



*Here and There*  
Issue 5:  
Hosted by the Black Writers'  
Workshop



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tendencies  
Jordan Aaliyah

*We were pioneers, all three of us  
the same and then some.*

That spoon which stirs the spaghetti,  
the telephone line that unravels life's knots,  
the —

The truth is she was a mother  
in the end that is who they called for  
and she loved it, this dark-skinned matriarch,  
a descendant of the women who founded *everything*  
for us. whether you admit it or not; this beautiful lady,  
remained beautiful no matter how many times  
her steely gaze hardened. you were not afraid,  
for when Get-the-job-done finished,  
her smile broke through the clouds  
where sunshine rained down on vast fields of Sunflowers,  
this Kansas woman, who birthed six children,  
eleven grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren  
gave all of us something to work and die for — family.

Like the closing of a photo album, when she clapped  
she pulled the Atlantic and Pacific towards her,  
“Let's go,” she would tell them, “I got things to do today,”  
of course, no party ever really started until she rode in,  
crashing down, sweeping up the entire ancestry and then some  
with her voice. her hands always keeping the rhythm was  
the family's work song, *harder, better, faster, stronger*,  
that is what they praised her for and she loved it,  
this brown-skinned mother could do it all and did, and I know this  
because little me saw the sunflowers do something incredible —  
they looked up and followed her.

That's heliotropism for ya, and it's alright if you didn't know that,  
I am just learning all this now too. I am the first and the last,  
I did not provide the home, and no, I did not bring life to this party, but  
I — the girl with alarming, brown eyes who looks out beyond the fields,  
who sees children silently dying, lifeless on the backyard's brown patches  
am a mother too.

Unrest  
Chamari Mink-White

*A nightmare. Intense. Terrifying. Relentless. A jolt forward and:*

I'm awake, I'm awake, I'm awake!

Of course I am.

I'm always awake.

I can't sleep.

I'm too afraid to.

My dreams are nightmares.

They hate me.

Have you ever seen the face of hate?

The faces of hate? Rage? Violence?

It's... terrifying.

Don't.

Don't look at me like that.

I know, for you, that sleep is something you look forward to.

It's the perfect ending to your busy day.

Beautiful respite...

Quiet bliss...

I know.

I've seen the peace on your face when you sleep.

The calm.

The beauty.

It makes me ache. It makes me ache because I know I'll never have that! Sleep terrifies me. Everything about it is horrifying! The darkness, the silence, the... nothingness of it all.

It's - it's all the ingredients of fear.

Every time I think I can finally do it, I can finally close my eyes, I can finally rest, my - my heart decides to jump outside my chest, my body gets the shakes, I can feel my breath leaving my body, my life is being stolen from me! I just, I start thinking about every ugly, ghastly creature I could dream up. It seems so... real. I see them... watching me, threatening me, from the corners of this room. Out my window - it's like they want to hurt me. They can't wait to...

And, it just leaves me exhausted.

I am SO exhausted, SO tired of living in fear. I can't take it anymore!

*Beat.*

Oh. My. God.

You're laughing at me.

*Starts laughing, Uneasy.*

I guess it sounds kind of ridiculous, huh. Paranoid. *Pause.* Crazy...

*A grimace.*

Go back to sleep. I'll find my way there too.

Hopefully.

Retrospective Adolescence  
Hailey Colborn

Be a *good girl*  
Be quiet, be smart, be trite, and pretty, and quick  
*But not fast, like her*  
That's a *fast* girl you're not like,  
That. Are you?  
Don't be a doormat.  
Be the most beautiful, exotic, expensive rug,  
Worth something, the kind people  
Pay good money for.

I am a *good girl*.  
I am witty, not a bitch. I am  
Brown, not black.  
I have an ass he loves and a mouth  
to whisper -- not talk  
Back. I am bad when it matters  
And contrite when it  
does most.

Be a good girl. Be docile and  
Meek and mowry and  
Smart and awoken, but  
Thinking for yourself isn't  
What God wanted, he wants  
You to lay down  
and be a whore only once there  
Is a ring on your fourth finger  
And a pit in your  
Heart the size of him.

Am I a *good girl*.  
What is a *good girl*?  
What's good, girl?

I am running in circles,  
Biting my nails and  
Pinching at my skin I  
Am poking my  
muscles and scouring  
My mind and policing  
My thot and turning my soul

Inside out, looking for the  
*Good, and yearning for the* girl.

I want to try again

Peanuts  
Skyler Gordon

*For Daddy*

Peanuts, pick them, country boys,  
For croppers bound to landed lords.  
Your hands will help them pay their rent  
And earn you boys a couple cents.

Peanuts, snatch them from the ground  
Expose the goobers dangling down.  
By stem and leaflets, shake them loose  
Of dirt and pop them free for use.

Peanuts, pack them, nuts alone,  
Till the basket's empty space is gone.  
Per bushel, a measly fifty cents  
You earn for earning these folks' rent.

Peanuts, "Heap them past the rim!"  
You'll pick past your wage making baskets brim.  
If they want "heap," you make it so—  
Into the basket, dirt and stems will go.

Peanuts, load them in the truck  
Drive them to the barn and dunk  
Them in the water trough, wash clean  
For sale at market to clear the lien.

Peanuts, learn them, "When we are grown  
We'll own our land, do no hand wrong!"  
But when they learn the scourge of rent  
They'll learn to dupe their hands of cents.

Peanuts, make them cheat for change  
To buy a life with better range.  
Get over on any just to make do  
In hopes of one day being landed, too.

## Inconvenient Ghosts

Taylor G. Branch

Haunted houses are my shit. Halloween season is when I *really* start to come alive despite the fact that the trees are all dying around, putting on their swan song of orange, yellow, and red. To me, recreational places of tasteful horror are always a welcome sight. Getting lost in corn mazes only adds to the fun even if it means running into one of the painted actors. Jump scares pack an intoxicating punch.

When I was a child, however, I didn't like houses that were haunted. During the blurry part of my early life where my family moved around frequently, we stayed at this particular house in Berwyn, Pennsylvania. I don't remember much except for the fact that it was old and definitely haunted. It was old in a sense similar to those houses that have creaking staircases that are far too narrow by today's standards and the smell of aged wood and musk permeating everything. It incorporated indestructible stones into its structures instead of cheap pine and had crawl spaces that seemed so random it made you question their purpose. I remember that while we stayed there, my stepfather, who was my mother's second husband at the time, said something along the lines of "The air smells sweet when there are ghosts around. Like sugar". This statement was not very chilling in itself. However, later on, there was an unrelated incident that made my stepfather's words have more weight to them. One day, my older, toddler-aged sister mentioned how it had smelled like Skittles in our bedroom even though there were no Skittles or other candies to be found. We never found out the exact source of the sweet air and we didn't want to.

It could have been a ghost from the Civil War since we were not too far off from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. After all, the Battle of Gettysburg was the battle with the largest number of casualties in the American Civil War. Perhaps a slain Confederate soldier was drawn to the aging colonial house and sought eternal respite in our walls. The son of a bitch deserves to be trapped in this earthly realm anyways since he did fight for slavery. Serves him right.

Luckily for me, my mother was something of a nomad at the time when I was a toddler and eventually divorced again and moved again, leaving the haunted Berwyn house behind like several others. We ended up settling into our current home, and Doylestown, not Berwyn, became the place for us to put down our roots. I can't remember exactly when my baby fat turned into actual fat, but it must have been the time when my mother suffered from a few years of depression.

I didn't know it at the time, but losing a job and coming out of a toxic relationship with a now ex-boyfriend had done a serious number on her mental health. Whenever we went to the grocery store, we would pick up some kind of confection: fruit juices, ice cream tubs, walnut fudge brownies, and coconut cakes. These were the four horsemen of a food addiction. While this became the norm, my mother became more distanced,



more irritable, more removed. And now, years later, I'm reminded of when my once-stepfather told me how ghosts carry the scent of sugar around with them. At that time, she might have been one. Sometimes she would just float around us, present but not entirely engaged with our world. My sister and I looked after ourselves more than our adolescent peers did who often had stay-at-home, non-working mothers. Since my mother was no longer in a relationship, there was no man in the house that demanded cooking, so we ate meals that we prepared on our own, usually in our own rooms or at least at separate times. They weren't really meals as much as they were a few snacks (some crackers, leftover ice cream, an apple or some strawberries depending on the season) that paraded under a trench coat stacked on top of each other trying to pass as such. No one felt like cooking so it was either this sad display of out-of-the-fridge-and-into-the-mouth-food or take out. Chinese food is great when it comes piping hot out of the bag, but it loses its allure when you realize that's the only real thing you have in the fridge to eat besides some old vegetables and frozen tofu bricks. I learned to make my sesame chicken stretch.

I don't blame my mother for any of this. Raising kids is not easy, especially when you do it alone and especially when you haven't had much to learn from in the first place. When I think of my mother's childhood I think of a girl that was interrupted from a very young age. She was forced to bear the burden of a dead father from age nine. At this point, she was old enough to hold onto a few dear memories, but young enough to realize that many of her formative years would have a tinge of absence. Whenever I ask her about those times when he was alive, I know that the right memory can be triggering and her face will turn red and her voice will start to choke up. Towards the end, my mother wasn't allowed to see him in the hospital. Perhaps this was a dying wish to keep her image of him one of health and liveliness instead of sickness and disability. Lung cancer is a ravenous disease. Sometimes I wonder if some of the underlying resentment she holds towards her own mother is because, to this day, she still smokes cigarettes despite his death all those years ago.

On a yellowed, wide-ruled piece of paper lying dormant in a red photo album is the last letter from my grandfather addressed to my mom's 9-year-old self. It's written in the hand of my grandmother. I recognize her writing from the holiday and birthday cards that she still writes to me; she writes a bit slanted with random letters capitalized in the middle of words. A portion reads, "Some day you will leave and go into the world alone but knowing love found you at home. My precious little girl, you know you have your dads and moms love. With this I hope you will find life good and fine. And thank God for making you mine. Some day God will bless you with a child. Then you will understand this joy of ours."

In a conversation with my mother she mentioned how she used to pray to see his ghost after he died. When people leave this earth, they create a hole in the lives of the people that knew and loved them. I imagine my mother thought she could remedy this grief if she could still feel his presence through some sensory experience and not the more

ambiguous experience of feeling someone within the heart or soul. Such a feeling still doesn't measure up when it cannot replace the physical act of taking care of a child. After he passed, my mom could feel her mother growing more distanced, more irritable, more removed. Depression comes naturally when someone experiences the death of a loved one. And grieving is even harder when there is work to be done, kids to be dressed, unruly hair to be combed, a house to be overlooked, and money to be made. Eventually, only some of these domestic chores were given attention. Soon the cockroaches made their way into the home. A sink full of unwashed dishes, growing and festering with each added plate smudged with tacky sauces and crumbs, is too good for a pest to pass up. My mother remembers one day where one cockroach fell out of her backpack during school and she had to act like she didn't know where it came from. She knew.

My mom still holds the belief that my grandmother never really wanted to be a mother in the first place. It was a box to check, a natural progression for a young woman with a high school education in the early seventies. When my grandfather passed away, the chore that was children became even more apparent. Things that my mother said "would never have been allowed if my dad had been alive" went on within a household still adjusting to loss. My grandmother, a white Italian woman who was the spitting image of Sophia Loren, wasn't adept at detangling the biracial curly hair my mother has, which is slightly less curly than the hair I have myself. At times, my mother's hair could only be described as what she called "a rat's nest". My grandmother's lack of patience would typically manifest itself into a robust *whack!* of the brush against my mom's scalp every time she winced away from the rough pulling of her untrained hands. In a moment of perhaps desperation or frustration, my grandmother cut off my mom's hair into a gravity-defying afro. Gone were the elegant afro-italian tresses that went all the way down her back. I don't doubt that this amateur haircut made the painful task of doing my mother's hair a lot easier.

It is almost like a cosmic joke that my mother was given the ghost of her mother who was living instead of God answering her prayer with the gift of the ghost of her father who had passed. But life, like many things, is not governed with order. It can burn a house down in one day and bring gentle, cooling rains the next. But, while ghosts undoubtedly bring a sense of loss and detachment there is still an obvious presence and line of communication between our world and theirs. It's up to them to use that presence to be benign, malicious, or productive. Casper isn't synonymous with Freddy. When my mother, tired in more ways than one, would throw all of my books and bric-a-brac crashing down on my bedroom carpet in a bout of rage leaving me to pick up the pieces, she resembled that terrifying specter with singed flesh and razor-equipped hands that led a path of destruction. Later, after I had calmed down from crying and began to place things back on their respective shelves and she brought me a box of toffee chocolates as a way to say sorry, she took the form of that baby-faced, almost featureless spirit. Her ghost was transformative and variable.

It's easy to forget things, even if the house always remembers. Now, I even find myself favoring the bookish and career-oriented aspects of my life over the domestic. The sink still gets filled up and sometimes it will stay that way longer than it should. But, if I see a curious fly, I'll make sure to scrub at any old cups and spray greased countertops as I recall the consequences of a house left forgotten and announce the lack of welcome for any suspecting creature. But, just as we may unintentionally become absent within each other's lives or commit the inconvenient act of dying, there is still a question of what the people we leave behind will feel about it; whether they long to see us again, long to have our warmth instead of our coldness, or long to move on from us completely.

Besides, my mother is like any other fallible human being and is (often) made of flesh and blood with a beating heart that is of the human realm, not the spirit. She may have not made family dinners or packed lunches a part of the household structure but, to me, that made days like Thanksgiving even more special. Each year she starts cooking two days in advance, buys the softest challah and cornbread for homemade stuffing, makes a sweet and tart cranberry sauce using only her intuition as measuring tools, and brings out our expensive ceramic dishes to create a beautiful spread. We even visit our grandmother's house on that day of feasting and remind ourselves that while our family is small, fragmented, and imperfect, we are grateful to be able to share a meal with each other. My mom still silently condemns my grandmother for using boxed stuffing and canned cranberry sauce on the car ride home, but everything always tastes delicious to me. It's not just about the food really, but the fact that we are all here. We are all gathered around a table, alive, with stomachs and hearts full.

For Floyd  
Millicent Darko

They kill us intentionally  
Indeed  
They lock us behind bars  
Indeed  
They steal us from our own families  
Indeed  
They drive over us with their cars  
Indeed

They kneel on our necks  
Indeed  
They rip out our tongues  
Indeed  
They blind us with gas  
Indeed  
They poison our lungs  
Indeed

They tempt and they instigate  
Indeed  
They blame us for their wrongs  
Indeed  
We will never forget  
Indeed  
We will never move on

Blind Spot  
Allison Peart

*For my sister on her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday*

Caroline was no stranger to the disease that had rendered her rationally useless for the past two days. The symptoms of infection mirrored something else that often happened to her. Sometimes, as the cheer team began its final formation during the last dregs of a game, Caroline would lose focus. The slant of the setting sun on the dewy, artificial turf; or the directionless, spearing flight of a distant hawk would command her attention. For a moment, she would forget the tightness of her ponytail, the weight of a white-sneakered foot in her hands, the roaring ocean of a joyous or enraged crowd. For a moment, Caroline would relax, allowing her smile to fall as her eyes tracked the sun's slow path.

But at that same moment, the formation would tremble, until sharp, quiet calls jerked Caroline back to the football field, back to the migraine starting at her temples, back to the weight of her team in her hands.

Sounding like a nest of snakes, the whispers would come:

*"What the hell, Carrie." "You almost dropped me!" "Are you okay?"  
"Focus, Smith."*

*"Smile, everyone keep smiling."*

*"What's up with you?"*

"Sorry," she would whisper through the brick wall of a re-plastered smile, replanting her feet, sending the strength up through her arms, stabilizing the formation. The game would continue. The girls would cheer their boys to victory or through defeat.

After the game, walking home, holding her sweater closed against the chilled night air, Caroline would think of the moment when she had almost broken the formation, when she had become dangerous – a weak link. A great wave of desperation would surge in her as she climbed the steps to her porch. The sun, the hawk, had nearly freed her. Then, opening the door to the warm smell of dinner and welcome of her parents, Caroline would shake her head, step back into the formation, and take on the weight, trying her best to forget.

An ungraspable chance; the seductive danger of impossible freedom. Distraction.

To Caroline, all that was encompassed in one incredibly close, yet unreachable, unknowable person. His name was Nate – Nathan. Nathan Johanson.

\*\*\*

### *Thursday*

It had begun suddenly, as breathtakingly as a star falling through the sky, during an ordinary sleepover with Mary – Caroline's closest childhood friend, fellow cheerleader, and greatest tormentor. Caroline's hands had been caught in Mary's tangle of curls when the white bedroom door swung softly open.

"Knock," deadpanned Mary, closing her eyes as Caroline wove her hair into a tight, unmoving braid.

"Where are they?"

"What are you talking about," barked Mary.

"Do you *have* them."

Caroline hadn't looked up, but she felt Mary tense. Mary jerked away, and the braid Caroline had wrangled into submission unraveled into nothingness. "Why don't you ask Peter?"

Caroline looked, then, at the disrupter. She looked, and for the life of her, could not look away.

"You don't knock, you don't say hi to Caroline. You're so rude, Nate." Mary said with a teasing laugh.

"*Please, Mar.*"

In the house she had grown up visiting, with the girl she trusted as a sister, Caroline suddenly felt oddly out of place. She knew Nate—he had always been Mary's quiet, solitary brother, sometimes smiling politely at her, sometimes not—but now his voice held something in it that was a star falling, landing in Caroline's chest, tangling itself up in her veins. She looked down, drew a steadying breath, but her breath caught on the something.

Mary's thin shoulders hunched as she sighed. "You know where they are."

A sound Nate made drew Caroline's attention again. His face was terrible for a moment, blank, despairing, until a cool dullness smoothed it. He left without another word.

After the door closed behind him, Mary looked over her shoulder, wrinkled her nose at Caroline. "What's up with you?"

Caroline shook her head, heart beating loud. “Nothing. C’mon, turn around and let me finish. We’ve gotta get up early tomorrow and I *know* you won’t let me braid your hair when you’re tired.”

Mary laughed softly, turned back for Caroline’s fingers. For a moment, both girls were lost in silence. Then Mary said “Brothers, right?.”

“Right,” whispered Caroline, as the tangle grew in her chest.

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The tangle grew like a weed. That night, as Mary slept soundly, head tilted back, Caroline listened. Down the hall, voices rose: A soft, quiet, determined one that made Caroline’s heart beat faster; a deep, unyielding one, stubborn as a rock.

“*Give them back.*” The voice trembled with – was it rage? Or terror? An indecipherable response.

“*Give them back!*”

She heard a door slam, then another. Then quiet.

Eyes wide, Caroline freed her hand from the vice of Mary’s sleeping grip and turned onto her side. She stared into nothing. What had Nate lost? Had Peter – the oldest, a distant, fleeting figure in Caroline’s life – really taken them? If he had, why?

For a reason she didn’t care to acknowledge, Caroline had to know. She tucked her hands under her cheek and tried to sleep.

\*\*\*

### *Friday*

The next day, after early-morning cheer practice, Caroline was at her locker, shoving her Calculus textbook into her backpack and pushing loose strands of hair back from her face when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

“Caroline. Hey.”

She stared. Nate stood in front of her, dark circles under eyes clear as water, a lifeless smile on his face. What was he – a junior – doing in the sophomore hallway?

“Listen, I’m sorry I didn’t say hi to you last night, but where’s Mary? I need to talk to her.”

Caroline blinked the surprise away and swung her backpack over her shoulder. Mary was in room 203, upstairs. Ms. Dundelle’s french class. “I dunno.”

She began to walk to class, and had to swallow more surprise when Nate fell into step with her. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, but he was staring straight ahead, jaw clenched.

"Just . . . tell me. I won't let her know that you told." Caroline narrowed her eyes. "You think I'm a liar?" "I think you know where she is."

Caroline stopped, opened one of the many doors in the long, crowded hall. Over her shoulder, she said, "I've got to get to class," and left Nate to the rushing flood of hormone-pumped teenagers. She had derivatives to solve.

But at her desk, the tangle kept tugging at her insides, demanding, incessant. Strange, desperate, blue-gray eyes. And his hair – Caroline remembered that, usually, it was perfectly combed and gelled in a long, sweeping, honey-blond crew cut. But today, it had stuck out at all angles, fuzzed or flat in the wrong places.

Caroline didn't realize she was chewing her pencil until the wood cracked in her mouth. During lunch, she would make Mary talk to Nate. Caroline had to find out what he wanted, what had made him look so – well, like he'd just learned he had three weeks to live.

"Miss Smith?"

Caroline looked up, the taste of wood and lead dusting her tongue. "I'm sorry?"

"The answer to number forty-seven, please?"

Caroline looked down at her paper and all the unfilled answer-blanks after number thirteen. She winced. "Uh, sorry, but could I . . . use the bathroom? It's an emergency."

\*\*\*

Mary ate like she was starving – six nights of cheer practice and four days of swim practice a week will do that to an appetite – and, chewing slowly on her own peanut butter and jelly sandwich, Caroline waited patiently for her to finish.

"How was Calc?"

"Fine," Caroline said softly, drumming her fingers on the table.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Mary asked through a mouthful of potato and boiled eggs, "you wanna know what Nate said or something?"

Caroline looked down, took another bite of her sandwich. When she glanced up, Mary's blue eyes were dark slits of suspicion.



"What?" Caroline tried to look innocent and unconcerned. "Why do you care so much?"

"I don't!"

Mary raised an eyebrow.

Caroline sighed. "I don't. Well, maybe a little. It's just, I dunno. He seemed so *sad* — I never remember him looking that way." She also didn't remember his eyes being so clear and expressive, but Mary didn't need to know that.

Mary scoffed, but her frown had softened. "Well, get used to it. Ever since Peter moved back home, Nate's been like that. They don't hit each other or anything but —" she shrugged.

They chewed in silence. After a while, inspecting her nails, Caroline said "So? What did he need to tell you so bad?"

Mary sighed and put her fork down. "He asked me to get some stuff Peter took from him. He's kind of afraid of Peter."

Caroline frowned. "Are you?"

Mary shrugged. She looked small suddenly, dwarfed by a mass of blonde, tangled curls and the shadow of someone Caroline only knew as a remembered voice, as country music blasting beneath a door, as beer cans in the kitchen trash when she and Mary had decided to become pastry chefs at twelve years old. A looming stranger, his face was a mismatched collage of all the family photos Caroline had seen hanging on Johanson walls over the years. Was he twenty-six? Twenty-seven? She knew, at least, that he was tall, taller than Mary's father.

"Peter's gonna follow in your dad's footsteps, right?" pushed Caroline, tilting her head. "Mary?"

Mary was nodding, but Caroline didn't like the faraway look in her eyes, or the way she was squeezing her hands together. "Yeah," Mary said quietly, "he'll be pastor if father ever steps down." She shook her head. "He doesn't like us bothering him or going in his room."

Caroline frowned. "So you won't get the things for Nate? What did Peter take, anyway?"

Mary spoke as if she hadn't heard. "I don't know why Nate thinks he'll listen to *me* — Peter doesn't like either of us much . . . but —" she stopped abruptly and looked once more at Caroline with narrow, calculating eyes.

Caroline shifted uncomfortably, tugging at her necklace. "What?"

"Let your hair down."

It wasn't a question. Caroline swallowed, pulled her scrunchie out. "What are you on about?"

Mary leaned forward, sharp elbows digging into the table, sharp eyes roving over Caroline's face. She sat back wearing a grim smile. "You kind of look like her. His ex. Remember? With the alligator boots and the tattoo?"

"I do not – What does that have to do with anything? Anyway she had *red* hair . . ."

Mary's smile widened to a wolfish grin. "If Peter found *you* digging through his stuff –"

Caroline's voice was a harsh whisper. "I can't snoop around in your brother's room!"

"But then you'd get to find out what's got Nate so worked up," sang Mary, digging back into her lunch, self-satisfied.

"Can't *you* just tell me?"

Mouth full, Mary replied "I have no idea what it is. Nate didn't tell me. Just said Peter had stashed some 'important things' in his room. I could care less, honestly, but I know you're curious. And," Mary drawled, "I think I can guess why."

Under the heat of Mary's gaze, Caroline's cheeks grew hot, and she squinted down at the table, suddenly interested in a few stray crumbs by her lunchbox.

"Doesn't really matter to me," Mary said brightly, standing up. "C'mon, I'll watch you fix your hair in the bathroom."

Minutes later, as Caroline bent over by the sinks to sweep her auburn hair into a high pony, Mary asked "So, you'll do it?"

Caroline stilled. She could say no, and Mary might still get the things for Nate, and, if asked, she'd likely tell Caroline what they were. But Caroline thought of the look on Nate's face when he had said "*Please, Mar*"; the sound of his voice drumming in vain against the solid rock of Peter's; the dark circles under his reddened eyes. She imagined giving whatever he'd lost back to him, imagined the relief that would wash over his face. The gratitude.

Could it change the indifferent politeness with which he treated her?

Caroline straightened, finished wrapping the scrunchie round her hair. The sharp ends flipped slightly, just below her ears. Perfectly in place. She met Mary's eyes in the mirror.

"I'll do it."

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### *Saturday*

Caroline grimaced at the stuffy odor of self-indulgence and resignation that filled Peter's dark, untidy room. She kicked at one of the empty cans strewn across the carpeted floor. There was little chance she'd be discovered – the Johansons churched harder than most families on any given weekend; and with Pastor Johanson beginning a special series, Mary had sworn they'd be at church from sunrise Saturday to sundown Sunday – but still Caroline's heart drummed in anticipation and nervousness as she stepped slowly and cautiously into the room.

Avoiding the bed, she went to Peter's cluttered dresser. In the third drawer from the top, groping under wrinkled boxers, Caroline's fingers brushed something smooth and cool-to-the-touch. Frowning intently, she pushed the boxers away and took out a pile of papers that Peter had stashed beneath his underwear.

Her heartbeat sounded loudly in her ears. It was too dark to see. She went to the window, pulled the navy curtains back.

She'd asked Mary earlier that morning, watching her get ready for church after another sleepover: "*How will I know what to look for?*"

Mary had shrugged, biting her tongue as she'd struggled into her dress. "*I'm sure it'll jump out at you – anything that doesn't smell strongly of beer, or toxic masculinity.*" Nerves and frustration had made Caroline laugh, but now, holding the papers up to the late-morning light, she believed Mary.

Something this beautiful *couldn't* be Peter's.

In dark, fluid, sweeping lines of dusty charcoal, parts of a face repeated across the fronts and backs of worn notebook paper. Some angles showed the face as dark, hidden in shadows cast by a serious brow, a lock of black hair, or the faint suggestion of a jacket's hood. Other angles showcased dark eyes that stared out at Caroline with the piercing, shining life of light on deep waters, or starlight in a clear sky. In one bottom corner was a hand, frozen at someone's lips, blue fingernail caught between their teeth – a single drop of color in an ocean of black. The word "*Ellie*" was scrawled repeatedly along the margins of pages in small, condensed lettering, declaring the owner of the vivid, yet fragmentary body parts.

Caroline's mouth was dry. The artist had drawn mainly the face, as if it belonged to no real person, rarely defining its borders with firm lines of cheeks or shoulders. But certain shades, certain smudges convinced Caroline that all the different features belonged to one face and one person, someone the artist knew, someone the artist had studied intently, deeply. Caroline guessed at a square jaw, at oil-black hair that brushed a collarbone. She tried to see her own features in the fluid strokes, but she would have had to be blind to equate the sharp jaw to her own soft cheeks; the short, dark, tousled hair to her own perfect ponytail.

Who were they, this person Nate seemed almost afraid to draw, this person captured in glimpses, snippets, barely-defined? Not for a moment did Caroline wonder if the drawings were Peter's; no artist would hide valued work unprotected, stashed carelessly with dirty underwear. Of course, there were also the confirmatory initials, *NJ*, written neatly on each page.

Why had Peter taken Nate's drawings?

"Caroline?"

Caroline squeaked and jumped in surprise, although she was relieved the voice didn't belong to Peter. She turned around slowly, trying to act as if she belonged there. "I thought you all were at church?"

Nate frowned in the doorway as he straightened his tie. "We are, father just sent me home because—" his face changed suddenly, tightened, as he caught sight of Caroline's hands and what they held.

"What are you doing with those?" Nate said quietly, voice strained with some emotion Caroline couldn't name.

Caroline swallowed her nerves. This was not how she'd imagined it, but it could probably still go well. She held out the papers. "I—I thought I'd get them for you. I saw how upset you were and—"

Nate strode forward, snatched the papers away, and held them to his chest, but when Caroline drew back, eyes wide, he seemed to catch himself, to deflate.

"Sorry. I guess Mary sent you?" He wouldn't meet Caroline's eyes. He held the papers tight, and his hands shook slightly. This was not how Caroline had hoped he'd receive her gesture.

"N-no, not really. I wanted to. Nate, your drawings, I—" he looked at her strangely, intensely, brows drawn together as if frightened, or confused. Caroline shook her head, wanting to set him at ease. "Nate, they're *really* good."

He stared at her, mouth parted slightly. His hands relaxed, and then his soft laughter was cascading over Caroline like summer wind, like a warm shower on a cold night. She gave a short, breathless laugh.

"You, uh, you really think so?" Nate said smiling, as if he didn't believe her.

"I do! They're beautiful," Caroline rushed, nodding for emphasis. "But I can't understand what your brother would want with them. Who's Ellie?" Caroline said, before she could stop herself. She nearly slapped her hands over her mouth but she managed to shrink the embarrassed gesture to a discreet pinch of her inner arm.

"I—I mean, she's very beautiful, whoever she is—um, I mean if she even *is* anyone, I know I'd be *so* flattered if someone drew *me* that way, uh, what I mean is, she's very lucky—"

Nate's face had darkened, and Caroline stifled the horrible stream of nonsense gushing out of her traitorous mouth. He'd turned away from her, and one of his hands was in his hair.

"Yeah," he said quietly, "she."

Caroline frowned. She didn't know what to say. Had she done something wrong? "I—are you alright?"

Nate straightened, looked over his shoulder at her and smiled brightly. "Thank you for getting these, I really appreciate it." He rubbed the back of his neck. "But maybe don't go looking around in other people's rooms? Especially Peter's."

Caroline nodded without knowing why. "I, uh, I won't."

Nate carefully tucked the drawings under his arm. "Don't worry, I won't tell him. I've got to head back to church—are you coming?"

Something was strange about his face, but Caroline couldn't put her finger on it. It almost hurt to look at his smile. "No," she said slowly, "Mary told everyone I was sick so I could stay behind; it'd be weird if I showed up now."

Nate shrugged. "Oh. Well, see you later then." He turned to go.

"Wait!"

He looked back, and for a brief moment that tense, uneasy look flashed once more across his eyes.

"You really are a wonderful artist," said Caroline softly, flushing a little under his clear gaze. "I mean it."

Nate held her eyes for a moment, head tilted slightly, before he gave her a small smile. "Thank you. After I put these up, I'll walk you home—it's on the way."

After they parted ways, Caroline lingered outside on her porch for a few minutes, watching Nate walk down the street to the white-walled church at its end. At first, he walked cheerfully, arms swinging loose.

But the longer Caroline watched, and the closer Nate got to the church, the faster he began to walk, as if his easy-going stroll had been a facade. He walked faster until he moved down the sidewalk with long, angry strides, and then he marched up the church steps like a soldier going to war, head down, hands stiff at his sides.

Caroline watched the church doors for a long time after Nate passed through them. She kept seeing the brilliance of his smile after she'd given him the drawings. Something about it filled her with deep, inexplicable uneasiness.

Why hadn't the smile reached his eyes?

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### *Sunday*

That morning, before the early service, Caroline's mother sent her to the grocery store. Standing at the register, bleary-eyed, Caroline dozed as the cashier rang up a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, and three oranges.

"Hey, don't you go to Cliffside?"

Caroline jerked awake, startled. The cashier was holding out her change, a lopsided smile on his face.

"Uh, yeah—sorry," she said, taking the coins, noticing that his short nails were black, that a tattoo of a snake coiled around his wrist. "Late night."

"Don't worry about it," he chuckled, "I know how you feel. I'm in your Calc class by the way," he said good-naturedly, "in case you didn't realize."

Caroline tilted her head, and the dark brown, floppy curls and easygoing voice finally clicked. "Oh *yeah*, you're the transfer kid. Mr. Malawati hates your guts," she laughed. "Aren't you a junior, anyway? What are you doing in Calc?"

The boy grinned. "Not everyone can be as smart as you, 'Miss Smith,'" he said, mocking Mr. Malawati's clear favoritism.

Caroline rolled her eyes, smiling. "Are you ready for the test?" she asked, taking up the grocery bags.

The boy laughed, and Caroline saw that one of his eyes squinted more than the other when he smiled. Had she—dreams etched in charcoal swarmed behind her eyes, as if she was still asleep, as if she'd never awoken—had she seen that smile before?

"Mr. Malawati hates me for a reason," he said, and would have said more if not for the bagger who ran up and interrupted him.

"Ellie!" said the red-haired youth, out of breath, "Manager wants you."

The cashier's face fell. "Looks like I must beg my leave of you, Miss Smith," he said, bowing slightly, "my fate awaits me."

"Yeah, and it'll get worse if you don't hurry up," urged the bagger. "He's in a bad mood, not like your being late helped much."

The cashier shrugged, smiling easily at Caroline. He pointed a thumb at the bagger and pretended to whisper. "This one over here has a thing for authority figures."

"I do *not*," scoffed the bagger, as he moved to take the cashier's place.

Caroline frowned. She looked at the tag pinned to the cashier's green apron. *Elton*. "Ellie?" she asked slowly, brows drawing together, hands clenching around the plastic handles of her grocery bags.

The cashier tilted his head at her. "Yeah—it's a nickname. You really *didn't* remember me, huh."

Caroline slowly shook her head. Her voice was quiet. "D-do a lot of people call you that?"

"Among . . . other things," laughed Ellie, eyeing Caroline. "Listen, I've got to go. See you Monday!"

Caroline nodded blankly. She felt very cold. Her hands hurt, and she realized her nails were digging into her palms.

"Ma'am? Helloooo, ma'am? Is there something else you needed?"

"W-what?"

The bagger – now cashier – was glaring at her. “You’re holding up the line.” “O-oh. Sorry.”

She walked out of the store and walked home and put the groceries on the table and ignored her mother and went into her room and lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling until her eyes watered. She closed them, and behind them swam charcoal images that taunted her with their beauty, their intimacy. A smile, a clenched hand, the curve of an upper lip. And the eyes – oh, god, she couldn’t imagine Elton that way, disarmed, intense, mouth parted, eyes burning with – she shook her head, covered her face in her hands as the flush crept up her neck.

She thought she’d considered every possibility – Elizabeth in third period; Elena on the cheer team; Ms. Eloise, the gym teacher for upperclassmen; even Eleanor, the *janitor*, in Caroline’s most desperate moments – but *Elton*?

Caroline squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to hear her mother calling that it was time to go.

Now, torturously, she could imagine it. The way that someone might transform this boy – who was barely her acquaintance – into art. He always wore a hoodie in class. His nails were black – but his thumbs were painted the palest blue. His dark eyes scrunched up, filling with light when he smiled, and tantalizing mystery when he didn’t. When he talked, he sounded always on the brink of laughter. Loose shoulders, loose curls, loose tongue.

Caroline felt like scales had fallen from her eyes. Ellie.

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“So, looking forward to tomorrow?” asked Mary as she walked with Caroline to that evening’s service, the second of that day, Pastor Johanson’s final segment of what he had solemnly called ‘a festive weekend of holy passion.’

Caroline shook her head, hands stuck in the pockets of her sweater. “I just know I’m going to fail.”

“Eh, I’m sure you’ll do great, even if it is Calc. You always do. Then again,” said Mary carefully, as if she didn’t want her mother, walking a few feet in front of them, to hear. “You have been rather distracted.”

Caroline stopped abruptly, then tried to keep walking as if she hadn’t. Mary’s voice was deathly soft. “Aren’t you ever going to talk to me about it?”

Caroline drew a sharp breath. “You want me to?”



Mary put her hand on Caroline's shoulder, and Caroline thought how strange it was that eyes the same shade of blue as Nate's could make her feel so differently. Nate's gaze thrilled Caroline, sent her heart racing; but Mary's could both terrify and set Caroline at ease with one glance.

"You're my best friend. Of course I do."

"Even if —"

"Always."

Caroline reached up and squeezed Mary's hand. "Alright."

Mary grinned and threw her arm around Caroline's shoulder. "You can tell me all about it after the 'festivities.'"

Laughing, they followed Mrs. Johanson, who was glaring at them to hurry up, down the long street to the church. But as they climbed the old stone steps — Caroline and Mrs. Johanson treading carefully, mindful of their heels — something in the shadows, between a line of hedges and a newly whitewashed sidewall, snared Caroline's attention.

She grabbed at Mary, a few steps above, and caught her hand, ready with an excuse.

"What is it — oh." Mary raised an eyebrow. "Shall I save you a seat?"

Caroline stared at Mary, briefly wild-eyed. Had Mary guessed what Caroline was going to do?

Mary shrugged, but the set of her jaw betrayed her feigned indifference. She bent down towards Caroline's ear and her whisper was fast and sharp as falling ice. "Listen. It's fine if you're in love with my brother. But there's things in this family, things you don't know, things you'll find out if you keep obsessing over him."

Caroline tried to draw back, to meet Mary's eyes, but Mary gripped her shoulder and held her still. "Just, whatever happens, remember this. You have a choice about being in this family. I don't."

Mary let go then, and her gaze was utterly unreadable. "I'll see you inside."

She turned, and without another word or backwards glance, followed her impatient mother into the church.

For a few seconds, Caroline stood frozen on the church steps, heart in her throat. She felt like she was balancing on the precipice of something she didn't want to understand,

didn't know if she *could* understand. She couldn't understand Mary – if she was approving or resentful.

Caroline could hardly understand herself.

But before she could analyze the tones in Mary's voice or the erratic rhythm of her own heart, she heard voices. The unmoving stone and the persistent, despairing sea. They came from around the corner of the wall, wrapped around her neck, and drew her like blood to a vulture, like honey to a bee. Helpless, intoxicated, hungry, she went.

She crept down the outside of the hedges, peering through densely entangled foliage, following the voices that rose in fell in quietly explosive tones. When she saw bright shocks of white and blonde and navy through the leaves a few feet down from where she stood, she dropped to a crouch. The scene was clearer through the bases of the hedges.

"It means nothing, Peter, I swear. *Nothing.*"

"Sure. That's why you woke me up at three in the morning to beg for them, and stole them from my room when I wouldn't give them back. For nothing."

Nate made a strangled sound of exasperation or exhaustion or defeat, and Caroline moved some leaves aside to see better. His back was pressed against the wall, and under Peter's outstretched arm, Caroline could see Nate's face, a bed of hardened stone.

"I've told you a thousand times," he spat, "I needed them for my art class."

Peter shrugged and gave a dry, humorless laugh. "You think I'm blind?" His voice was lighthearted, as if he was discussing the weather, or that morning's sermon. "I'll catch you, eventually, and then you'll finally get what people like you deserve."

*People like you.* It was as if Peter had slapped him.

"Peter," whispered Nate, white-faced. His voice was nearly lost in the rustling of the leaves. "I'm not – you can't. You wouldn't."

Peter straightened, wind rippling through his white button-down, blowing the long blonde hair that glowed in the late-afternoon sun. He looked like one of the heroes in Caroline's fantasy novels, like a medieval knight – except, she could see it now, as he dropped his arm to his side and turned, the black leather and gilded lettering – instead of a sword, he wielded a Bible.

And Nate, nails digging into the wall behind him, small in the shadow Peter cast, was frozen, as a cornered animal freezes in the face of inevitable death. As Peter walked away, Nate opened his mouth, moved his hand as if to speak, or beg, or protest, but he made no sound.

Caroline could see Peter's face, smooth and smug under heavy, dangerous brows. He said, loudly enough so both she and Nate and probably anyone outside the church could hear, "Sing well tonight, little brother. You may not get to sing again."

Caroline waited, heartbeat like gunfire when Peter strode past where she hid, crouched. She waited until, a long time afterwards, Nate walked slowly into the church. Then she stood, wiping tears from her cheeks.

Mary was wrong. There was no choice.

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The church's stained-glass windows glowed as the amber light of the setting sun illuminated, filled, and brought their red, green and blue stones to life. They cast their colored light in serene, slow-moving columns on the hushed congregation. Into that sacred silence, darting between the colors and the light and the people's beating hearts, Nate's voice wove an intangible, breathtaking tapestry.

He sang, and Caroline rose and fell with the clear tremors of his voice. She surrendered to it helplessly, a ship surrendering to the ocean, a cloud surrendering to the wind. She let it carry her far beyond the church, far beyond their town, to the place where the sun sank below the horizon; to the place where the hawk slept at night. Nate's song gave her wings.

But his face tethered her firmly to earth. Even as such hauntingly pure song poured from his mouth, his face was devoid of emotion, stern as if he'd dipped it in plaster, cast it in stone. As if one movement would shatter it. He stood stiffly, frozen in place on the platform. Caroline sat sandwiched between Mary and Mrs. Johanson, near enough to the platform to clearly see Nate's expression. He never once looked at the congregation. Instead, his eyes were fixed to the ceiling in what appeared to be spiritual devotion.

Caroline knew better. She knew she wasn't the only one watching Nate for a crack in the stone. On the other side of Mrs. Johanson, Caroline could hear Peter, talking to Pastor Johanson in low whispers. She knew that if Nate looked down, he would break.

Behind Nate, seated on a stool, all loose shoulders and curls, Elton gently strummed a guitar. Long sleeves covered his wrist tattoo, and he'd pulled his hair back into a low ponytail, but light glanced off the black and blue tips of his fingers as they plucked the strings.

When Nate finished singing, he walked off the platform wordlessly, disappearing into the back. Caroline thought Elton seemed concerned, but if he was, he quickly shook it off, entertaining the crowd with a few chaste jokes until the next performer – worshipper – arrived, and then he too disappeared backstage. The whole church laughed at Elton, the well-liked newcomer Caroline hadn't noticed until that morning.

The weight of Peter and Pastor Johanson's solid, impassioned silence beneath the laughter and the music grated at Caroline all through the long night of performances.

Hours later, after the night drew to a close, Caroline stood outside the church, under stars, with the Johansons and a few church members that were reluctant to leave. Mrs. Johanson conversed quietly with the elderly lady that led the choir, and Pastor Johanson and Peter leaned against the doors of the church, talking. Mary sat on the church steps in front of them, head on her knees, fast asleep. Caroline had draped her sweater around Mary's shoulders before getting up to walk.

She wandered around the church building, seemingly aimlessly, but she knew what she hoped to find – *who* she hoped to find.

He was there, back to Caroline, leaning against the wall by the side door as if it was the only thing holding him up. He straightened when he heard Caroline's soft footsteps, and the brief look of utter relief on his face when he turned twisted her heart.

"Ellie? Oh god, you came back. You have to know I didn't mean it, I—" he stepped back, face falling when Caroline came into the faint glow of the door's old light fixture.

"Oh," he said hoarsely. "What are you doing here?"

Caroline wet her lips, drew a deep breath, and struggled to say the words she'd rehearsed all night long. "Nate, I—" she paused.

He was frowning, staring, whole body sagging with exhaustion.

She gathered her courage and met his eyes. "Nate, will you go out with me?" He blinked, taken aback. "What?"

Now that she'd said it, the words came fast. "I think you're great, and Mary doesn't mind, and we'd have lots of fun together. We could go skating, or biking, or have a picnic, or anything really."

Nate stared at Caroline as if seeing her for the first time. "You . . . want to *date* me?" Caroline nodded, trying not to appear eager before deciding she was already far past that point. "Yes. I really like you."

Nate moved his jaw, frowning, as if he couldn't find the right words. He shook his head, bewildered. "But—you're terribly sweet, Caroline, but I thought—my drawings—you deserve to—" he stopped himself, surprised. "It's so strange," he said, brows drawn together, voice low as if he was talking to himself, "I can't believe I was almost about to tell you."

Caroline set her shoulders back, trying to stop her mouth from trembling. She smiled, she reached for Nate's limp hand. "You don't have to," she said, "I know."

Nate held very still. "You –" his voice broke, and he stared in stunned silence.

Caroline nodded. "Follow me," she said softly, leading Nate towards the front of the church, never letting go of his hand.

For this, he found his voice. "I—I can't –"

"Trust me." They reached the corner. Caroline peeked around the edge of the wall and saw Peter's gaze sweeping over the moonlit lawn. She turned back to Nate, whose face was twisted in confusion and fear.

"See the tree?"

There was only one tree on the lawn, an old, heavy-leafed oak. "Yeah," said Nate, "but –"

"We'll walk quickly over there, and then you'll lean me against the side with the root sticking out, and then –" she swallowed, " – then you'll kiss me."

"What?"

Caroline's heart beat loudly in her chest. She spoke quickly and quietly, flushed with urgency and nerves. "Your brother is up there, by the doors. So is your dad. They'll see us."

Nate looked at her as if she'd suddenly sprouted wings, or spoken in French. "W-what are you talking about?"

For a brief, searing moment, Caroline squeezed her eyes shut and drowned in the beat of her heart. Silently, she let go of Nate's hand and turned to walk away, blood rushing through her veins.

"Wait." Nate reached forward, took her hand. "Please, wait."

His eyes were soft, full of wonder. He squeezed her hand, and Caroline felt him tremble as he said "Okay."

They crossed the lawn together, took shelter under the tree. The night wind rustled through the leaves. The trunk was rough against Caroline's back and bare shoulders. She put a hand on Nate's cheek and he closed his eyes. Over his shoulder, for a split second, she met Peter's dark, shocked gaze.

“Ready?” she whispered.

Nate nodded, cupped her face in his hands. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He leaned in. Above them, the tree leaves sang.

They parted, and Nate touched his forehead to Caroline’s. She ran her hand down his cheek, to his collar. The faint chirps of crickets filled the air.

“Would you draw me, sometime?” she asked softly.

Nate opened his eyes, nodded, thumbed Caroline’s bottom lip. “You’re beautiful.” He breathed a long, shaking sigh. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

When Caroline said yes, Nate began to cry, and she drew him to her. As she held him, feeling his back shake under her hands, she closed her eyes. She saw the sun, the hawk, the charcoal, the blue-tipped thumbs. She breathed deeply of the night air. It was a new formation, but she was strong enough to hold it up. She could take on the weight.

□ ♡ Fin ♡ □

## Graduation Auhjanae McGee

Born with hair that reaches for the moon  
Which soon will stuff beneath a cap to say  
On this day you succeeded, made space  
At a place where not so long ago  
You know they would scoff and sneer  
You here is not welcome, unwise  
Their eyes saw your skin made of mud  
A heavy thud and the weight falls  
Appalled at a haunting history  
Victory now in the seven percent  
Made a dent, made a mark, made a name  
To claim it still feels surreal, foreign  
Adorned in orange and black, you shall march  
Back arched, hips swaying, head held high  
The sky is your limit now, doll, please believe  
You achieved something phenomenal  
Nominal praise just will not suffice  
Entice them with pride, unapologetic  
Magnetic is the smile on your lips  
It grips your mama's heart, note the tears  
All those years spent toiling, week after week  
Now they speak your name, hand you a scroll  
The goal, this small slip of paper, unlocked  
The clock's tick stops, it's not your time  
A dime for everyone who doubted you  
(A new Tesla it would buy, maybe)  
But, baby, that does not matter now  
They see how brilliantly you shine  
One line stands out as your favorite  
You savor it, your name on the page

## Meet the Contributors

**Asia Kaiser '21** is an Ecology and Evolutionary Biology major. She was born and raised in Philadelphia.

**Jordan Aaliyah Stallworth '21** is a Public and International Affairs major from Lawrenceville, Georgia, currently living in Los Angeles, California. This year, she really enjoyed reading the works of James Baldwin and more recently, NK Jemisin. She is forever grateful to her Black writing family.

**Chamari White-Mink '20** is a multi-disciplinary theater-maker from Hartford, CT. They majored in English and received a certificate in theater during their time at Princeton. Chamari is committed to use storytelling as a tool to deconstruct and dismantle systems of power, empower themselves and their collaborators to produce work they are proud of, and create a new reality by searching for truth.

**Hailey Colborn '22** is an English major pursuing certificates in African American Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies. She loves spending time with her three dogs and sharing the books that she reads on her bookstagram (@hailsreads). She especially loves Russian literature and is on a quest to read every Nabokov book she can get her hands on.

**Skyler Gordon** is an Oklahoma-born, Tennessee-raised third-year PhD candidate in History and African American Studies. Love is his lodestar.

**Taylor Branch '23** is an English major from Doylestown, PA. She is involved with the Princeton Film Society, and her featured piece was written for a class about creative nonfiction called "Writing About Family."

**Millicent Darko '21** majored in Molecular Biology with a certificate in African American Studies. She was raised in Phoenix, AZ but enjoys visiting her home country, Ghana.

**Allison Peart '24** is a freshman, the eldest of three-sisters, and a native Floridian who never experienced the seasons before coming to Princeton. She is probably going to major in Anthropology and hopes to use what she learns in a future that's centered around better understanding the human experience. She has a slight obsession with frogs (as an artistic concept; she has no desire to get close to one IRL), and she loves reading and writing fiction, especially historical and speculative fiction. She loves all things cottagecore, magical, and matcha-themed, and you might find her on campus taking a long-walk down the tow-path or riding a bike (If she can get her hands on one). She wrote "Blind Spot" for her sisters, who are her greatest inspirations and who have made her into the person and writer she is today.

**Auhjanae McGee '23** is an English major from Detroit, MI. She does *not* consider herself a poet, but she loves rhyme schemes, so she'll occasionally jot some stuff down!