOUR SOULS ARE TOO WEAK. YOUR SOULS ARE TOO FAR GONE TO SAVE, SO THE REAPER OF SOULS WILL CLAIM IT."

A DARK HOODED INDIVIDUAL ENTERS THE ROOM AND POINTS A LONG, SLENDER FINGER AT THEM. BEFORE JAK DISAPPEARS, HE WEEPS, "I'M SORRY," THEN ESCAPES THROUGH CRACKS IN THE ROOM. THE SHADOW GRABS MICHAEL AND PULLS HIM DOWNWARDS. AS HE SCREAMS FOR HELP, THE DARK FIGURE SHOUTS, "THIS IS WHAT YOU WISHED FOR."

THE CREAKING

VINNY G.

OPEN HIGH SCHOOL

THERE ARE MANY NATURAL PHENOMENA THAT EXIST IN OUR WORLD, BUT FEW COMPARE TO THE THIRTEEN-YEAR CREAKING INFESTATION. EVERY TIME THE CICADAS COME, IT DOES NOT SURPRISE THE RESIDENTS OF VALIANT YARNS, WHO HAVE SUCCUMBED TO THE INSECT'S BOTHERSOME NOISE. ONE YEAR, HOWEVER, THEY CAME OUT AT AN UNEXPECTED TIME, OCTOBER. NO ONE QUESTIONED WHY THEY WERE AROUND, AND MANY BLAMED CLIMATE CHANGE. ONE MAN, DR. HEMA, WARNED THE TOWNSFOLK, "THIS IS UNNATURAL. WE SHOULD NOT SHRUG THIS OFF AS JUST ANOTHER HAPPENING OF CICADAS!"

NOBODY LISTENED. THEY ALL FELL SILENT.

THE FIRST NIGHT, THERE WERE TWELVE DEAD. THE SECOND, FORTY-THREE DEAD. BY HALLOWEEN, HALF THE TOWN HAD FALLEN TO A SOURCE NO ONE COULD PINPOINT. PANIC ERUPTED IN THE TOWN, AND MANY ATTEMPTED TO FLEE THIS UNFORGIVING FATE. DR. HEMA REMAINED, DETERMINED TO FIND OUT WHAT HAD OCCURRED. HE CONCLUDED THOSE WHO SPENT THE MOST TIME OUTDOORS FELL ILL FIRST. AS MORE PERISHED, HE SOON FELT HIMSELF FALLING ILL, AS IF SOMETHING WAS CONSUMING HIM FROM THE INSIDE. HE REMAINED IN THE TOWN UNTIL HE WAS THE LAST RESIDENT. THE LAST REPORTS OF THOSE ABANDONED AND DEAD CAME IN. UPON FINDING A FOREIGN ELEMENT IN HIS BLOOD, HIS VISION FADED. HE SAW ONE LAST THING, A CICADA BURSTING THROUGH HIS CHEST.

THE DANCE

SHAYLA D.

HUGUENOT HIGH SCHOOL

RAIN DECIDED TO TAPDANCE UPON MY ROOF LAST
NIGHT,
CREATING A MELODY SO DEEP
THUNDER COULDN'T EVEN SCARE IT AWAY.

LIGHTNING FLASHED AS IF GOD WAS HAVING HIS
OWN PARTY.

THE THUNDER ROARED,
SENDING A BASS SO LOUD,
I COULDN'T HEAR THE RAIN DANCE
FOR THOSE SEVEN SECONDS.

NEXT WEEK

ADA N.W.

OPEN HIGH SCHOOL

SOFT SPRING GRASS AND ARIZONA ICE TEA.
BLUE DRESS WITH A PATTERN LIKE A TABLECLOTH.
PICTURES LOOK BETTER ON OLD CAMERAS.
SKIN A WARM COLOR LIKE MANGO.
GLAD TO BE BACK IN THE SUN AGAIN.
CHIPPED, PALE YELLOW NAIL POLISH.
I HAVE NEVER BEFORE BEEN SO HAPPY, I COULD CRY.
AND I HAVE NEVER BEFORE SEEN A SMILE SO BIG AND
BRIGHT.

THE SIREN'S SONG

HALEY K.

OPEN HIGH SCHOOL

COME LITTLE ONE, COME INTO THE
SEA.

THE OCEAN WILL SOOTHE YOU,
LIKE THE FEEL OF A BREEZE.
YOU'VE LIVED LONG ENOUGH AND
DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.
I WILL SOLVE ALL OF YOUR
PROBLEMS FOR YOU.

COME LITTLE ONE, COME CLOSE TO
THE SEA.

I'LL WIPE THE TEARS AWAY AND
ALL OF YOUR NEEDS.
WORRY NOT FOR YOUR TROUBLES,
I'LL TAKE THEM AWAY,
AND YOU WILL BE HAPPY AMONG
THE WAVES EVERYDAY.

COME LITTLE ONE, COME PLAY
WITH THE SEA.
ONLY I HAVE TO KISS YOU, AND
HAPPY YOU'LL BE.
ANOTHER LIFE TAKEN, AND THE
OTHER REPLACED,
FOR TRUTH COMING FROM LIES
WILL BE THE CASE.

COME LITTLE ONE, COME REST
WITH THE SEA.

WRAPPED IN ITS ARMS, YOU'LL
NEVER WANT TO LEAVE.
SLEEP NOW AND FOREVER; YOUR
TROUBLES ARE GONE.

YOUR TIES WITH YOUR FAMILY ARE
NOW NONEXISTENT BONDS.
COME LITTLE ONE, COME TRUST IN
THE SEA.

I'LL SING YOU A LULLABY TO PUT
YOU AT EASE.

FOR, THE SIREN'S SONG HAS YOU
NOW HERE PEACEFULLY
BECAUSE YOU HAVE ACCEPTED YOUR
FATE SO WILLINGLY.

SO COME LITTLE ONE, COME INTO
THE SEA.

WRAPPED IN ITS ARMS, YOU'LL
NEVER WANT TO LEAVE.
ANOTHER LIFE TAKEN, THE OTHER
REPLACED,
AND YOU SHALL BE HAPPY AMONG
THE WAVES, ENCASED.

PREDATORS
VANNIECIA J.
ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL

**THE STRETCHING OF MUSCLES AND DREARY EYES,
SOFT WORDS COMING FROM A DIRTY MOUTH
MOVING AND STRETCHING LIKE CAT
PROWLING AFTER THEIR PREY.
SMOOTH SKIN, LIKE A VELVET PILLOW.
EYES INVITING YOU IN,
LURING PREY WITH A VICIOUS SMILE.
WICKED MOMENT, WITH TEASING MOVEMENTS
UNTIL THE DEATH BLOW FALLS UPON YOU.
THOSE TEASING EYES AND SMILE WITH EVIL INTENTIONS,
YOU FELL INTO THEIR TRAP OF LOVE.
THERE IS NO PAIN, ONLY TAUNTING AND LUST.
FALLING AS THE VICTIM TO SWEET HONEY.
ONCE MORE, YOUR HEAD GOES NUMB.
VENOM TRAILS YOUR BODY AS THEY STAND.
AGAIN? THEY CHUCKLE.**

**CRYSTAL BLUE
MARYJANE P.
THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL**

**CRYSTAL BLUE, GLIMMERING DROPS,
SLIDE DOWN MY CHEEK
AS I STARE AT WHAT I HAD, THAT SLIPPED
THROUGH MY FINGERS BECAUSE I WAS SO WEAK.
I HAD IT ALL, THE FAMILY AND THE CHANCE TO BE SOMETHING GREAT,
YET THROUGH MY HANDS IT Poured LIKE CRYSTAL BLUE WATER
DROWNING, DROWNING IN THE DEPTHS OF HAVING THE IRREVERSIBLE
BLUES.**

**THE SAME COLOR AS MY LIPS IN THE CRYSTAL BLUE WATER,
AS CLEAR AND COLD AS THE JUDGEMENT OF SOCIETY.**

**THE BLUE SKY SEEMS SO DISTANT
FROM THE DEPTHS OF THIS FATHOMLESS OCEAN,
AND I DON'T KNOW HOW TO SWIM.
HYPOTHERMIA SEEPS LIKE SNAKES
THROUGH MY ALREADY BLUE VEINS,
MY HAND REACHES, MY FINGERTIPS ARE NUMB
AND AS BLUE AS THE WATER THEY REACH THROUGH.
PAINTED NAILS, PAINTED FACE, THE BEAUTY IS ABLE
TO ERASE ANY TRACE OF NOT BEING ALRIGHT.
THEN, NIGHT COMES, AND BLUE FADES TO BLACK.
THE CRYSTAL BLUE OCEAN HELPS ME TAKE
WHAT I'LL NEVER GET BACK.**

BA-DUMP.

BA-DUMP.

BUMP.

SILENCE FALLS LIKE SNOW.

**THE IMPRESS
MIRAKHAL D.
HENDERSON MIDDLE SCHOOL**

**I'M ABOUT TO SHOW Y'ALL WHAT THE
ELECTROMAGNETIC SPECTRUM
IS ALL ABOUT.**

**YO, LIGHT IS THE KEY.
OPEN UP THE LIGHT AND LET YOUR
LIFE BE FREE. YOU'LL SEE.**

**ALL OF THE LIGHT WILL COME TOGETHER
AND MAKE A BIG BUBBLE
THAT WILL STAY FOREVER.**

**YO, BLACK AND WHITE
ARE DIFFERENT ON THE OUTSIDE, BUT THE COLORS
COME TOGETHER AND UNITE,
MAKING THE ELECTROMAGNETIC SPECTRUM JUST RIGHT.**

**BLACK COMES IN, AND WHITE GOES OUT.
THE RAINBOW IS NOW OUT, AND I'M
ABOUT TO SHOW YOU WHAT.
NOW IN AND OUT.**

DON'T YOU SEE?
JASMYN W.
JOHN MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

**IT'S FUNNY,
NO, HUMOROUS EVEN.
DON'T YOU AGREE?**

**I CAN SAY THIS WITH TREMBLING HANDS AND TEARS IN MY
WORDS.**

**I CAN SAY THIS WITH MY EYES CLOUDED AND HEART ACHING.
MY FACE SAYS, THIS IS FUNNY.
SO, WOULD YOU BELIEVE ME?
IF I WALKED BY YOU IN THIS MOMENT.
UNCERTAIN?**

**I COULD SCARE YOU. I COULD BE YOU!
IF I CAME FORTH AS A CREATION YOU'D FEAR.
DON'T YOU SEE?
OF COURSE NOT
BECAUSE IT'S JUST FUNNY.**

**17 FROM PARKLAND
JULIA H.P., ANIYAH R., ROSELEE B., SHA'AIJAH M.,
AND SHIYA B.**

LUCILLE BROWN MIDDLE SCHOOL

**REPORTING LIVE ON CNN! THIS JUST IN!
POW! POW! POW!**

**SEVENTEEN PEOPLE DOWN NOW.
SEVENTEEN FAMILIES TORN APART.
SEVENTEEN FAMILIES WITH ACHES OF THE HEART.**

**I KNOW I WASN'T THERE,
SO I DON'T COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND,
BUT 17 DEATHS
ALL CAUSED BY ONE HAND?
WE ALWAYS WAIT UNTIL AFTER IT HAPPENS
TO FORMULATE A PLAN.**

**NOW WE'RE STRUGGLING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO
DO.**

**SHOULD TEACHERS HAVE GUNS IN THEIR HANDS?
IF SCHOOLS HIRE GUNS,
WE WILL ALL FEAR AND RUN, AND
THE CHILDREN DIE YOUNG WITH
THE VERY LAST SWEET TASTE OF LIFE
ON THEIR TONGUES.**

**PARENTS TRY TO SHOW THEIR BEST SIDE,
BUT IN THE END, SOMEONE ALWAYS DIES.
WHO SAYS SOMETHING?
WE DON'T KNOW.**

THEY LISTEN TO PEOPLE LIKE LIL PUMP + NBA YOUNGBOY,
BUT WHY, OH WHY, THEY DON'T DO A THING?
THEIR SONGS INSTEAD CREATE MORE MURDERING.
THEY SAY GUNS SHOULD PROTECT US,
BUT ALL THROUGH HISTORY, WHAT HAVE GUNS BEEN USED FOR?

KILLING.

HATE IS A THING THAT EVERYONE HAS,
AND PEOPLE LIKE TO TAKE IT OUT ON OTHERS.
WHY SHOULD ANYONE GO THROUGH THAT?
THEY SHOULDN'T.
PEOPLE DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW PAINFUL IT IS FOR THE
FAMILY;
NO ONE HAS REAL SOLUTIONS.
THEIR IDEA OF A SOLUTION IS ADDING MORE GUNS.
OR CHANGE THE AGE LIMIT. BY WHAT? 3 YEARS?

ONCE IS ENOUGH, AND TWICE IS A CRIME.
THREE IS IGNORANCE.
HOW MANY TIMES DOES IT HAVE TO HAPPEN
FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND?
THAT NOT AGE, NOR RACE, BUT A GUN IN THE HAND,
CAN END THE LIFE OF A TEN-YEAR-OLD CHILD
THAT HAS BEEN HERE BUT ONLY FOR AWHILE.
IT MAKES YOU THINK
WHAT'S WORTH MORE?
A GUN OR A CHILD?

THE HATE YOU GIVE

KYANA J.

THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

IT STARTED OUT WITH A GIRL,

TALL, BROWN, AND SMART.

SHE LIVED TWO LIVES.

POOR, SOMBER, AND GRUBBY WHEN SHE WENT HOME.

CLEAN, RICH, AND PRETTY WHEN SHE WENT TO SCHOOL.

SHE DIDN'T WANT TO FACE THIS LIFESTYLE,

BUT SHE HAD NO CHOICE.

SHE HAD A BEST FRIEND SHE COULDN'T VISIT,

TALL, HANDSOME, AND CHOCOLATE.

HE WAS A LITTLE, TROUBLED BOY,

BUT HE LOVED HIS BEST FRIEND.

MANY MOONS LATER,

THEY FINALLY SAW EACH OTHER.

IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

THE PARTY WAS GOING GREAT,

BUT, OF COURSE,

SOMEONE HAD TO START SHOOTING.

IT WAS TIME TO PROTECT THAT TALL, BROWN GIRL.

HE HAD A CAR

A NICE, FANCY CAR.

LIGHTS STARTED FLASHING.

HER MOM ALWAYS TOLD HER TO TREAT THE POLICE LIKE
KINGS.

DO WHAT THEY SAY.

BUT THAT DIDN'T STOP THE MAN WITH A GUN.
THAT DIDN'T STOP HIM FROM SHOOTING AN UNARMED CITIZEN,
OR DID IT?

"POW! POW! POW!"

ALL SHE HEARD.

BLOOD AND MORE BLOOD,

ALL SHE SAW.

RED AND BLUE LIGHTS AND A WHITE FACE,

ALL SHE REMEMBERED.

HER BEST FRIEND LYING THERE,

ALL SHE REMINISCED.

THE NEWS, THE BLOGS, THE CAMERAS,

ALL ON HER.

SHE WAS THE ONLY WITNESS.

WOULD SHE TELL?

WOULD SHE KEEP IT A SECRET?

WOULD SHE BE CRITICIZED?

HER FAMILY WOULD HAVE TO FACE THE OUTCOME.

SHE HAD TO MAKE A CHANGE.

SHE HAD TO CONFESS.

EVERYONE KNEW.

SHE CHANGED.

SHE TOLD.

**HEAVEN AND EARTH
MARCUS D.
OPEN HIGH SCHOOL**

**HEAVEN AND EARTH,
ONE BLESSED, ONE CURSED.
AS THE DEMONS INSIDE ME TRY TO REIMBURSE,
SO I MAY IMMERSE BACK UPON THIS CRUEL EARTH.
HEAVEN, A DREAMLAND DEPICTION OF THE TIME TO COME
AFTER LIFE.
HAPPY WITH EVERYTHING YOU LIKE.
MY LIFE, YOUR LIFE;
EVERYTHING IN YOUR SIGHT
MAY END WITH A BIG BANG,
A METEORITE, OR
JUST FROM A SIMPLE GUN FIGHT.**

**BECAUSE NEWTOWN CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE
DESTINY H.H.**

RICHMOND COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

**KEEP QUIET. DON'T MAKE ANY SOUNDS.
GET OFF YOUR PHONE. THIS IS SERIOUS!
BUT, WE ALREADY HAD A DRILL THIS MONTH.
I DON'T KNOW WHY THEY CHOSE TO HAVE ANOTHER
LESS THAN A WEEK APART. THE KIDS ARE SCREAMING!
SHOVE THE GREEN CARD UNDER THE DOOR, SAME AS ALWAYS.
BUT, WHY ARE THEY JIGGLING THE HANDLE SO MUCH?
I THOUGHT THIS WAS JUST A DRILL?
HE... HE HAS A GUN.**

**I HAVE A COUSIN WHO'S SEVEN YEARS OLD.
HE'S IN SECOND GRADE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
AND DREAMS OF BEING A FIREFIGHTER
AN ARTIST. JUST SOMETHING.
I REMEMBER, ONE TIME, HE LOOKED AT ME
AND SAID, "I'D BE SAD IF YOU DIED."**

**ON DECEMBER 14TH, 2012, MY COUSIN, BY AGE ALONE,
COULD HAVE BEEN A VICTIM AT SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY.
TWENTY STUDENTS AND SIX STAFF MOWED DOWN.
HIS SPARK WOULD HAVE RAN OUT, AND JUST LIKE THE OTHERS,
YOU FORGET THE VICTIMS BUT CAN REMEMBER THE SITE,
EVEN THE SHOOTER IN SOME CASES.
WE REFER TO THESE SHOOTINGS BY PLACE OR BY SCHOOL.
COLUMBINE. SANDY HOOK. TECH.**

LOCKDOWNS HAVE BECOME A MAINSTREAM, LIKE HATING
ARITHMETIC.

MANY PEOPLE LOVE CHECKING INSTAGRAM DURING THESE DRILLS.
AS IF THIS COULDN'T HAPPEN TO OUR SCHOOL. TO MY SCHOOL.

IT PAINS ME TO THINK MY COUSIN KNOWS WHAT A RIFLE IS.
HE'S JUST LEARNING HIS FRACTIONS.
WHEN THEY DRILL AT THESE SCHOOLS,
YOU NEVER KNOW IF SOMETHING OR SOMEONE IS REALLY OUT THERE.
I'D LIKE TO MAKE A PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT.
FOR ALL THE STUDENTS THAT DIDN'T MAKE IT
OUT THE DOOR OF A SCHOOL WHERE THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN
LEARNING.

FOR THE ONES HURT WHILE GETTING AN EDUCATION:
THIS IS REAL. WHETHER WE ADMIT IT OR NOT.
GUNS KILL, AND SO DO PEOPLE.
I HAVE NEVER FELT SCARED TO GO TO SCHOOL.
THIS IS MY SENIOR YEAR.
I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO FEEL SCARED FOR MY FAMILY.

THE NEXT TIME A SCHOOL HAS A DRILL, TREAT IT WITH YOUR LIFE.
REMEMBER, SOME BEFORE US
COULDN'T MAKE IT OUT OF THE FIRST GRADE.

IMMIGRATION DISCRIMINATION

LOVELY C.C.

HUGUENOT HIGH SCHOOL

LET'S TALK ABOUT DISCRIMINATION.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHANGING

DEPORTATION LAWS,

BRINGING US BACK TO

SEGREGATION

WITH THIS IMMIGRATION HATRED.

MAKING INNOCENT SOULS GO

DOWN

TO THEIR FINAL DESTINATION, HELL.

NOW JULIO'S ON DRUGS, AND HE'S

HALLUCINATING.

AND JOSE, HE'S IN THE BASEMENT

DRINKING.

HE'S SCARED HIS FAMILY WON'T

MAKE IT.

IF YOU CAN'T TELL WE'RE

SUPPOSEDLY

THE LAND OF THE FREE, SO, TELL

ME,

WHY IS IT THAT MY FRIENDS HAVE

TO BEG AND PLEAD

FOR RIGHTS THIS COUNTRY ALLOWS,

WITH FULL CONDITIONS,

TO EVERY AND ALL OF ITS

CITIZENS?

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

BY CAGING HUMANS IN.

WE'RE ALL FROM THE SAME

DESCENT, THOUGH

SOME THINK THAT'S ALL AN

ANCIENT MYTH.

SO, TELL ME, IS IT JUST A TALE

THAT MANUEL WILL BE SHOT

DEAD,

SENT BACK TO A COUNTRY HE

HASN'T BEEN TO

SINCE HIS YOUNG LIFE BEGAN?

WHY CAN'T YOU SEE THAT

THIS SPREADS HATRED LIKE A

DISEASE,

AND NO ONE'S REMEMBERING THE

SACRIFICES

AND WORDS OF KING?

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO HIS

DREAM?

WHY HAVE CANCEROUS LAWS THAT

KILL FAMILIES AND TREAT THEM

LIKE PEASANTS?

SPECIFY, AND TELL ME,

HOW CAN ONE BE SO OBLIVIOUS

TO SUCH A SCENE?

**STRANGER
ROMAN K.
OPEN HIGH SCHOOL**

**DRIP DROP,
THE SOUND OF MY DAMAGED HEART
DRIPPING OFF MY FACE AND
HITTING THE DAMP, WATER RIDDEN PAVEMENT BENEATH ME.
I'M STANDING THERE STILL, STILL
LIKE A STATUE,
EVEN THOUGH I AM COMPELLED TO MOVE.
MY MIND AND BODY HAVE SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT THAT.**

**YOU TEAR ME DOWN FOR YOUR OWN INTENT
TO SEE ME FAIL, AND LEAVE ME TO REVIVE MYSELF.
YOUR INTENTIONS, YOUR IDEAS,
SICK SOUR STUPID.
THESE IDEAS THAT RACE AND RAVAGE THROUGH YOUR MIND,
YOU ARE SOMEONE I DON'T KNOW ON THE INSIDE.
WHO ARE YOU?**

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

KATE W

OPEN HIGH SCHOOL

SEXUALITY IS SHOVED DOWN OUR
THROATS
SINCE CHILDHOOD.

I HAVE BEEN AN OBJECT.
SHE'S TOO YOUNG TO WEAR THAT,
TOO FAT, TOO THIN.
YOU'LL NEVER GET A MAN IF YOU ACT
THAT WAY.
MEN DON'T LIKE WOMEN LIKE YOU.
MORE GUYS WOULD LIKE YOU IF YOU
CHANGED.

WHY SHOULD I CHANGE FOR THEIR
BENEFIT?

WE'RE INTENDED TO BE CLAY,
TO BE MOLDED FOR THEM.

THE SHADOW

KAPRI R.

ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL

SHE FOLLOWS ME, AND HER WHITE
EYES PIERCE MY SOUL.
THAT SMILE PLASTERED ON HER
FACE.
HER ARMS WRAP AROUND MY NECK,
ATTEMPTING TO SHOW A GRAIN OF
SYMPATHY.
SHE LAUGHS AT MY MISTAKES.
SHE CLAWS AT MY FACE.
HER DARK CLAWS LEAVE MARKS TO
SHOW MY FOOLISHNESS.
MY UGLINESS. MY GRUDGES.
MY STUPID PERSONALITY.
I TURN TO HER, AND I LOOK IN THE
MIRROR.
I'M STARING IN A MIRROR.
SHE IS ME.

ROOTS
KAMARI B.
THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

SHE NEVER REALLY SPOKE. HER FACE WAS ALWAYS BLANK. HER BROWN EYES REMAINED EXPRESSIONLESS, AND HER FULL LIPS PRESSED. THEY WOULD TALK ABOUT HER. THEY MADE FUN OF HER HAIR AND SAID IT SMELLS. BUT THE SCENT WAS ONLY CASTOR OIL AND COCONUT WATER. THEY TALKED ABOUT HER SKIN AND SAID IT WAS TOO DARK, BUT IT GLISTENS WITH UNDERTONES OF GOLD AND BRONZE. THEY TALKED ABOUT HER NOSE AND SAID SHE RESEMBLED AN APE, BUT REALLY, HER NOSE DISTINGUISHED HER FACE FROM ALL OF THE PLAIN-FACED JOES AND JANES. IN TRUTH, SHE WAS THE OFFSPRING OF DEITIES AND CARRIED THE BLOOD OF OSHUN, BUT LIVING AMONG THE BLIND AND IGNORANT TOOK A TOLL. IF CONSTANTLY CALLED A MONSTER, THEN IT'S AN IDENTITY YOU TAKE ON. YOU LOOK IN THE MIRROR EVERY DAY AT A STRANGER. YOUR CROWN WILL BEGIN TO FALL, YOUR GOLD SKIN WILL DULL, AND YOUR CONNECTION WITH HER WILL BE LOST.

MY CULTURE IS NOT YOUR COSTUME

INDIA W.

ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL

MY CULTURE IS NOT YOUR COSTUME. MY CULTURE IS NOT USED FOR YOUR ENJOYMENT. MY CULTURE IS THE ART AND ACHIEVEMENT OF MY PEOPLE. I'M MAD BECAUSE YOU LISTEN TO OUR MUSIC, WEAR OUR HAIR STYLES, CLOTHES, FEATURES, AND COLORS. I'M MAD BECAUSE YOU RENAME THEM. "OH, LOOK AT MY KIM KARDASHIAN BOXER BRAIDS."

I AM MAD BECAUSE MY PEOPLE WERE PICKED ON FOR HAVING "MONKEY LIPS." NOW, IT'S A TREND. I WAS TOLD MY HAIR WAS "TOO BIG." NOW, AFROS ARE A THING. I AM OPPRESSED BECAUSE OF MY SKIN TONE, BUT NOW, TANNING IS A THING. PEOPLE FROM DOMINANT CULTURE TAKE THINGS FROM MY PEOPLE, WHO HAVE BEEN SYSTEMATICALLY OPPRESSED BY YOUR PEOPLE. MY MUSIC WENT FROM HIP-HOP TO POP. TO GET TO THE POINT: MY CULTURE IS MY COSTUME.

MY SKIN
ZAKIYA R.
ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL

MY SKIN IS MY SKIN. YOU SHOULDN'T JUDGE ME OR PUT ME IN A BOX BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF MY SKIN. I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO WALK DOWN THE STREET SAYING, "HANDS UP, DON'T SHOOT" OR "BLACK LIVES MATTER." IT IS UNFAIR PEOPLE WHO LOOK LIKE ME ARE AFRAID OF THE POLICE, AND THE POLICE GET AWAY WITH SHOOTING AND KILLING SOMEONE WHO LOOKS LIKE ME. DON'T ASSUME THAT I'M GOING TO STEAL BECAUSE I HAVE A HOOD ON WHEN I WALK IN YOUR STORE. DON'T MAKE ME FEEL UNPRETTY BECAUSE MY SKIN IS DARK. DON'T TELL ME THAT I DON'T MATTER AS MUCH AS YOU. DON'T TELL ME ABOUT MY SKIN BECAUSE YOU AREN'T IN IT.

BUYING TIME
MAX E.
HUGUENOT HIGH SCHOOL

THEY'RE ALL AROUND, LOOKING FOR A WAY TO CORRUPT YOU TO BELIEVE IN THEIR LITTLE SCHEME THEY CALL "PEACE" AND SOVEREIGN NATION. SOME PEOPLE SAY THEY DON'T EXIST ANYMORE, LIKE DINOSAURS AND DODO BIRDS. THEY ARE NOT IN SIGHT BUT IN HIDING, WAITING FOR THE MOMENT TO RISE UP WHEN EVERYONE IS DOWN AND CONQUER. THEY PREY ON THE WEAK AND SLOWER MINDED ONES WHO CAN'T THINK FOR THEMSELVES. THIS WAS THE REASON THEY FIRST WON VICTORY. THEY HAD WITH THEM A SMART AND PERSUASIVE SPOKESPERSON WHO KNEW THE RIGHT WORDS AND WHAT PEOPLE OFTEN DEBATED. THEY LISTENED THEMSELVES TO A POINT WHERE THEY KNEW THEY COULD NOT FAIL.

IT'S OKAY
TOREY W.
ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL

**I WISH YOU NEVER HAVE TO CRY, THAT
YOU NEVER HAVE TO SIT AND WONDER WHY.
I WISH I COULD MAKE ALL THE PAIN AND SUFFERING YOU
BEEN THROUGH GO AWAY,
BUT ALL I CAN DO IS SYMPATHIZE AND TELL YOU, "IT'S GOING
TO BE OKAY."**

**SOMETIMES, I WONDER, WHY MYSELF? WHY YOU, OUT OF ALL
PEOPLE,
WHY DID THEY CHOSE YOU TO BE PLAGUED BY THIS EVIL?
IF THIS HAD BEEN UP TO ME, I'D MAKE BREAKING YOUR
HEART ILLEGAL.
I WISH I HAD YOU IN MY ARMS, SO YOU WOULDN'T WISH YOU'D
DIE EVERY DAY,
BUT FROM WHERE I'M SITTING,
ALL CAN SAY IS THAT, "IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY."**

**I PRAY I NEVER FIND OUT YOU LEFT YOUR FAMILY A NOTE
SAYING YOU'RE SORRY,
REMINISCING ON THE SCARS YOU LEFT BEHIND ON YOUR BODY.**

I ALWAYS TRIED MAKING YOU SMILE, MY ONE AND ONLY
MISSION,
AND I'M BEGGING YOU, PLEASE, DON'T LEAVE THIS EARTH
OFF SOME SUICIDAL IDEATION.

YOU TOLD ME ABOUT THE PAIN THEY CAUSED YOU EVERY DAY,
BUT I COULD NEVER DO ANYTHING BUT SAY, "IT'S GOING TO
BE OKAY."

THERE WERE SO MANY THINGS I NEVER GOT TO SAY,
LIKE HOW MANY MORE TIMES I WANTED TO TELL YOU,
I LOVED YOU EACH AND EVERY DAY.

BUT, YOU'RE GONE NOW, AND IT'S FAR TOO LATE.
THAT BEAUTIFUL SOUL I FELL MADLY IN LOVE WITH
HAS JUST GONE AWAY, AND I SWEAR,
IT'S ALL MY FAULT BECAUSE ALL I EVER TOLD YOU WAS THAT
IT WOULD BE OKAY.

**MY PERFECT WORLD
LOST STAR
THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL**

**IN MY PERFECT WORLD,
I AM TOLERATED BY EVERYONE
NO MATTER WHAT'S IN MY PANTS,
OR WHO I FALL IN LOVE WITH.
NO MATTER THE COLOR OF MY SKIN,
OR WHAT'S GOING ON IN MY BRAIN.**

**IN MY PERFECT WORLD,
CONFLICT STILL HAPPENS; HOWEVER,
IT'S RARE TO SEE ANYONE DIE.**

**IN MY PERFECT WORLD,
GOD WAS PROVEN TO EXIST BY SCIENCE; HOWEVER,
SHE TOLD ALL WORLD RELIGIONS THAT SHE IS
OFFENDED BY THE CHRISTIANS AND THE OTHER
RELIGIONS FOR MAKING THINGS UP.**

**IN MY PERFECT WORLD,
NEGATIVE EMOTIONS STILL EXIST; HOWEVER,
EVERYONE WILL HAVE SOMEONE TO CONFIDE IN.**

**IN MY PERFECT WORLD,
NOBODY IS ALONE, AND
EVERYBODY HAS FRIENDS.**

**IN MY PERFECT WORLD,
MY FRIENDS ARE BY MY SIDE,
AND THEY'LL ALWAYS BE THERE.**

**IN MY PERFECT WORLD
THAT ISN'T JUST A DREAM.**

NON-BINARY HEARTS

JANAY B.

HUGUENOT HIGH SCHOOL

WOMEN ARE WOMEN, REGARDLESS OF
SEX,
AND MEN ARE MEN, IN THE MOST
RESPECTS.

YOU CAN BE BOTH, OR A MIX OF TWO.
YOU CAN BE NEITHER, IF THAT'S WHAT
SUITS YOU.

PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE, WHATEVER
THEIR PARTS
BECAUSE WHAT REALLY MATTERS IS
WHAT'S IN OUR HEARTS.

BULLIED

ILARIA B.

HENDERSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

YOU DON'T KNOW HOW IT FEELS TO
GET BULLIED,
TO NOT BE HEARD, TO BE CALLED
NAMES.

WE FEEL TRAPPED, WHILE OTHERS
FEEL FREE.

I'M DOING THIS FOR EVERYONE, NOT
JUST ME.

WHEN YOU GET BULLIED, YOU FINALLY
SEE

THE TEARS OF VICTIMS, OF SOMEONE
LIKE ME.

THEY ALWAYS TALK ABOUT POLICE
BRUTALITY.

BUT, HOW ABOUT KIDS IN THE
CLASSROOMS?

WHEN YOU GET BULLIED, YOU FINALLY
SEE

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE HIM, AND HER,
AND ME.

MISSING PIECE

JASMINE C.

THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

I SAT IN THE CORNER, UNCONSCIOUSLY AFRAID
OF THEIR OPINIONS. OF WHAT THEY'D SAY.
PLAYING ALONG, LIKE I'M ONE OF THEM.
IF I COULD HAVE BEEN, IT WOULD BE GREAT.
MAYBE THEY'LL ACCEPT ME? MAYBE THEY WON'T CARE?

BUT, I WAS WRONG. HERE, PEOPLE STARE.
HERE I STAND, ALONE AND ABANDONED.
IT'S FOR THE BEST, I SUPPOSE.
NOW, I CAN JUST CONSIDER THEM FOES.
THIS DARKNESS I FEEL IS ALL CONSUMING,
AND WITH NO ONE ELSE, I FEEL I'M FALLING.
NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO BE SAD OR ANGRY.
NOW IS THE TIME FOR INDIFFERENCE.
DON'T LET THEM GET TO YOU.

EASY FOR YOU TO SAY.
YOU'RE ON THE OUTSIDE, LOOKING IN.
THEY STAND AT MY SIDE, THE FEW THAT CHOSE ME.
THEY FIND ME FUNNY AND EQUALLY CRAZY.
EXPLAINING MY REASONING WAS LIKE FINDING
MY MISSING PIECE. IT COMES NATURALLY,
THIS PART OF ME. IT'S ALWAYS HERE ESSENTIALLY.
LAST NIGHT, I HAD A DREAM.
ONE OF HOW I WANTED MY LIFE TO SEEM.
I REALIZED, I WAS NEVER MEANT TO LOSE THIS PART OF ME.
BUT NOW, I HAVE MY MISSING PIECE, AND MAYBE,
JUST MAYBE, IT'S ALL I'LL NEED.

EQUALITY

OMARI Y.

JOHN MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

I FIND IT FUNNY HOW WOMEN AREN'T RESPECTED.
WOMEN AREN'T TREATED EQUALLY, I FIND IT PRETTY HECTIC.
I DON'T ALWAYS KNOW THE MEANING OF THE WORD,
BUT THE BIRD IS THE WORD.
I NEED NEED HELP WITH MY WORDS;

I'VE BEEN DIAGNOSED AS DYSLEXIC.
NOW, I'M GETTING OFF TRACK.
WOMEN ARE BARELY TREATED EQUALLY, AND I FIND THAT WHACK.
IF THERE WAS EVER AN EQUAL TIME,

MAN I'D WANNA GO BACK.
IF WOMEN WERE TREATED EQUALLY, LIFE WOULD BE FAIR.
THERE WOULD BE LOVE, PEACE, AND HAPPINESS ALL OVER THE AIR.
I FEEL LIKE WOMEN SHOULDN'T FEEL BAD, MAN, THAT'S UNFAIR.
BUT, LIFE IS NEVER FAIR, AND THERE IS MORE TO COME.
NOW, I GOTTA PREPARE.

IF WE WERE ALL ANIMALS, MAYBE WE WOULD BE EQUAL.
AND, IF I WAS IN A MOVIE, I WOULD GO INTO A MUSICAL SEQUEL.
YOU DON'T SEE FEMALE BIRDS JUST SITTING IN THE NEST.
IF LIFE WAS LIKE THAT, LIKE BACK THEN MAN, IT WOULDN'T BE THE BEST.
I'M NOT FAMOUS.

THE DREAM

JULIA H.P.

LUCILLE BROWN MIDDLE SCHOOL

I HAVE A DREAM OF A PERFECT WORLD. A WORLD WHERE EVERYBODY GETS ALONG. A WORLD WHERE WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER. A WORLD WITH NO BULLYING. A CHILD SHOULDN'T BE JUDGED BY THEIR RACE, CULTURE, OR SEXUALITY. THERE ARE MAYBE A MILLION PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD WHO ARE THINKING, WHAT CAN ONE GIRL DO?

WELL, I'M HERE TO TELL YOU THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE. NONE OF US ARE! YOU'RE NEVER TOO YOUNG TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE! WHEN MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. GAVE HIS 'I HAVE A DREAM' SPEECH, HE WANTED TO CREATE AN AWARENESS OF THE INEQUALITY IN AMERICA. I'M HERE TO CREATE AN AWARENESS THAT SOME KIDS ARE SCARED TO GO TO SCHOOL, FOR FEAR THEY WILL GET BEAT UP.

WHEN THIS IS OVER, IF YOU DON'T REMEMBER ANYTHING ELSE I SAID, I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER THIS: IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT OTHER PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU. ALL THAT MATTERS IS WHAT YOU THINK OF YOURSELF.

**THE TRUTH
JUSTIN D.V.
ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL**

**I BEAT MYSELF UP BECAUSE
I TRY TO FIX THE THINGS I CAN'T FIX,
SO I GAINED THIS PURPLE HEART.
I HAVE A BATTERY-POWERED SMILE.
MY SELF-ESTEEM IS LIKE MY LAWNMOWER,
IT JUST WON'T START.
AND WHEN IT DOES, IT CLINKS AND CLANKS
UNTIL IT FALLS APART
WAITING ON SOMEONE TO FIX IT THE NEXT DAY.**

**WONDERING ABOUT THE GALAXY, LOOKING FOR MY "ME."
I'VE BEEN SOLAR SEARCHING.
LOOKING FOR THE PERSON WHO STOLE MY SUNSHINE
BY THE WORDS PLACED ON ME.
I'M JUST A BOY.**

**BONES BROKEN TO BLEED OUT THE RAINBOWS
THAT PAINT THE WALLS I DANCE IN.
IT'S NOT JUST THE CHURCH THAT SHAMES LOVE,
IT'S THE PEOPLE WE LOVE WHO SHAME LOVE.**

A MAN FOUND A GUN AND TRIED TO KILL THE TRUTH DEEP
WITHIN.

YOU HELD THE GUN, BUT HE PULLED THE TRIGGER.

YOU HELD THE GUN, BUT HE PULLED THE TRIGGER.

HE PULLED THE TRIGGER BECAUSE YOU SHAMED HIS LOVE.

HE PULLED THE TRIGGER BECAUSE YOU MADE HIM FEEL LIKE
LESS OF A PERSON.

SITTING IN HIS ROOM, DOUBTING HIS LIFE.

YOUR WORDS KILL US; ALTHOUGH,

WE ARE ALREADY KILLING OURSELVES.

WE SPEND SO MUCH TIME WONDERING WHAT PEOPLE THINK
OF US,

WONDERING IF THEY WILL ACCEPT US.

MY PEERS ARE BLINDED BY THE WORDS OF OTHERS.

ANY GLEAM OF HAPPINESS THAT FLIES BY

THEY TAKE AS A THREAT,

BEING ENVIOUS OF SOMETHING THAT THEY LACK.

LEADERSHIP, SELF-CONFIDENCE,

A STATE OF MIND.

CONVERSATION

CEIRA A.

HUGUENOT HIGH SCHOOL

I'M TRYNA HAVE THAT DEEP CONNECTION,
THAT CONVERSION ABOUT HOW THIS SYSTEM IS HOLDING US BACK.
IT MIGHT SOUND CORNY, BUT I WANNA EXPAND YOUR MIND,
AND HAVE YOU OPEN MY MIND.

THE WORDS YOU SING REACHES MY EARS,
TRAVELS TO MY SOUL, AND RATTLES MY BONES.

BROWN

AMAYA B.

OPEN HIGH SCHOOL

MY EYES FLUTTER CLOSED WHEN I COME HOME FROM WORK
I SWAY TO THE MUSIC AND RUFFLE MY SKIRT.
LITTLE BROWN RADIO, TAKE AWAY MY HURT!

IT'S MELLOW TIME TAKES ME TO A BETTER LAND,
WHERE I CAN BE IN CHARGE AND MAKE ALL PLANS.
WHERE MY HEAD SPINS FROM EXCITEMENT
INSTEAD OF EXHAUSTION.

WHERE I ENJOY NIGHTLIFE WITHOUT HAVING TO BE CAUTIOUS.
WHERE I CAN SIT ATOP A PIANO, SINGING SOULFUL TUNES
INSTEAD OF JUST STANDING WITH MY EYES CLOSED
IN THIS DUSTY LIVING ROOM.

FEMINISM
AMAZIN B.
THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

BABY,
I'M EVERY WOMAN,
AND HONEY, I'M LOVING IT.
WOMEN ARE DIFFERENT:
I'M YOUR MOTHER
I'M YOUR SISTER
I'M YOUR DAUGHTER
I'M YOUR GRANDMOTHER
BUT, I'M ALSO MORE:
I'M A BUSINESSWOMAN.
A FIREFIGHTER
A COP.
A PRESIDENT.
I'M EVERY WOMAN AND
SO MUCH MORE.
BABY, BABY,
I CAN BE YOUR
WIFE, BUT I
ALSO HAVE A LIFE.
I'M NOT YOURS.
I AM MINE.
I CAN BE A MOTHER
I'M EVERY WOMAN, DARLING.
I MAY BE SOFT SPOKEN
AND SWEET, BUT
OH, DON'T TEST ME!

**TROUBLE YOU SEE
MA'REESHA R.
ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL**

**I TRY NOT TO, BUT WORDS FORM ME,
AND MY EMOTIONS OVERPOWER ME.
I RUN, BUT THEY FIND ME.
I WANT TO ESCAPE.**

**HELP ME, IS ALL THAT POPS IN MY MIND.
THEN, MUSIC FOUND ME.
IT UNDERSTOOD ME.
I WAS FINALLY FREE FINALLY WITH THE LIGHT I WISH
FOR.**

**MUSIC, MUSIC, HOW YOU LIFT ME UP!
HEALING ME AND MY BROKEN FEELS.
THANK YOU. OH, THANK YOU!
MUSIC, YOU CARRY ME.**

HOPE
CHRISTOPHER O.
THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

HOPE CAN BE A DIFFICULT THING FOR MOST.
IT'S HARD TO UNDERSTAND OR GRASP, AND
THINKING ABOUT IT MAY MAKE YOUR BRAIN TOAST.
BUT, IT'S QUITE SIMPLE ACTUALLY.
FOR SOME, IT COMES NATURALLY.

HOPE IS WHEN YOU BELIEVE, EVEN WHEN
AT TIMES, IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE YOU CAN ACHIEVE,
AND THE STRUGGLE OFTEN DOESN'T PLEASE.

HOPE IS COURAGE TO GO AGAINST ANY CHALLENGE,
WHETHER IT'S AS EASY AS PIE,
OR YOU DON'T STAND A CHANCE.

HOPE IS A LIGHT TO SPARK IN A DARK PLACE,
WHETHER ITS PITCH BLACK,
OR THE LIGHT IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOUR FACE,
AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO CHASE.

HOPE IS PERSISTENCE TO NEVER GIVE UP.

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