

NEXT *steps*:



WRITINGS *from* STUDENTS AT THE CENTER CLASS *of* 2010

EDITED BY *graduating seniors* Tiera Randolph (McDonogh #35),
Glenicia Welch (McDonogh #35), Ariel Estwick (Sarah T. Reed),
Chinonye Emezie (Eleanor McMain), AND STUDENTS AT THE CENTER STAFF

NEXT *steps*:

WRITINGS *from* STUDENTS AT THE CENTER CLASS *of* 2010

EDITED BY *graduating seniors* Tiera Randolph (McDonogh #35),
Glenicia Welch (McDonogh #35), Ariel Estwick (Sarah T. Reed),
Chinonye Emezie (Eleanor McMain), AND STUDENTS AT THE CENTER STAFF

NEXT STEPS:

Writings from Students at the Center Class of 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Students at the Center.

All rights reserved.

www.sacnola.com

nextsteps@sacnola.com

TABLE *of* CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
WRITINGS	13
AFTERWORD	113
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	119

AUTHORS

<i>Ariel Estwick</i> . . . INTRODUCTION: We Have Come a Long Way...	9
<i>Alisha Lewis</i> Promised by God	15
<i>Andrew Nguyen</i> I am a Student	17
<i>Antonio Williams</i> Listen to the Wind's Soft Cry	18
<i>Ariel Burks</i> Be Patient	19
<i>Ariel Estwick</i> . . . My Transition with Education After Katrina	21
<i>Arnold Burks</i> 2010	25
<i>Baralyn George</i> What Makes Me Cry, Laugh, and Smile	28
<i>Britney Winfield</i> I Love You Books	29
<i>Brittany George</i> Reflection in My Mirror	32
<i>Chelsey Melancon</i> My Bike Followed Close Behind	34
<i>Chinonye Emezie</i> We Became Human	35
<i>David Tran</i> Discovery	37
<i>Dejonique Magee</i> Where's June-June?	38
<i>Derranique Jenkins</i> "Where Are You?"	40
<i>Destiny Knatt</i> Not What You Think	41
<i>Edmond Coleman</i> Black History	43
<i>Glenicia Welch</i> Dear Mr. Earl: Two Letters	45
<i>Huy Nguyen</i> I Don't Feel Anything	47
<i>Ireion Smith</i> This Day Belongs to You, Daddy	49
<i>Jasmine Robinson</i> I Was There	50
<i>Jennifer Le</i> So Young, So Sweet, So Soon	52

<i>Jessica Thompson</i>	Diabetes	54
<i>Juanisha Moxley</i>	You Were Never There	57
<i>Juliana Ratliff</i>	From You, to Me	59
<i>Kabbrisha Bryant</i>	Life Goes On	60
<i>Kiara Williams</i>	Brother Letter	61
<i>Lashondra Thompson</i>	The Wrong (Right) Turn	63
<i>Mack McGinnis</i>	Inspiration Fading to Realization	65
<i>Marquita Nash</i>	Daddy	67
<i>Mathilde Fougat</i>	A Remarkable Year	68
<i>Minhvan Nguyen</i>	My First Funeral	71
<i>Neshia Ruffins</i>	The Power of Youth	73
<i>Ngan Vu</i>	She is Me, and I am She	75
<i>Roachell Sterling</i>	How Far I've Come	78
<i>Russell Lopez</i>	Who I Am	79
<i>Sean Burrell</i>	Culinary	80
<i>Shanae Franklin</i>	Gotta Face Reality	82
<i>Sidnie Jackson</i>	Writer Who?	87
<i>Stephen Gladney</i>	Parts I-V: Of a Lifelong Recollection	89
<i>Thao Nguyen</i>	The Abhorrent Truth	101
<i>Tram Tran</i>	Reconnect	106
<i>Wendy Williams</i>	He Never Said I'm Sorry	109
<i>Kalamu ya Salaam</i> ...AFTERWORD: One of the Three R's is a "W"		115

INTRODUCTION

We Have Come a Long Way...

Ariel Estwick

In an era in which people are used to seeing and hearing everything, these young people have taken an extra step by writing.

— *Kalamu ya Salaam*

There is an importance of words that many in our generation of constantly evolving technology do not understand. When the class of 2010 was freshmen, Youtube, Myspace, Facebook and Twitter were just becoming a part of mainstream media. Since then they have taken society by storm. Even more so, the value of the words we write has greatly diminished. According to Twitter the average number of tweets per day is about 50 million. As a result, words no longer have the same impact because they are constantly being replaced. They also have less meaning. So we don't truly know as much as we think we know about others through social networking. Although we might have 2,000 friends on Facebook, we don't really know how many friends we have. We may know where someone is, but not how they are experiencing that place. Accordingly, one can say whatever he or she likes on television or the Internet knowing that realistically it is interesting only for the next five minutes until it is forgotten. In contrast, through writing we know more about people than with any other medium such as television or radio. When you put words on paper and collect it in volumes, it has an infinite lifespan. These volumes last longer than their popular counterparts because of the unlimited thought and description within them. With bits of words, video and music being so easy to describe in a short and straight-to-the-point format most have glorified the transition, but the Class of 2010 graduates along with the Students at the Center Staff acknowledge that you cannot limit life's ups and downs to 140 characters. They also recognize that meaningful life experiences cannot be replaced. Just as people will save the newspapers from the election of our nation's first black president for decades to come,

people will be reading the immortalized words of the Children of Katrina, the first graduating class to pass through the school systems of the city of New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina, long after Youtube, Myspace, Facebook and Twitter are replaced. We know that writing is important because of the courage required to truthfully scribe your inner most thoughts and feelings for everyone to see and interpret. This understanding is one of the main factors that influenced the students to open up to you, their audience. Another contributing factor was the realization amongst the students and staff that as young, budding adults we have much to say. It has inspired us to know that we have proven ourselves to be worthy and that the world is finally ready to listen. Within this book you will encounter feelings of betrayal, guilt, sorrow and anger as well as joy, accomplishment, vivacity and enlightenment all as if you are peering into a window through which you can see the writers' triumphs as they move forward towards the next mile stones in their lives. These are the writings of the bravest and boldest of the Sarah T. Reed, McMain, and McDonogh 35 Class of 2010, who present to you: *Next Steps*.

WRITINGS

Promised By God

Alisha Lewis

I had just arrived home from another youth meeting, another late afternoon Monday filled with naive and immature adolescent minds. Maybe it was first my attitude or mood. I don't know why I was so pissed off. All I knew was I wanted to break free from this over bearing field. The whole time I was texting my boyfriend, trying to find a little entertainment just to escape. I thought I would never say this, so instead I put it in a text and sent, "I've never been so glad to go home." Finally the meeting ended, and I waited for my father to arrive. We talked a little bit on the ride home, but only on a general spectrum. Finally I could see the house on the corner. I was home!

I arrived to a place I terribly disliked, but yet I felt a certain ease as I entered the front door. I hugged my sister and spoke to my brother. Then my mother welcomed me with a kiss on the cheek while asking, "How was your day?" I replied the best way I could. I barely found the correct usage truly to express my inner thoughts. "It was okay." Minutes passed as I began to text Sidnie and other friends. I went upstairs to change my clothes and wind down.

A t-shirt and panties! My sister stepped foot in my doorway and asked for a hot glue gun for her social studies project. Luckily, I kept a spare in the bottom drawer of my night stand. As I searched for the gun, I came across a picture of my sister and me. Finally, I had made a discovery within realization, an eye opener if you must, a discovery so familiar and common to every human being: a moment when they can once more relive a time so significant, only history can reveal the time.

I gazed at the picture of my sister and me. She lies in her rocker on the kitchen table, tucked in as a baby should. Next to her am I, leaning over and making an adorable kissy face. I looked once more at the picture and looked up at her. The significance hit me, and the essence

of time had done it again. My sister is the exact same age now as I was then in the photo. Eight to nine years had passed since Amaris was born into my life. All those years before I had begged for a little sister, and at that time, as it is now, my prayers were answered.

I tried to express towards my sister how she is as I am (in age difference) in the photograph. Of course she couldn't reach the level of what I was trying to explain, but she did understand the general side. "My how you have grown," I hugged my sister as she kissed my cheek. Then I began to reflect on lost memories snapped within the picture's corners. She left with the glue gun, as I was left with an old album I had once prepared so long ago. I looked through every picture, and each one reminded me of why I placed the photos in that order. I was maturing: From skin so pale to red, from laying in my father's lap to crying in my mother's arms, from skin so bronze and eyes so bright I too hold my brother and kiss my sister on her little red-blushed cheek. I was evolving. From slumbers to milk and baths to Mardi Gras parades, I recapped it all and envisioned what I could.

I had forgotten myself a long ways from now. How oblivious I was to the world around me at such a young age. I was so happy and at peace, no worries and no harm ever came to mind. The only memories I had were tucked into joy and love. Even though I had forgotten, I had also found. I saw a woman in the mirror that night. Still in my T-shirt covering my voluptuous figure and underwear hugging hips so round and full, "My how I have grown!" I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and closed the photo album. For a moment I felt the spirit of a time when happiness once traveled through the walls of my home. That itself was a feeling of lost memory recaptured through a picture. I don't know what it was that day, but I have never been so glad to be home.

I am a Student

Andrew Nguyen

I am a student who goes to Sarah T. Reed.
After a class of English III,
I know I will succeed.

I stare into my teacher's eyes,
and know for sure
she isn't telling any lies.

By the looks and the way she speaks she's a great teacher.
English is about Power,
and that can make one person a great preacher.

Writing poetry is my best.
Anything I do,
I know I will be a great success.

Listen to the Wind's Soft Cry

Antonio Williams

Listen to the Wind's soft cry
of a Lady singing her Lullaby.
Whispers of the Night so long
wishing for that Famous Love Song.

She is my Flame in the Night.
Forever my Love burns.
She is my Light.
When Darkness falls,
She is my Sight
in my darkened halls.

Hear the Joys of my Angel's Story,
when the People around her now See
with Eyes so Clear and Pure.
All that you've been dreaming of
and more... so much more.

I want to be your everything!

When you wake up,
I'll be the first thing you see.
I'll cherish your words.
I'll finish your thoughts.
I'll be your compass when you get lost.

Be Patient

Ariel Burks

I think I have to go way back, I mean way back, for this one... Um age: thirteen, mind frame: grown. You think? Growing up cross the canal a day back in time. My life was basically going to school, coming home and going outside to chill. Where was my mother from school to play? My mother was working, working hard to get that money: that money to pay for her two children attending school, trying to make life, reality, and education possible for those who came behind her.

My mother was trying to make it possible her children to become great leaders and beyond the average. At the age of thirteen I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I couldn't help being part of today's world, world of the young age, no rules and sex sells any and everything. The thirteen year old girl I was had a boyfriend far from my age. Six years before my time to be exact. By him being nineteen, like any other relationship, sex was a factor. The virgin I was, my mind was absent of what and how sex would change me.

The day came, the day most females will always remember, the day I lost my innocence. I really didn't know much about sex. I just knew it was awesome, at least I heard it was. I walked through a back door of a shotgun house. It took two rooms to get to my destination, the destination of becoming a young woman. You think? A soft twin bed, blue sheets, a television three feet away; boy: Darnell. Um,um,um... It all started with a push, then a stop. "You want it to feel good huh?" He continued to push, back up, and push some more. Oh my gosh! Thank you! It's over! We lay there watching tv like nothing never happened.

My mind was drifting off to what had just happened. Yes Ariel you just did it! You did exactly what you was looking for, not actually looking for but look what you got yourself into. Um... The innocence my mother birthed out was now gone. I was just a thirteen year old girl with her history in her hands: The history of the young people in today's world, world of the young age, no rules and sex sells any and everything.

Since that day, things have never been the same in my life. To all my virgins and inexperienced, your innocence is something you should cherish, cherish it until death do you part. Sex is death, but it can be great if you wait: wait for the right one, right time. Be your own person. Follow your history, keep up with it, but at the same time be mindful of the experiences you'll face. Be patient.

My Transition with Education after Katrina

Ariel Estwick

The infamous Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 25th, 2005. Luckily, that Sunday, my family and I evacuated the city. For some, this was probably the worst event to ever touch their lives. For me, it was the best. As a result of our evacuation, I was exposed to so many things I had never seen before such as snow, marshmallow popcorn balls and hayrides. But the most memorable thing I was exposed to was the educational system of Omaha, Nebraska.

Throughout my life I have attended four different middle schools, three different high schools, and lived in five different cities with four different relatives, mostly without having prior notice. Until the age of 13, I had taken education as a joke, and it has been an ordeal of adversity to do otherwise. Going to class was not a priority, but hangin' in the hall with friends was. During that time, it was difficult for me to maintain a positive attitude and focus toward school. It seemed as though there was not a reward for hard work, and grades were just alphabets. The New Orleans Public School System was a mess, simply put. The buildings were decently kept by janitorial staff but were littered with graffiti and trash from apathetic students. Desks, tables, walls and whatever else one could think of were vandalized and almost never replaced or restored. Classes were on average a ratio of 1 teacher to 30 students and textbooks were in ample supply but very outdated. Most students would sit around in the drab cafeteria or hang in the insipid halls during classes. In those classes, teachers would not take the time to cater to a single student. If not able to keep up with the class's pace, they would leave a student behind but who could blame them? I know I would do the same if forced to work in such a rampant environment. Some teachers even gave up and either transferred out of the district or sat there at their desk giving simple book work, for those of us who wanted to, to try and teach ourselves. Once a teacher left there would be a substitute in place which, for students, meant a place to party. Lunch was horrible,

though better than now. The food tasted like glue, the milk was soured more often than not, and there were no facilities in which to purchase anything else. These challenges are the key components for my current GPA of 2.05, which is a total misrepresentation of my true worth. In all, the New Orleans Public School System was already in dire need of a reform, which is the cause of my previous behavior.

All of that changed when I began to attend school at Lewis and Clark Junior High School in Omaha, Nebraska. Those environments taught me to be the person who I am today: a person with dreams, goals and ambitions. As a matter of fact, I remember my first day at Lewis and Clark. Approaching on the shipshape yellow school bus, I could see that the building was clean: free of graffiti and litter of all kinds. From corner to corner, the campus was delightfully landscaped with delicate flowers and trees succumbing to the bite of the fall frost. The inside of the school was beautiful as well. There were many exhibits of school spirit shown with eye-catching banners, gleaming trophy cases and vivid murals that seemed to almost come to life before you. Students were able to wear regular clothes, but most donned a school tee-shirt from one of the various activities held. Everyone moved swiftly to class as soon as the bell rang, which I had never seen before in New Orleans. Classes usually had a ratio of 2 teachers to 20 students. When in class people not only raised their hands to answer a question, which I was totally shocked at, but also to speak. The challenging curriculum flowed smoothly throughout the school year in all classes, even those with substitutes. The textbooks were within a two- to three-year range of publishing date, and there was a different variety of courses and teams to be in and on. Sexual Education, Team sports, Yoga, Aerobics, Chinese, Trap shooting and Mock Trial are only a few of those that I came across. The lunches were the absolute best! They were always fresh and piping hot, not to mention, healthy; but even better than the lunches were the teachers. They were great, to say the least. They all got really personal and helped each student as an individual not as just a body of students to bark at. A teacher who really helped me to grow as a person during my short stint there was my eighth grade chorus teacher, Mrs. Green. She understood that I had not received the education of my peers but that I was just as capable and destined to be great. Any student coming up through such a school system with teachers like Mrs. Green is guaranteed to be a pretty well-rounded person.

Recently, after almost two years in Nebraska, I came back home to New Orleans and the Recovery School District for my junior and senior year. That was when my mother explained to me that after graduation I would be faced with even more challenges. She also said that I would then be held responsible for my own actions and accountable for my own stability. Basically, I have my entire life ahead of me, and this time it's in my hands, so I better do the right thing. After this realization, I was consumed by the thoughts of achieving stability. This is when I went to work. It is now the fall semester of 2009, and I am on the Principals' Honor Roll with a GPA of 3.6. In addition to keeping up with all of my school work, I have sought out tutors to improve my ACT score of 24 and SAT score of 1560. Also, I have joined a few clubs, such as: the Newspaper, Debate team and cheerleading (all of which keep me very busy but are all useful in learning to balance things in life).

But as I was busy achieving I began to once again notice the everlasting, pitiful situation around me. In 2006, my freshman year of high school, NOPS had been reduced from 122 to just 5 locally run schools. The rest, including Sarah T. Reed, my current high school had been taken over by the state-run RSD or Charter schools. When I returned to this new public school situation in New Orleans two years later, I found myself to be very unmotivated and apathetic, just as before. Not only I, but no one I knew, cared about class because of the oppressive educational environment in which students are not motivated or encouraged but instead share the mentality that just getting by is good enough. Until this day, it is still the same, although I am back to my more hardworking self, after being back in Nebraska. Budgeting issues such as high administration and out-of-town consultant salaries are limiting school efficiency. Teachers, as well as materials, are in high demand and low supply. There are not enough textbooks, calculators, packets of chalk, etc. But there is an ample supply of unused computers in most classrooms. Those classrooms usually have about thirty students or more with only one teacher. There are only the basic P.E. Health classes, and extracurricular activities are limited to sports such as Basketball, Football and other basic sports. The curriculum is so far behind compared to that of other schools across the nation that students in regular class settings are not getting what they need to prepare for college. My fellow classmates moan and groan in agony simply because they have to write on a topic with a minimum of two pages in length. The effect of

such disruptions is that those who want a decent learning experience have to compete with classmates for the instructor's attention. There are no real disciplinary actions in place. This lack of authority has led to bathrooms and other areas of the school being covered from eye to eye with graffiti. The facilities also lack necessary elements such as toilet paper and/or soap because of the students as well as janitors. Lunch is so watered down and stretched out it is sad. I once even bit into a hot dog and ended up with a mouth full of mold. And recently new coming students are being set to graduate in three years which will greatly downgrade the worth of a diploma from here and also release immature persons into a cruel world too early. (Can you say naive freshman and all night partying equals college drop outs?) Although New Orleans schools were never quite up to par, the bar is now lower.

In conclusion, while growing up in New Orleans, especially during my teenage years, I have faced a lot of educational ups and downs. It was not until I attended school in Nebraska that I fully comprehended the short-comings of my education in New Orleans. This leads me to believe that environment affects a young person's perspective in such dramatic ways that it can alter any chances of success in life. As for the school districts, the Recovery School District is even worse off than the New Orleans Public School District and should use Omaha Public Schools or maybe even a better district as a model for reform so that there may be a chance for other young minds to make a turnaround such as I did. My experiences in Nebraska taught me not to settle for the status quo or to be held back by any school district's poor educational standards. It is my goal to not let those past circumstances and low GPA deter me from achieving my ambitions; hopefully these ambitions will be attained at a university where I feel I can live, learn and flourish, regardless of any obstacles that might cross my path.

2010

Arnold Burks

With the start of the New Year, I find myself reflecting on not only 2009, but the past decade also. I started the year 2000 as a scrawny, innocent seven-year-old, and ten years later I am more mature and aware of how fast life goes by. I've been thinking about my friends from my elementary days whom I haven't seen in years. I didn't have any of my friends from today ten years ago, and this makes me realize that your family members are the only people who remain over the years.

I remember walking into a diner one morning with my mother and sister for breakfast. I was an untainted fourth grader waiting on my favorite breakfast, chocolate chip waffles. There was a television above the counter that seemed to be getting a lot of attention from the customers. As my curiosity led me to walk closer to the television, my eyes glanced upon an image that to this day I don't think I was ready for. I saw two buildings blazing in fire, while people on the ground just watched. It had not come to my attention yet that there were people in the buildings until I saw an airplane fly into it out of nowhere. My sister and I screamed in amazement as if we were watching a movie. My mother pulled us to the side and tried to explain to us what was going on the best she could. For the rest of the day, I pondered on why someone would kill themselves just to kill others. I thought this was bad at the time, but I was about to undergo my own crisis in just four short years.

Monday, August 29, 2005, was the day that I almost lost my life. I went to sleep with three feet of water outside of my house and woke up on my bed, which now seemed to be an island surrounded by water. The only connection I had with the outside world was a radio that broke the news to us that the 17th street canal had breached. By us, I mean me, my older brother, and my father. When we were finally rescued, I stared out the window of the helicopter at my city, which now looked like Atlantis. I had many questions about where we would go next and if we would ever return to the house I took my first

steps in. Four years later, I look back at the event as a turning point in my life from thinking that my life would turn out like I wanted it, to realizing that life is full of unexpected occurrences.

I didn't experience the loss of a friend until I arrived at high school. There was this girl named Darielle whom I met in my ninth grade world geography class. At first, she was very shy and seemed as innocent as a pre-k student. I sat next to her, so we held conversations daily. The more I talked to her, the more about her life she told me. She mentioned the fact that her dad was dead, and she had a younger sister who went to McMain also. As our ninth grade year came to a close, I noticed that Darielle was becoming very popular around the school. So when our tenth grade year came around, I wasn't surprised to see Darielle walking with a click of girls to every class. When we held conversations now, the topics were about what people we knew from different schools. During her tenth grade year I saw her become the topic of every conversation at school, and as I can imagine the topic at other schools also.

September 20, 2008, was the day that the lives of every McMain student changed. Darielle was with some guy from another school who had beef with many other boys from all over the city. I wasn't there, so I can't explain the actual event that occurred on that evening. I can only imagine that someone tried to "handle that beef" that they had with the guy, not knowing that Darielle was there. So she was just an innocent bystander, at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

The next morning, I was sitting on the steps eating, unaware of what had occurred the night before. I saw multiple students walk past me either crying or looking melancholy. When one of my friends walked up and greeted me, I asked him what was wrong. He said, "Haven't you heard what happened? Darielle was killed last night." Instead of asking more questions, I sat down and let the reality of those words sink in. That was a long time ago, but sometimes I sit and reminisce

on those conversations I held with Darielle before she died. I still see students much younger than me making the same mistakes Darielle made, using high school as a means to become popular. What I learned from this experience is the fact that popularity sometimes comes with a price, and unfortunately Darielle paid the price with her life.

The past decade will be remembered as a time of great innovations and unfortunate tragedies. It makes me both eager to see what the next ten years have in store and cautious at the same time. McMain class of 2010 members will be somewhere in their upper twenties when this decade ends, and I hope to see my fellow classmates successful and wealthy at the 10-year reunion. Even though I hope for this, I understand that I may not see some faces because death is the only thing that humans are promised.

What Makes Me Cry, Laugh and Smile

Baralyn George

What makes me cry is looking in the sky, knowing that you are looking back at me. What makes me cry is seeing your face when I look into the mirror seeing your reflection in mine. I look at my smile, thinking about how I always smiled because of you. I flinch when I hear a gun shot, knowing you died from three. What makes me cry is not being able to see, hear, smell or touch you: Knowing your last words were "I love you, sister."

What makes me laugh is thinking about your words, your jokes and sayings. What makes me laugh is hearing our nieces talk about you as if they witnessed your joy. What makes me laugh is dreaming of you, thinking about what you would say or do right now. You were crazy, but I loved you, too, brother.

What makes me smile is knowing that you are watching over me, pushing me to make it through this hard life and succeed. What makes me smile is knowing that you are in a safer place now, one more serene than this. What makes me smile are the memories of our times together. I miss the times we jumped on daddy and woke him up. I wish you were still here with me.

If you were here now you would be my prom date.

I don't care if you are dead, you will always live through my memories of you.

What makes me cry, laugh and smile is you. You always made me push towards my goals. On May 20, 2010, you will watch me walk across the stage from above, and there will be more to come. I love you. I miss you. See you soon in the upper room.

I Love You Books

Britney Winfield

“Do work and go by him.” I want to combine my love for school and my love for men, but they get in the way of each other. Every day I have something to do, so if I say I don’t have anything to do I am lying like a bad perm. Work being completed and done well takes time. Every time I talk to someone who is free of work I tell them how lucky they are, show them my work that needs to be done written on my white board, and show them the big rubric planned out for each quarter. After all of that, I ask do they want to help. And the answer is always, “I don’t like to read or write.” That shows me they would not switch places with me, even if they knew they were going to get a big special deal out of it. I kind of wish to myself that I could switch places with them, but I can’t. Then there are my friends who want attention from me, want to be around me, and just want to spend some time, friends who bring on the synthesis in my life trying to combine spending time with my men and doing work. They just always seem to eventually butt heads. Should I go by him knowing I’m not finished or tell him, “No, I can’t. It’s personal?” I want to be successful, so I wait until a holiday comes. Wow, wouldn’t that be a knock out like a boxer in the last round. I mean man I can’t take this. I need love too. Then I see the only problem with falling in love with my books is that they don’t love me back.

So my question comes up as, do most successful women have a man and books or all books and no man. But I think it is better for a woman to not be in a relationship while in the midst of pursuing her career. This is important to me because although I feel the physical need to have a man, I don’t want this need to stop me from being successful in the future. I also have to think both ways wondering if I get this physical comfort will it throw me off my route to success by being side-swiped by temporary happiness. For me to find this out I must try them both ways, so here’s what I need to do to do well in school. In school to do great I must keep a schedule of all assignments and due dates. Next, I must schedule my assignments to a date and organize all work to be done on certain days, so it can be done in time

You haunted me the whole night as I lay closely, tightly, underneath his arms. Maybe next time I'll bring my work too.

Go by him and do work. Can these two just work together as interacting forces like Ying and Yang? If I want this to work, I might just have to force it. Books, you and he are going to have to get along! Because I'm tired of the bullshit you try to pull with me. My men make me happy physically, and you make me happy mentally. You two need to be in balance, so I can make it through another day. So I have decided to bring you with me by him, and we're going to see how this works because I like him, and he wants to help me with you. Will our flow intertwine like the tread in my pants or clash like glass after a car robbery? You two have me emotional within my needs from you both.

We all gather at his home in a big space for you to spread out. While he and I are close, you look at us like we're doing something wrong, and I look at him and say, "Help, these books are driving me crazy. Can you help me with any of this?"

He looks and says, "That's a lot of work. Can I just hold you while you handle your books and not say anything?"

"Yes. Are you sure you can? That would really make me so happy."

"Of course. I really don't mind long as you're comfortable."

Yes this is all I ever wanted, for you two to just get along. Although you tend to get jealous at times, but know that most of my love is for you. Because I know the only reason that you and I are together is so my future can be filled with joy and happiness. The mister right here holding me might not be here in my future, but someone else's. If I was ever dumb enough to kick books for dudes, my future wouldn't be looking so good, so here's the solution. You two get along or neither of you will have me in my flesh and blood.

The conflict has to stop, but will it? The "either/or" is maybe just too serious. The interacting forces I won't let get the best of me, and "both/and" are going to have to learn to communicate because I am not kicking books for men or men for books. We will all just have to get along some day like the English and Spanish in *Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood* by Richard Rodriguez. Now my inner disruption can come to an end like the Saints in the fourth quarter leading with two seconds on the clock.

Reflection In My Mirror

Brittany George

A young woman stands in the middle of a room. The room is all black, representing guilt, depression, failure, and pain. In the room there's a mirror about five feet tall. The mirror represents what the young woman "thinks" she sees, or what she has "made" herself believe. When she looks in the mirror, she sees an all white room. White, representing, success, hope, pride, and happiness, is the opposite of black in this case. Her lack of realism has caused her to be in denial to all those around her. Negativity is not a factor in her mind. She doesn't notice when things are falling apart.

At school the young woman is in all "top notch" classes but doesn't do her part in those classes. All she has is the title of a gifted student, nothing under her belt to prove how truly gifted she is. But she fails to realize all of that. The title "gifted student" seems to be enough for her young, naïve mind.

She often wonders why friends drift away from her. They claim she has the attitude of an evil widow, but she thinks she is as sweet as Snow White. Failing to understand why people don't have sympathy for her, she suffers with depression because she often feels alone, too in denial to realize how much people really love her.

Often she looks in her mirror. The mirror is the only positive aspect of her life. If she looks in the mirror, she can't see the mildew in the roof of her room, neither does she see the broken window, or the chipped paint. In her eyes she sees a room perfected with exquisite décor, a

bay side window and the most expensive paint known to mankind. She doesn't even feel the rain as it pours in through her broken window. The broken window represents her failures in life. She was once all together. Straight A's and always in the top 5 of everything she did. Now like the window, she is broken, and unfit, barely passing any classes she takes. The rain represents people in her life who try to "tap" her shoulder and push her on the right track. But she doesn't feel the cold rain as it soaks her body.

That young lady is me, and this is a metaphorical essay on my public and private self. In public, I refuse to understand my surroundings, and when at home I truly don't understand them. I decided to use a metaphorical essay, because that's the only way I can describe how I feel about life itself.

My Bike Followed Close Behind

Chelsey Melancon

Whoosh, sounded the wind as I toppled to the ground and my bike followed close behind. I groaned to myself as my father's shadow hovered over me, lifting the bike from my tiny form. I took a deep breath and was taken aback by the strong smell of the freshly cut grass. At that moment I came to the conclusion that I could not and would never learn how to ride a bike. My father's words of encouragement were drowned out by self-doubt. The scenes made themselves clear, over and over again: Me losing my balance and falling into the grass or me jumping off of the bike whenever I swore to myself that I would fall. Defeated and ready to go home, my parents and I began to pack up the car. As I placed the blanket we'd used into the back seat, I noticed the defeated look on my father's face mirrored my own. At that moment I knew I had to try again. I took my father's hand and led him back to the track, excited and filled with adrenaline. As the soles of my shoes touched the pedals and the wide smile crept across his face, I knew I would be able to do it. And I did.

We Became Human

Chinonye Emezie

He used to walk with an effortless glide and a slight cockiness in his shoulders. He used to speak strong and bold and with no hesitation. He used to be perfect to me. He used to be.

We found ourselves outside in front of the old sea foam green and murky white colored building of McMMain. We gave our usual hellos and hugs to one another as friends typically do, and then we sat side by side on the ledge of the imitation vegetable garden. We began to talk. The atmosphere was as carefree as a child on her third birthday. There were conversations about school and teachers and other stuff you talk about when you're bored. After talking about nothing and everything for half an hour I asked him a question, "Why are you always so happy?"

"Why are *you* always so happy?" he quickly reciprocated. He looked into my eyes and saw nothing but deep curiosity and proceeded to answer the questions with a hint of seriousness in his voice. "I don't know," he said. "I just don't like to dwell on the negative stuff for too long."

I found myself highly interested in getting a real and true answer to this somewhat trivial question. I found myself in interview mode, asking several questions about chipper attitude towards life. Finally, I allowed him to answer.

He told me about his father, or lack thereof. He told me about the struggles his grandmother faces to provide a household for her grandchildren. He told me about work and school and the difficulties of balancing them both. He didn't tell me much about his mother, which sparked curiosity in me. But I was so engaged in his words that the curiosity faded quickly. He told me that he prayed every night, for himself, for those he loves, and sometimes for those he hates. He told me he had faith and hope for a better today and tomorrow. He told me *that's* why he was always happy. He told me that there were too many things that he was blessed with and thankful for, and he refused to dwell on the bad. I sat and listened, the old weathered building of McMMain began to lose focus in my eyes. The vegetable garden was

disappearing quickly into nothingness. The rustle of leaves and the sounds of car tires rolling against concrete became non-existent. All I saw, all I heard was him.

I sat, and I looked at him astonished. Emotions of different spectrums rushed through me: sympathy, remorse, anger, hope. I blinked uncontrollably and held the air in my throat trying to fight back my tears. In this very moment, my eyes were opened to a new world, his world. He trusted me with words that meant more to me than he would ever know.

After that day, I saw him for the first time. A glow that became so evident to me engulfed his being. He became beautiful. It wasn't the Will Smith sexy kind of beauty or the twenty karat diamond ring kind of beauty. It was the beauty of him becoming human with me. He opened his heart and spoke to me, really spoke to me. He allowed me to listen and discover a part of who he was, while all at the same time pushing me to discover myself. His beauty was real, raw, and rough, showing his strength and determination. His edges were no longer razor sharp, but rusted, and ragged. His smile was no longer a string of perfect pearls. They now had a hint of triumph that I had never noticed before. I felt within myself a discovery happening. He was imperfect which made him human, and my realizations of his imperfections drove me to become more human than I ever was. All these new discoveries made my being stronger. I gave myself permission to become much more observant of my world and the world of others. I realized for the first time that the small things about a person can have a greater story behind them, and that my story was one worth telling to those worthy of hearing it. He gave me a gift that day. He forced me to see that the ability to be vulnerable is a strength not a weakness.

From that moment on I challenged myself. I challenged myself to let my guard down and let people in, to let go of the absurd notion that people can be perfect, that I should be perfect. I became more free to be spunky, weird, and optimistic as well as more stubborn, curious, and lighthearted. I learned to embrace the negative in my life and turn it into something positive just like he did.

For that moment outside of the old weathered McMain building and all the days after that moment, I am thankful to him. On that day, in that instant, he allowed me to become human through him, and we became human together.

Discovery

David Tran

Reminiscing about the days of my youth, I've come to realize my previous ideals and beliefs are totally different when compared to my current ones. I used to live life for a day and start over again the next, never planning for what laid ahead. While evacuating from Hurricane Katrina, I had a lot of time to think and set my priorities. Returning to McMinn for my freshman year of high school, everything seemed so fresh. I had a newfound passion for learning. I think it all started with my interest in computer games and then editing packets. Eventually a basic knowledge of nearly every aspect of the computer became second nature to me.

Google was my best friend; I loved searching up all kinds of different, interesting things, then reading articles or watching videos about them. Then one day I stumbled across the "Blasphemy Challenge." People would record videos of them announcing that they were atheists and rejecting the belief of deity. Then they would post the videos on YouTube. I watched some of these videos without first understanding what blasphemy or atheist meant, so I ran a search. Merriam-Webster defines atheism as "a disbelief in the existence of deity," which sounds quite accurate to my position on religion; however I didn't make a video. This essay is sort of my version of the Blasphemy Challenge.

However, for some of my friends the word atheist is too radical. They're baffled that there are people in the world who aren't bound to any abstract beings and are free to think and live the way they choose. Most of my friends are either Catholic or Buddhist; although I was born to Buddhist parents, I can't see myself claiming a faith I don't fully understand or practice or one in which I am not allowed to question. My current ideals and beliefs say that a person should be drawn to religion and not born into it.

Where's June-June?

Dejonique Magee

It was Easter of 2007 when the majority of my family, along with other people from the town of Franklinton, gathered at a local park. I was walking with my best friend Kanisha when I spotted one of my older cousins, whom I hadn't seen in a while. His name is Brent, also known as June-June to the family.

June-June was the "big brother" to all of the young girls of the family. I recall plenty of times when he would make us change our clothing because he felt as though our outfits were too revealing. June-June was also the object of admiration and inspiration to 'us' children to know what's right from wrong.

I ran into his open arms, and I held on as tightly as I could. Our embrace reminded me of two magnets stuck together forming the most powerful bond: his arms represented steel which attracted the iron that lay within my heart. We walked and talked for a while and caught up on the missed details of each other's lives. It was then I noticed he was driving one of his nicer cars, which he had fixed up with rims, sound, etc. He was very cautious of his cars. This particular car was candy apple red, sitting on 24-inch rims, finished off with the superman symbol on both sides of the car. It took close to an hour of begging him to let me drive, but it was well worth it.

I traveled over every inch of Franklinton, and I purposely drove more slowly in my friends' neighborhood. Before I knew it my time was up when he called and said he had to be on his way back to Biloxi. Once I was back, he said he would return in a month for another cousin's birthday. Well a month had come and gone, and June-June was still MIA.

While walking in the mall with the softball team, I received a call, which informed me that June-June had been shot. At first I was ok with the idea, because I thought he was recovering as we spoke. Later once I was home, I got the devastating news that he was gone forever. My family told me that he had been shot once in the arm and close range to the chest and then forced into the very car I had driven only a month before. Then he was dumped on a deserted street left to die.

My heart was shattered, my body went numb, and my knees felt like Jell-O. It took me a while to adjust to the fact that he was dead, and it still affects me, especially when the family reunites. I constantly catch myself looking around and thinking "Where's June-June?" until reality sets in, and I remember that he's gone. For good. The lesson I learned from this experience has taught me to live life to the fullest and enjoy it while I can. I give my best effort every day to accomplish everything I want, before the sand in my hourglass of life has all fallen to the bottom.

“Where Are You?”

Derranique Jenkins

I have only seen you twice and have only heard your voice three times. I have received all of your letters but have never replied. Why should I? Where are you? I've asked my mom many times why you weren't in my life. She said you weren't man enough. You were considered a “dead beat.” She said you never finished school, never had a job, and didn't have any intentions of taking care of a child. When I saw you for the first time, I was stunned. Your appearance wasn't that of what my mom described at all. You were thin with brown skin. You had long curly hair with these big brown eyes: just like mine! You were my twin. Sitting in visitation, we talked but I wasn't feeling your vibe. I was thinking to myself, “Who is this stranger?”

You were a very friendly stranger! Still to this day I don't know why you're away. Sometimes I wonder why you didn't change your lifestyle after learning my mom was pregnant. Did the drugs make it not worth being in your own daughter's life? The funny part is I was a planned baby. I'm 19 years old now. I'm a senior in high school, and I have my own family now. Still I am stuck wondering, will you miss my graduation? Will my daughter ever get a chance to meet her grandfather? Should I hold a grudge? Either way the cards are shuffled, you're still my dad. I wish you well. I can't say I love you, but you take care.

Not What You Think

Destiny Knatt

Surrounded by violence, I am expected to be a product of such activity. I was born in New Orleans, so I was born into the nonsense of violence. New Orleans is a place where everyone thinks they are the most feared person ever, but I wonder if they still believe that when people are getting the last view of their body before they are captured under six feet of dirt, worms, and grass. I am not surprised by the males who act like steel to gain respect in the streets, but I am shocked at the increase in female funerals that I have to attend due to gunshot wounds. I guess they feel good about being the chick whom nobody wants beef with. I don't see why. I would hate to have to look over my shoulder every 10 minutes over foolishness that I could've avoided.

I, Destiny Knatt, am in a whole pot of trouble. I did not bring it upon myself. I love to blame my grandmother for choosing the neighborhood in which we live. I'm so accustomed to hearing drive-by shootings, seeing dead bodies, and losing people whom I consider close to my family and me. Every time you turn around someone is having a brawl. It has gotten so bad to where I've seen a man stab his mother and beat her with a brick.

I remember being in the fifth grade. I was preparing to leave my elementary school to attend Samuel J. Green, but it wasn't my choice. I only participated because I knew that was the only way to make them stop picking with me. My cousins felt like my fighting experience wouldn't be enough to get me through Green, and they were right. So they took it upon themselves to prepare me. They taught me how to put up a shield. That "nobody better not fuck with me" shield. It worked for a little while, but some people wanted to make sure that it was legal.

I only had one fight at that school. I knew I had to give it my all, because the students would make sure that would be a day that I will never forget. Luckily, I came out on top, but the only thing was that

I had to keep the reputation going for myself. I didn't have the time for it, so I decided to leave Green and attend McMain. I left Green, but Green hadn't left me yet. If someone looked at me too long, I went clean off on them. I'm surprised that I didn't have a fight at McMain. I guess I couldn't have a fight by myself because they would never get rowdy with me.

I look back on myself now, and I am ashamed. I am ashamed for actually thinking that it was cool to have people scared of me. I feel worse knowing that that was not the real me. I wish I could turn back the hands of time so that those students wouldn't have seen the Destiny that the 13th Ward created.

Black History

Edmond Coleman

Way back then when black people were slaves, they were forced to stay in the heat while picking cotton for days. With their children by their sides toting sacks on the ground with blisters on their hands and feet.

“Good God almighty,” I cried.

I was looking at my T.V. screen. A lonely tear came out of my eye. What their master said goes. They were beat for saying, “I suppose.”

Now back in those days they didn’t have an education. They couldn’t read, couldn’t write. All they really knew how to do was pick cotton and stay alive. You see, the Klu-Klux-Klan, a very racist organization, they would kill a black man and lynch him before he could say “amen.”

Just like they did with a boy named Emmitt Till when he was
14 years old.

Man! They beat this dude so bad his life was over. Put two slugs in his head for whistling at a white lady. When they found his body, his mama identified him by the ring his daddy gave him. She said, “Oh lord, they killed my baby!”

See Emmitt Till couldn’t speak a word. He couldn’t scream or cry for help. Now just think if he was yours. While all this leads up to Anna May Collins who was 14 years old, Denise McNair who was 11 Years old, Carrillo Robertson who was 14 years old, and Seniti Westlake who was 14 years old. Four little girls wanted to sing in the choir. Little did they know, their life was expired . Two Klu-Klux-Klan-men bombed the church. All 4 girls were worse than hurt. They were trapped in the basement with no way to escape, when they finally realized they were much too late. All 4 girls meant so much to me that I had to

honor them in this Black History. See when Dr. King gave his speech "I Have a Dream," it was a beast; I told myself, it really meant something special to me. See Dr. King wasn't down with all that drama. He taught people how to fight with their minds to stop the violence. I'm standing here thinking about how the world is today. How we have freedom of speech and the right to an education. Like Public Enemy said we can "fight the power." So let me tell ya'll real loud.

I'm black and I'm proud!

Dear Mr. Earl: Two Letters

Glenicia Welch

FIRST LETTER:

Dear Mr. Earl,

It's me, baby girl, the one you hardly see. I am a senior in high school and recently made seventeen. I guess you forgot about my birthday on May 10 or maybe you did not give a shit. I made sure I took my phone off vibrate, so I could answer to hear you sing "Happy Birthday baby girl" like you did when I was eight.

Mr. Earl I feel as if I have come of age to ask you some things. I know you probably like, "awwww shit," but you knew this day would come when you would have to face me. Why you did not show up the day I was born? Why you stayed around the corner from me and never stopped by to say hi? Why the first time you looked into my eyes you cried? Is it because I am your reflection? Why you allowed another man to take your place? Why were you never there?

I looked into the crowd of my middle school graduation because you promised me you would be there. Afterwards, mama told me you called and promised to make the dinner. I got my hopes up high because I knew I still had a chance to see you. At dinner I sat at the table surrounded by the ones I love and made sure nobody ate until you showed up. The food started to get cold, and the folks started to complain. So I called and called and after the nineteenth time I gave up, and you let me down again. Everybody told me the food was delicious, but I was not in the mood to eat. I just cried until my head felt like it was about to burst and went straight to sleep.

See daddy all this shit you put me through and this lists only a few. At one point I hated you. I did not give a fuck if you lived or died. I looked at you as dirt, scum of the earth, just another statistic, son of a bitch. I used words to describe you such as: sperm donor, beat down, and dead beat dad. Now I just want answers so we can repair what we could have had.

Mr. Earl I just want us to start over. It is never too late. I told you how I felt. Now I am telling you how I feel. I feel there is hope, if we both put up the effort. Mr. Earl give me the chance to call you daddy, da, or pops. The ball is in your court again. Try not to drop it because after this...GAME OVER!!!

Baby Girl

LETTER TWO:

Dear Mr. Earl,

I guess you forgot about my birthday, AGAIN. Or maybe you just did not give a shit, because I did not receive a gift, card, or simple phone call with good wishes on my day. I do remember that time you bought me a bike when I was around seven or eight, and you will never let me forget. Every time I talk to you, you always throw that damn bike in my face. Well thanks Mr. Earl. I guess that makes you super dad for supplying me with a toy that quickly got old. Oh, and how can I ever forget about that name plate set I got for Christmas that year. You will never let me live that down.

Out of all those “sweet” things you did for me, I only seem to have sour memories of you. Like unkept promises and tons of lies and crying about hating you.

But do not feel bad, because I had my real dad here wiping my tears. This man has always been here for me. That time you bought me that bike, it was he who taught me how to ride. When that nameplate set became old, it was he who bought the diamond set I wanted. Every play I was in, even when performing parts like the tree, he took off of work to come support me. For all my birthdays he made me feel like a queen. Sitting me down to talk about education, self respect, and life was his choice. Saying yes I can go places, convincing my mommy that I would be ok, and checking my closet for boogie monsters was his place at home.

So you see, Mr. Earl, without you I will be ok, because daddy got me every step of the way.

I’m not a baby anymore,

Glenicia

I Don't Feel Anything

Huy Nguyen

Her words were so sharp they slit my throat, leaving me without a voice to speak. I looked deeply into her eyes, trying to analyze her. Why didn't she feel the same way as she did before? Was it something I did? Something I said? I couldn't grasp a hold of the situation. I didn't understand. I sat there hoping she would say her signature phrase "I lie," but she didn't; she was serious. I didn't want to care, but my tender heart couldn't allow me to do such a thing. It's in my nature to feel the way I did.

I felt gloomy, sad. I felt myself shifting into a state of depression. Why did I care? Why couldn't I be heartless? I wanted to hate her, but unfortunately for her, I couldn't. I compiled a list of her faults:

- 1) obnoxious laughter,
- 2) a mouth full of metal,
- 3) her inability to be serious,
- 4) the way she says "I don't know" after every statement she makes.

But that didn't help. Ironically, the list did just the opposite. Creating the list only made me realize why I felt the way I did in the first place. It didn't make sense to me. How could I have possibly fallen for someone as goofy as her? As loud as her? As strange as her? There must be an answer. I couldn't find the answer. I didn't want to find the answer.

When she told me she no longer wanted to continue with this relationship, a part of me died. My inside was screeching. It was begging me to open my mouth and ask her to give me another chance. But I didn't. My surrounding was filled with my peers. Everyone around me had an expression of joy and excitement in their eyes; with mouths full of food they would give out a care-free laughter. I looked around for a moment, in a pathetic attempt to try to dispel the awkwardness in the atmosphere. My eyes caught onto the president of the Asian American Club. She was running the booth to raise

money during our school's annual Fall Fest. I did not want to make a scene. My exterior did not represent the way I felt. I had a face that carried a smile and an "I don't care" attitude. I didn't want people to know how attached I was to her. How much I actually cared. How much pain I was in.

With a smile I laughed and said, "I hope we can still be friends." I walked away. I couldn't stand being in her presence. I skipped the remainder of the school day. I went home. I saw the piano sitting there crying out to me. I had rejected taking lessons ever since Hurricane Katrina. I touched it for the first time in months. I took a seat, plugged in my headphones, closed my eyes, and played.

This Year Belongs to You, Daddy

Ireion Smith

When I was twelve years old, the most tragic thing happened to me. Well first let me start off by saying when I was young, I was a daddy's girl. I loved being around my daddy all day. We even went together to get our hair braided. The most thing he was always talking about was he was looking forward to me walking across the stage. I didn't have no idea at the time what he meant, and I didn't really care. I just looked up to my daddy so much. He always kept me feeling like a princess, and he was my knight in shining armor.

Well one day, February 5, 2005, the worst thing happened: my knight in shining armor was defeated. My daddy/best friend died. Someone shot him, and I just felt helpless. I just wished his killer's head would have shriveled up and fell off. I was so hurt that my daddy was gone, and it also hurt me that his killer was alive getting away with it. I cried so much that I ran out of tears. In other words after a while, I accepted it and dried my tears and was a li'l more mature about it. I told myself that my memories with my daddy will always be with me, especially when he always said he couldn't wait for me to walk across the stage.

Now I'm almost to the stage that he couldn't wait for me to walk on, and it hurts that his face won't be the face that I'm going to see in that crowd. Those people who stand in that crowd don't know how lucky they are to see what was so important to my daddy to see. But if these stories my mommy tells me are true, I'm going to be good because daddy is watching over me. He can see my achievement, I just can't see him — and I wish I could.

This year belongs to you daddy.

I Was There

Jasmine Robinson

It started out as nothing more than friendship.
Getting to know you was the easiest;
 Letting you go was the hardest.
Our friendship was worth more than gold.
 You were number two on speed dial.
I called when I needed an opinion, a friend,
 Or just someone to talk to.
I wanted you to know
 I was always there.
I knew your value,
 And you'd use it to your advantage.
I told you the truth,
And nothing but the truth.
It was the most honest I'd ever been.
With you it came natural because
I loved you,
Because I felt you deserved it,
Knowing that,
I Was There,
You knew I'd be always honest,
 And tell you of your wrongs,
And with that you ALWAYS called.
 We weren't together,
But we were friends.
 In the back of my mind,
I was a bit jealous when you
 Announced you had a girlfriend.

Should I have spoken?

Did I want the title?

No, I knew she couldn't take my place,

But I still wondered,

Why not me?

Because, I was there.

I was myself with you.

I never had to hide my true colors from you.

With her in the picture,

That didn't matter,

All because she was sexing you.

I was there when you were having one of those days

And needed someone to run to.

I was there to answer the phone,

When you called at 3 o'clock in the morning cause you were bored.

It was me you called when you got your first interview

And needed help to prepare.

It was me you called for the truth,

The whole truth,

And nothing but the truth.

Of all, I was that "Best" friend you saw her as.

I Was There.

So, where are you now?

I don't see you here.

I ask myself,

"Why was I there?"

Because we got nowhere.

But through it all

I Was There.

So Young, So Sweet, So Soon

Jennifer Le

It was night, and I was up with just my mom. I was maybe about two years old. I can recall us sitting on the bed in my parents' bedroom, lit by just the night lamp, and silence echoed. My mom was sitting on the edge of the bed, and I was in front of her, confused as I was just a little child. She was holding the cord phone by her with her hand hovering over her forehead seeming as though she felt some negative feeling. The light from the lamp made the mood gloomy. I wondered why we weren't asleep yet.

I remember her looking out the window next door where my aunt and her family lived. Something was wrong, but I was just too young to know anything. I was just sitting and bouncing on the bed, kicking my little legs and pre-occupied with my teddy bear. My sweet little figure and appearance couldn't distract her from what was on her mind. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what. She seemed very tired.

"Hi Mommy," I said, sitting beside her.

She didn't say anything, but smiled. Then I gave her a hug.

"It's okay," I said again, stroking her hair.

I wonder if I knew at that time what I was saying, but I know that I knew why I was saying it. I was only about two years old, but years later I found the puzzles to piece together. My mom was worried sick, but she had to be home to watch over me and my siblings. It was during the time when my aunt's house next door had a fire incident. The house was burned down, but three of her children out of five couldn't make it out. Those are my cousins whom I never knew:

Mai, Hung, and Viet. Until this day, my family and I visit their grave occasionally. There is a metal plate on it that says, "So young, so sweet, so soon" with their precious smiles appearing in a framed picture. I find myself as well to be so young, so sweet, so soon to be losing these people out of my life.

To lose family members at such a young age, with a relation but no relationship, and to call them important to me are incredible yet strange. It's strange how I've experienced lost relatives already around new birth age. I started to grow up knowing that my three cousins died without recalling any emotional experience. Though I was already prepared for this, it never hit me until I was a little older in my teens. When other people in my life passed away, it struck hard to know it was reality because I had more sense of mind. Then praying with my family in front of my cousins' grave, gazing into their picture sometimes started to make it difficult. I was blank when I was two, but now at an age whereas I can connect with these situations, I'm sad about my first loss when I was a toddler. This innocent experience came so soon, and it's ironic. An experience at an age so young, so sweet, came too soon.

Diabetes

Jessica Thompson

Big, Round, and Fat, why are you eating up all the ribs wide back?

No growl, but my mind constantly yelled feed me!

Brownies, pies, and cupcakes, why are you giving me diabetes?

Sugar, spice, and everything nice.

Burgers, fries, or gravy and rice.

A devastating recipe to a reckless price.

No exercise, no dietary pills, I'm going to get it sliced.

But what if I don't wake up from this nightmare of my life?

Try small proportions, measure with a knife.

Pound for pound, my body multiplied by tens twice.

Breathless, now I don't feel good or look nice.

GOT MORE GRAVY AND RICE?

"Please step on the scale for me, Ms. Jessica. 187 lbs, you know for the age of 12, you are supposed to be no more than 120 lbs. Let me see something, please pull your hair back Hmmm...Hmmm... HMMMM...."

While I sat there as the doctor checked my neck for life-threatening signs that may notify me about my health, I began thinking about that double cheeseburger I just ate from Mc Donald's. Mmm....that sausage biscuit and hash brown I ate for breakfast, with that grape jelly? Boy, did that hit the spot.

"Well, Ms. Jessica your neck seems to be very dark. It appears that you are at risk of diabetes."

I thought to myself like, "Nah my neck just may be dirty."

“Do you all have a history of diabetes in your family, Ms. Thompson? Do you have it or someone in your family?”

“Yeah. My father, my grandmother, and my great grandparents have diabetes. Diabetes runs strong in our family.”

“Unfortunately, Jessica you are a border line diabetic. You must change your eating habits immediately. The greatest way to avoid contact with diabetes is to lose weight. Instead of eating fried chicken, eat grilled and instead of drinking cold drinks, drink water.”

So, this doctor means to tell me that I can’t have no more double cheeseburgers, no sausage biscuits and hash browns, or Mc Donald’s where I’m loving it. I think he just don’t like fat people.

“I suggest that you go on a diet. I request that I see you every three weeks to see how you improve. Okay, now you have a great day.”

“Same to you!”

Ugh! This man done lost his mind. First, he told me I couldn’t have no more double cheeseburgers, no sausage biscuits and hash browns, or Mc Donald’s where I’m loving it. Now I can’t have no cold drinks. This is outrageous. He just trying to control my life. What kind of man would take food from a child’s mouth?

As I made my way to get in the car stuffed with rebellion and confusion, I asked my mother, “Can we go to Burger King?”

“No! Didn’t you just hear what the doctor said? You better go home and slap a piece of chicken on the grill.”

I nodded my head, but little did she know, I got a stash of goodies on the side of my bed for when I be munching in the middle of the night.

When I made it home, I prepared myself for school and journeyed off to the room for my little late night snacks. Boy was I starving. I had a headache. I felt as if six kids and I gathered in a circle playing Ring Around the Rosie. Continuously they swung. Gosh! When were we ever going stop? Fatigue! All I could do was eat and go to sleep.

Eek! Eek! Eek! Eek! Eek! “Ah.....” I rolled over out the bed to brush my teeth. Boom! I fell to the ground. I couldn’t feel my legs or my feet. I made another attempt to stand, but all I could do was nod my head, for those kids were swinging that merry go round, causing drastic headache pain. My energy was crumbling like a

dry flower, and balance was something I could not sustain. I paused, gathering my self from the dizzy little pieces, got dressed, and made my way to school.

Ding! Ding! Ding....Ugh! Sixth period and I was the least bit of excited. That early bird morning headache was hitting again. All I had to do was change my clothes, run my two laps, and relax for the rest of the period. But the thought of me running the course had my head spinning. Chickens were running around in my head in a circle like speed racers, not to mention them six little kids and I were back at it again.

“Alright now class, you know the routine. Run your two laps, and you are free for the rest of the day. On your mark! Get ready! Get set! Go!”

Click-Clack, Click-Clack, Click-Clack!!! Round and Round, on that merry go round. Suddenly two chickens slammed and rammed into each other pound for pound.

“Ugh!” A gasp for air.

Unconscious, Weak, and Motionless.

Beep! Beep! Beep! “Hello, I am Dr. Wilson. How are you feeling Ms. Jessica?”

“Ahhhh....Where am I here? And why am I here?”

“You are at Touro Hospital. You passed out at your school today. Unfortunately, your sugar level was 250. You are a borderline diabetic, and drastic measures should be taken immediately. I don’t think you realize that you could have lost your life today.”

“You mean to tell me that I could have died?”

“O yes! I’ll be back with your discharge papers.”

Man.....I didn’t understand how important it was to eat healthy. I felt like the doctor was just trying to control my life. It seemed as though he didn’t like fat people because Burger King let them have it their way. Now I have to eat healthy and be active. But the thought of eating healthy had my organs flipping upside down like a gymnast. Irritated. Stuck between what I wanted to do and what I had to do. My life was at risk. I didn’t want to be a pretty face on the obituary list.

You Were Never There

Juanisha Moxley

Willimae Brass, the mother of my father, by law that makes you my grandmother. I don't want to say I hate you, but I can honestly care less. After my daddy passed you were never there. You know the saying "treat me like a step child?" You couldn't even do that. A step child receives more love than what you ever showed me. I feel as though I only have one grandma, and that's the one who's laid at rest. Well I had to grow up, and I later realized that it wasn't true; I was blessed with two wonderful grandmas. You see my momma has remarried, and my stepdad's people treat me as if it were their blood that flows through my veins.

I don't think you understand how much I needed you after my dad passed. I tried my hardest to ignore all of the negative things my mom said about you — how you didn't love me and that you didn't want anything to do with me. Being just a kid I thought since you two never got along that was her way of being mean and ugly. As I got older I realized that I was a part of a package: My dad, my mom, my sister and me. But little did I know we weren't the only surprise. Maybe the reason you never liked my mom was because when she and my dad met, there was someone else in her life, my sister. Thinking you feel this way about my sister brings so many thoughts to mind like you may feel that he's not my dad. I don't know what your reasons are for your actions, but I do know that I hate that I was always caught in the middle of everything.

Still I rise every morning thinking of what used to be, but as I sit here typing this paper I begin to come to the realization that of the times I ever came over, there was never a time you called for me. I always came over for my uncle, which is why after he left to move to Cali I never saw you unless he came back to visit. I remember coming over as a little girl, and you acted as if you cared, but still to this day you act as if you're scared, scared to get close to your second granddaughter, and I hate you for that. All of the dance recitals, games, and parades — I never saw you at any. It doesn't matter

because if you were there, you didn't even know how to identify me. You didn't know me or anything about me, and if you did, it was only off the strength of my uncle, your son. The longer we are apart the further I'll pull back. Yeah I know it's kind of hard to hear someone else has picked up where you should have started.

Approximately nine years have passed since his death, and I have yet to hear your voice. I know for a fact that you aren't trying to show nor tell me you care. Okay, I spoke with you once, and even that time you didn't call. About four years ago Hurricane Katrina whipped out the whole city, and if it weren't for my favorite uncle, you wouldn't even know if I were alive. I know for a fact that you're feeling guilty inside. Not to sound like a bitch or anything, but truth be told, you could die today or tomorrow, and I couldn't care less. Just for the record you're not the grandma laid at rest.

From You, to Me

Juliana Ratliff

To whom it may...concern:

I'm writing cause you may feel my stature you ill, now you have this will to be like me. Believe me honey, I'm flattered, so after my short laughter I gathered my thoughts.

See not too long ago I was that slut, that bitch, that hoe, so I know that I know that you know you must not have known me. Well since my highness compels you, I guess I'll tell you more about me. At the age of five, I made up my mind to leave bullshit stars behind and to shine with His son and myself. For you see, its Jesus who controls my health, my wealth, no stealth to it. Lucid is how this should be. My luxuriant success makes you stress, and yes I must confess, I am the best. See I didn't waste my time, so by the age of nine, I wanted to sign autographs. Yes, back then my work was lighter, guided by a writer and a fighter, I too am now a nationally known writer because I'm a fighter and not a biter of my tongue. I hold my head up high, so it is no surprise my writings on the events of 2005 lifted my picture way up in the New York skies in 2006. Times Square, yes I was there and I dare you to compare. Numerous celebrities have come my way, and to this day they still do. I've been recognized by my city, no not for pity you idiot....writing and dancing. Yeah that's just the start, see I'm talented in art, music, dance, and everything else I wanna get my hands on. Yeah now I've got you keen, when I say at the age of seventeen I've been in three books, one magazine, and your t.v. screen. It seems you've gotten the picture. I work hard at what I do. Now I'm telling you so you may do as I say and do. Like you all know you want to know how I say what I say when I'm saying what I say? Or accepting another award for they? Or taking trips when I may? Well if I may, let me enlighten you... once upon a time I made up my mind to take the time to open up my mind and close my darn mouth...

Life Goes On

Kabbrisha Bryant

It was 1996, and I was about four years old when I was “molested.” I didn’t know what was going on or what was happening to me. It all came out in a mysterious way because I didn’t tell anyone at the time it happened. I was playing with my mom’s friend’s son, Dwayne. I kept trying to kiss Dwayne in his mouth, when an old lady named Ms. Girt saw us.

She asked, “Where did you get that idea from?”

I replied, “My Paw-Paw Rickey.”

Ms. Girt knew he was my grandma’s boyfriend. When my mom got off from work and came to pick me up, Ms. Girt must have told her instead of my grandma. My mom flipped out! She went immediately to start fussing and cussing at my grandma. Grandma tried to give my mom his whole check and said, “Don’t worry about it,” as if I was lying.

Now, I’m eighteen, and I still can see flashes of what happened, but worst of all I can’t remember his face. People have told me don’t worry God will show me a sign if I ever were to see him again.

Brother Letter

Kiara Williams

Dear little sister,

I always laugh at you when you say “man where the hoes at?” It’s funny because you never hear a female say that. You have the mentality of a dude, that’s why I call you my lil brother. I notice you have started to rub off on me. I’m starting not to care about these females because they are scandalous.

Whenever I come to you for advice, you always have the same response, “man fuck ha, she don’t like me any way!” Once you see that a dude is falling for you, you cut him loose. Poor Will would have gave you the world if you wanted it, but you — being yourself — stopped talking to him.

I think you should give in and give someone a chance. I think you are afraid of commitment, scared of giving a dude your heart and him breaking it. You will have to just learn on your own. Everyone has to go through heartbreaks. Karma is a bitch.

Sincerely,

Your Big Bro

P.S. You can’t be a player forever...

Dear big bro,

I appreciate you always being honest with me. You tell me what I need to hear.

I can’t agree with you when you say I am scared of giving someone my heart, but I also can’t disagree. I am somewhat afraid, but I just don’t have anyone that I would want to give it to. It takes me a while to get to know someone. After I do that, I always lose interest in them.

Will, neither Joe, nor the rest of them can satisfy me. Out of all the dudes I have came across, only three were worth my time. Well, at least that's what I thought.

I recently made a new male friend. Once we started to get close, I realized we began to push each other away. We are too much alike, afraid of giving someone our heart and refusing to give up our playa ways. We are better off being friends.

Even though you may think it is time for me to settle down...
Only I will know when the time is right.

Sincerely,

Your little sister

P.S. I'm not a playa. I just crush a lot...

The Wrong (Right) Turn

Lashondra Thompson

This Sunday was a strange one because everything seemed unpredictable. The alarm clock did not go off on time; therefore everybody was late for church. With this being said, my mother, who was rushing out the house and up the street, took her route to church on Claiborne by the Tremé Center. While approaching a red light, she spotted a short “peanut-headed” man in the next lane, who was driving about five miles per hour faster than she was and therefore was about two cars ahead now at the light.

My mother, who was blowing, yelling, and pointing, said to me, “that’s your daddy.”

I, who was confused and at the same time feeling so many other emotions, quickly turned to see the “peanut-headed” man. I felt a sense of hope because I had always wanted to put a face on the man who was such a vague picture of a figure. This figure wanted no children and, because he was scared, left my mother with one hundred dollars and a good-bye. That hope that I felt made me feel that that day had finally come for me to meet with the man I had only pretended to be in my imagination as the world’s greatest daddy, who would take me shopping, tell me don’t run around with fast boys, call me names like princess and baby girl, and even buy me a car after he taught me how to drive. But in reality he was only a scared story with a sad ending.

After gaining close enough distance between my mother’s “beat up, gray, single parent with children, Dodge Van” and his “single man with no children luxury car,” he slowed down on the side of the road and parked his car, as if for us to reunite after having been apart for all my life. I, who was also waiting in this awkward situation, was with everything in me ready to finally meet this man, whom I could only speculate about and imagine. The moment was destroyed and shattered by the sharp-right, last-minute turn against a red light my mother made. I, who was sitting in the passenger side, followed with my eyes the only chance thus far to meet this stranger and maybe

close one chapter in the book of my young life. It felt like a cartoon, as if on an episode of *Tom and Jerry* when Tom finally catches Jerry, but Tom's master hits him over the head with a broom and demands he release Jerry.

In the heat of the moment my mother's response to the situation resulted from nervousness. Until this day, when I ask her why she didn't pull over, she simply says, "I wasn't ready for that."

This situation has taught me I can't always be ready for life, but in the heat of the situation I shouldn't turn!

Inspiration Fading to Realization

Mack McGinnis

It's a real funny thing, inspiration that is. Where it comes from, the power it holds. If only man could harness this power. How it could be used. Inspiration can cause an inventor to create something marvelous, cause a painter to paint *Mona Lisa*, or cause a normal human being to spill contained feelings onto life's floor like water pouring out of a shattered vase — feelings hidden so deep inside of this person's soul that the person himself almost lost the way to them. And now sitting here I wonder am I that person?

I sit here now inspired to dwell deep within myself and profess my feelings to all who may be fortunate or unfortunate enough to stumble upon this. And it's a funny thing, my inspiration that is, where it has come from. I guess I could say myself, or a rainy day in New Orleans, or a talented musician. Whoever or whatever it may be, I am here in a darkness, eyes closed, the only sound is the faint taps of fingers on my keyboard, as I type only from the memory of the qwerty keypad.

Truthfully I can say without shame that I really never had a relationship until after Katrina. I was really too young to understand anything about relationships before that anyway, for I was only in the eighth grade. Even still that's when I met you. I, the "kid from New Orleans," an outcast, saw you walking gracefully down the hall. For a second my heart skipped a beat...my eyes closed and reopened as if I had sneezed. I was choking on your beauty. In the days to come I gained enough courage to approach you. So struck by beauty, I forgot your name. I quickly played it off..."imma call you sexi..a name for only me to call you." You smiled and said ok.

As I look back on it now it was something special...one of those matches made in heaven...you know we met as children and just grew old together. Whenever I was allowed to go out, I wanted you to be there with me. We made it through a summer, transitioned to high

school, and everything seemed so sweet. Life was so blissful. How was this possible...too good to be true...well it was. How we drifted apart. Phone calls became shorter...conversations became dry...we no longer hugged or really spoke at all. We would see each other and force a smile, until finally we were now being seen with other people. No one was calling you by my last name any more. It seemed as though you were content. I wasn't though. To me it was too fast. What happened? I was...am confused. What went wrong? To this day I still don't know...I really am forever scorned.

Months later I moved away...back to what was supposed to be home. I made new friends, basically started a new life. I tried to forget the past but couldn't for I couldn't forget you. Not being able to forget you I forgot nothing. Everything was attached to you. I couldn't talk about a game without thinking of you in the stands, a class without thinking about you walking past the door, even the city without thinking of the interstate exit used to get to your house. And now in my new old home relationships just don't last.

Until earlier when the rain started I just couldn't see why I am the way I am. Why can't I make something last? But finally it is clear. Fear has been woven into my very mindset. I fear fully committing for the possibility of being left, cheated on and heartbroken again. Several times since we parted I have stopped myself short of my own happiness...without reason. Now I see the reason. You were the reason...not myself. You were the reason. Each year someone new soon to be hurt because I would pull back. Until the point at which I would rather flirt instead of commit. It was you. You are the reason. You are happy in your home as I sit surround by rain in my slumber. I blame you for my trouble, but now as the rain fades and I slowly come to I finally realize. How can I blame you for this when we both were so young? How can I blame someone hours away from me. I realize that I am the one to blame for me...and now I realize the only man thing to do is to apologize...to you...to all of you...I'm sorry for the hurt I have caused, if any.

Daddy

Marquita Nash

Daddy was the first word I said and my favorite.

Daddy is who I called when I was scared.

He was always there. When I woke up, slept, after school I knew
I could expect him there.

He worked day and night to make sure our family had.

With all that he still had time to be there whenever I needed him.

Daddy is what I called all day long, and every time I called he was there.

Until he was taken away from my presence of life.

I almost died. I felt like a part of me had gone away.

My best friend, my everything was gone within seconds.

Who was going to do all the things he used to do?

Once I woke up in the middle of the night and called daddy, but no one
came — well at least not him.

Then it hit me. Daddy was gone.

Forever.....

A Remarkable Year

Mathilde Foug

I am a foreign exchange student from Denmark, Northern Europe, and I go to high school in New Orleans at New Orleans Science and Math for my twelfth year of school. When I go back to Denmark after this school year, I have one more year in school before I proceed to university. I live with an American host family.

I arrived in New Orleans just two days before school started. The first day of school was an absolute shock, and I felt completely worn out after dismissal at one o'clock. Everything was new and different. It was very loud. Everybody was excited to see each other, and all the other kids were clapping, screaming, and running around. It was all very overwhelming, and the noise just never stopped. It's not that people are boring in Denmark; we're just not very loud. I didn't know anybody, and I felt like I was introduced to a thousand people. I didn't remember a single one when I left the school that day.

American high school is very different from the school I go to in Denmark. In Denmark, everyone goes to school for ten years, for zero-ninth grades. After ninth grade, you don't have to go to school if you don't want to, but that's not going to get you a good job. After ninth grade, there is a variety of options: Gymnasium, which is what I go to, and it's much like high school; Business Gymnasium, which focuses on business and economics; and Technical Gymnasium, which focuses on physics and engineering. If you want to go to university, you must first complete the three years of school at one of the gymnasiums. If you're not fond of text books and studying, you can go to technical school to become a hair dresser, painter, chef, mechanic, designer, bricklayer, farmer, etc. Since all education in Denmark, even college, is paid for by the government, almost everyone continues their education in some way after graduating from ninth grade.

In high school, I was surprised to learn that there are rules about pretty much everything. There are rules about staying on campus, absences, tardiness, leaving the classroom, etc. Actually, I can't

think of any rules at my gymnasium in Denmark. The fact that the students in Denmark come to school by choice after ninth grade eliminates the need for rules. People just naturally behave, pay attention, and keep quiet in class, because they want to learn. If they didn't want to learn, they wouldn't go to that school. I found it difficult to adjust to following the rules. For example, it took me quite a while to get used to the fact that I need a hall pass to leave the classroom during class. What actually surprised me more than the rules was that the students routinely disobey the rules. I experienced that the other students really lack respect for teachers and rules. I find it very distracting and disturbing that many of the other kids in my classes don't follow simple rules that are clearly stated and don't have manners that seem so natural to me. A good thing about the rules is the uniforms. I do prefer wearing my own clothes to school, but with uniforms, picking out my outfit in the morning is a million times easier.

There is also a lot more focus on grades, credit, points and testing in American schools compared to Danish schools. At first, I didn't believe the nine-year-old girl in my host family when she said that she had a test the following day, and she said she got grades in her classes. I never took a test until the finals in ninth grade. I may have taken a few quizzes just to check that my skills matched my grade level, but that was it. No students get grades until eighth grade, and they don't count for anything until gymnasium. Danish students only get grades in November, in February, and at the end of the school year. I think I find the focus on grades a little stressful, but at the same time, it helps you to know how you are doing in a class. Academically, I don't find high school as challenging as my school in Denmark. I have to admit though, that I don't take any AP or honors classes. I enjoy that there is less work to do, because I felt that I needed a little break after eleven years of school in Denmark.

Spending a year in New Orleans has of course given me a lot of experiences aside from school. Living in a foreign country with a local family is an amazing opportunity. I have experienced so many things this year. Living in America is so much different from being a tourist. I think I have been very fortunate to end up in New Orleans. The city is so full of life. There is always something crazy going on. It seems like there is some kind of festival going on every weekend. Of course Mardi Gras was the biggest one, and I thought it was a lot of fun. I had seen bits of the Mardi Gras celebrations on TV before I came

to New Orleans, so actually taking part in the festivities was a really big thing. I was also lucky enough to be here the year the Saints won the Super Bowl. What an amazing coincidence! When I first arrived, I asked if New Orleans had a football team, and I was told, "Yes, but they suck!" As football season progressed, the Saints kept winning every game. What ever happened to the team that sucks? Even though New Orleans is a big city, it feels much like a small town. Everyone knows everyone, and all the people I have met have been so nice and friendly and always happy to have a little chat about this and that.

In two months, I will return to Denmark. I know I will miss my wonderful host family, the delicious Cajun food, the festivities, and the warm weather. I wonder if I'll find it hard to readjust to the silence, the respect for teachers and school, and if I'll miss the constant check-up on my work.

My First Funeral

Minhvan Nguyen

This Saturday was different. I woke up at 8, getting ready for a black day. I didn't know what to wear, what to expect or anything at all. I woke up thinking to myself that this was the day, the day that I was going to attend a funeral for the very first time. Quickly, I got dressed with a black dress and some black suede boots and ran out the house. When I passed by the church, I saw everyone in slacks, both female and male. For my first funeral, I really didn't get the memo on the black pants thing. So I went back home, thinking how foolish I dressed at the funeral, and changed. I ran up my stairs and put on some slacks and a black top. I thought it was like a funeral in the movies, where women dressed in dresses, and men just wore the formalwear, slacks and a dress shirt. I was completely wrong. Most of the people covered up from the head to the toe.

Driving back to the church, I saw the limo behind us heading the same way. It was the same limo driving his washed out body. He was young, about 19 years old. I grew up with him, and he was always in my childhood. His family babysat my siblings and me. I was nervous about all of this. I thought, "Are they going to open his casket?" As we waited outside, we saw the limo pull up in the front of the church. While all of his brothers carried his coffin into the church, I couldn't look but stared at them. Their white headbands stood out and so did their tears. I thought, "Wow, I never thought Tuan or Phong would cry... they always seem so fun." Tuan's family cried so hard. His mother ran out and started screaming. I was scared of how crazy she sounded. Her Vietnamese words were blurs, but I know she said, "He's going to be home when I get home. He's not gone." Her mentality of her child's death killed her heart and her soul. Imagine carrying a child's life and in a blink of a fishing trip, he or she is gone. I wouldn't understand, but I can see how much agony she carried on her back. It was sad when I looked at the brothers and sisters. It was different this time. I remembered how they smiled and how much they would make fun of each other. I didn't expect Tuan to die so young...

When we got into church, everyone was seated. Black attire everywhere, the mood was mournful. Church didn't feel long with all my self-thoughts. I felt sad, but I didn't feel that I needed to cry. In reality, the priest continued church like a regular church. The songs were beautiful as the people sang "Amazing Grace" and other songs that included Vietnamese ones. My tears didn't fall out as I sat in my seat. I kneeled most of the time. And from time to time, I sat there looking at people around me. Everyone's head was down, praying and just praying. I wanted to pray for Tuan, but I couldn't. My thoughts of "why can't I cry or what the hell is wrong with me?" bothered me throughout church. Eventually, church was almost over, and Tuan's father gave a speech. When he stood up and faced everyone in church, his words were clear. His voice wasn't cracked up, and there wasn't a shed of a tear. His tone of thankfulness really set the mood. He told happy stories, stories that would make you smile and feel gracious that you hope to see the next day. He turned his view of death into something positive, a move on, the next life.

I'm surprised that his father didn't cry. If I was up there, I would be crying so much. It wouldn't be clear at all. The speech was so sad, but I still couldn't cry. I sat there looking around at everyone. My body sat in the seat, but my head was somewhere else. I felt sad, but I couldn't cry! Why?! After the funeral, everyone left the church and me, I was one of them who left first. I quickly left, to escape the awkwardness in the room. It was hard actually being there, and I couldn't even go to the burial. When I saw everyone crying, I felt horrible. My sister started to cry. I tried to comfort her, but it didn't work. I told lies, "Don't cry, everything's alright," but deep down I knew how much it hurt. The crying sobs continued, tissues in peoples' hands and the constant reminder that I was at a funeral felt sad. In my head, I was scared. My first funeral, and I couldn't even go to the burial....

The Power of Youth

Neshia Ruffins

"I only grew up to have bills." This was a statement-slash-excuse that my aunt, Tammy, made after another random childlike moment while being around me. And I use the term "random" loosely. She is childlike all the time. And all of my cousins, including myself, look up to her. She acts just like us! And we respect her more than any of the other adult family members for some strange reason.

Every time she speaks to me, I feel like I am talking to my peer. I can tell her anything. But when she gets mad, I know my place. Her youthful personality makes children respect her. And she can turn it off and on better than a clap on lamp. And when she switches back to an adult, everyone from children to elders respects her.

Because her personality is very youth-filled, it seems like everything that rolls off of her tongue is worth listening to. You know how a new-born baby starts to say his first words? And when it starts to speak, everyone just has to hear what he/she has to say. That is how Tammy's conversation is. I am always listening, whether she's talking to me or not. Even when she comes over, I find myself following her around the house afraid I am going to miss something.

We stalk her actions. We watch, and we imitate. It is usually her speech that we mimic. We always try to use her slang when we talk to our friends at school. She can make us do the exact thing we didn't do when another adult asked us. She has power just like children. There's something about the power of children's speech that is stronger of that of an adult.

Children will always change more lives than adults. Its almost like adults' speech should be overlooked to me.

Adults always stress to me how positive I am. They say I am going places real soon, and I have an optimistic personality. To be honest I never listen. Well, I listen, but I feel like that's what adults are

supposed to tell all kids regardless. But one day my little cousin said, “I want to be like Noonie.” (That’s what all my cousins call me.) I looked at her in shock. She was one of my “less disciplined” cousins. She just smiled and said, “Serious. You’re nice, *and* pretty.” So I casually turned my head as the tears rolled down my eyes. She made a difference.

Oh yeah, and she was Tammy’s daughter. That means I made a difference. She wanted to be like me when I wanted to be like her mother. Little did she know, she wanted to be just like mom.

She is Me, and I am She

Ngan Vu

My sister and I occupy a 15 by 20 foot bedroom. Before Hurricane Katrina, I shared this bedroom with my aunt, but she soon got married and moved out. After our home was rebuilt from the hurricane's damage, my sister — Xuan — took my aunt's spot. The bedroom was too big for me to stay in by myself, so Xuan and all her things moved in with me and my things.

I sleep on the left side of the bed. She sleeps on the right side. Her personal things — books, make-up, electronics, and necessities — are kept on the right side. My personal things are kept on the left side. She has the right half of the walk-in closet, and I have the left side. There is a small empty spot where no clothes are hung, and that is the invisible line that separates our clothes — our boundary.

Xuan doesn't say much to me, and I don't either. We speak mostly about concrete matters like cleaning the room, folding the blankets, or turning off the lights. I can't have a conversation with her for more than five minutes. Part of the reason is she is always so busy. She is barely home, and I sleep alone on some nights. She will come home, take a shower, and then go on to her business again. "Hey, can you grab my purple towel for me?" I reply, "Sure." And there goes our conversation for the day.

I feel like she is more of a roommate than a sister. An ideal sister for me is one who talks to me about problems, helps me when I'm helpless, teaches me new things, etc.

It was one night when I was studying for my Chemistry exam and Algebra II exam. That night changed everything I thought about my "sister." Approximately twelve midnight was when she came home from wherever she went, and I didn't bother to ask and find out. She looked very exhausted though, and so was I. We both brushed our teeth; she was using the right sink, and I was using the left sink. We were both laying in bed — trying to fall asleep. Suddenly, she said something. "You still awake?"

It was dark, and I wasn't aware she was speaking to me. I thought she was on the phone or something.

She repeated, "You still awake?"

Feeling awkward I slowly answered, "Yeah...?"

She began asking me how is school, are the exams hard, are you keeping up in class. I was trying to answer her questions while questioning myself if I was dreaming. We were talking about school for a while, and then she started telling me about her high school years. Boy, did I not know my sister at all. She was a wild child during those years — going clubbing with her friends, skipping school, drinking alcohol, and most surprisingly trying ecstasy once. Nothing in the present would have led me to think that, because she is so serious about her work and pharmacy school. She told me that she regrets doing all that then, because she could've been in her class top ten. Of course she said it was also an experience she would remember. She tried to guide me and told me to stay on track in school. The "wild" side of her jokes with me. "I know y'all gonna wanna do those things, especially when you're seniors, but it should just be a little fun experience, not a habit." All I could do was laugh and be stunned. We talked about school and her past for a while. Then she started expressing her thoughts about our family.

She exposed me to our family problems that I never knew. What did I know? I am the youngest, and no one tells me anything — at least not until that night. My sister and I talked for hours about our problems. She told me about how my family's business wasn't doing so well, and my mom always had restless nights thinking about our family problems. On top of that my dad was still unemployed. My oldest sister wasn't home to help take care of things, so Xuan had to take the responsibility. She felt a lot of pressure, and this was a lot to handle. Plus she had school to worry about too. My parents don't tell me these things. They think I'm still too young. However, Xuan knows I am old enough to help out, so she talked to me about it. I felt like she opened up to me, and I opened up to her too.

After that night, I always ask her for advice or just to talk. Surprisingly she does the same to me, which makes me feel like I'm not just an annoying little sister, but someone she considers on her level. We connect through other things as well. She offered to do my hair and make-up for my homecoming dance. We bonded more when we were

sharing our ideas and opinions on hair styles and which make-up works best. One thing that changed after the talk was we were closer. We shared our clothes with each other. We are about the same size, so we like to shop at the mall together or like to shop for clothes that we think we both will like.

“What you think about this shirt?” asked Xuan.

“Hmm it’s okay. I like the blue one better,” I replied.

“Yea I was looking at that one too.”

“Maybe you should buy both, one for me too. Hahaha.”

“Okay you spoiled self.”

We start to become one another. We like the same styles. We ask each other for advice. We share clothes. Our little invisible boundary line in our closet is filled in with clothes. We close that gap in the middle and make it understandable that anything that’s mine is yours. With all the conversations, hang outs, secrets, opinions, similarities and differences, my sister and I closed the gap that we had. We became like one another. She is me, and I am she.

How Far I've Come

Roachell Sterling

It was hard to imagine myself here.

I mean, I'm still shocked that I'm even graduating.

During my high school years I've been expelled 4 times

And suspended over 22.

I've been one to fight, cut class and school,

And show no respect for authority.

My bad childhood memories and poor study habits

All have been major setbacks for me

Or maybe it was my bad choices of friends.

I don't really know.

It's hard to pin point it exactly,

But I'm sure there is definitely a reason.

I'm literally bursting with satisfaction from realizing that I,

I am here on the top

Slowly yet patiently counting down my days to receive my diploma.

The purpose of me writing isn't to highlight my mistakes, though,

But to show others how to highlight their own so that they may overcome them as I did.

Something that I feel helped me a lot was to my own attention how much I've grown since my freshman year:

Not height wise but with the mentality to realize the importance of life,

How I shouldn't worry about small-framed mistakes

But instead to dedicate my energy to perfecting my overall mural.

Who I Am

Russell Lopez

I want people to see me for who I am, not for who I was.

Who I was:

I was this kid who did not care what anyone told me about life. I was always fighting at school, doing things to hurt people, breaking into people's cars and houses, and selling drugs. Doing all these things led me to trouble. Really I did not have a father in my younger days. So my mother tried to put me into boot camp, just lock me in a room so I could not do anything wrong. But all that did was make me do what I wanted even more.

Who I am:

I am seventeen. I am a Senior in high school and trying to do something with my life. Now that I'm older, I'm much smarter with things I do. I try to live life to the fullest and enjoy myself. I love playing sports, chilling with my homies, and being with my girl. I'm going to be one of the men to go to college, and that means a lot to me. And I promised my cousin in jail that I am going to do something positive with myself and won't end up where he is.

So this is who I am. I'm the kid with a lot of pride in what he does.

Culinary

Sean Burrell

As I walked through the halls of Reed High School,
Classrooms called my name, "Sean! Sean!"
I realized being in this place was kind of cool,
So I walked upstairs and met Juan.
We walked around and finally found a class;
The room said it would start your future and end your past.
As time went by I started to like this task;
After what I've learned I had nothing else to ask.
I love the sounds of the metals clinging
And the sweet smells of aromas constantly singing.
The melody of the timer was softly ringing.
Just a touch of spices will get this course stinging.
I'm having thoughts about what else I'd love to be,
But these feelings I'm getting I know it would pick for me.
Keep trying and never give up was the key.
Three years left until I'll become free.
Juan asked me, "Are you sure this class is for you?"
This is what I love to do so yes that is true.

The last three years passed. Schools wanted me worldwide.

From Texas to New York, that'll be a long ride.

This might be a recipe for success.

Anywhere I go I'll do my best.

I would really love to build and own my own restaurants.

I hope doing that won't tie me into many knots.

By me having second thoughts I hope my dream doesn't die.

I don't know where to go, but I'll give anywhere a try.

As I pursued the last year time seemed to fly.

I'm finally walking across the stage. GOODBYE!!!

Gotta Face Reality

Shanae Franklin

I was thinking of you, but I called my daddy's name. How ironic...

I just don't understand. What do I have to do for you to act like the man you're supposed to be? Think about it. Did I force you to love me? Did I hold a gun to your head and force you to be a part of my life? Remember last night? I called you, but there was no answer. Strike One! I waited for your Good Morning text message, but it never came. Strike Two! I sat at an empty table during lunch, but did you come and sit next to me? Strike 3! Here is where I'm supposed to say, "YOU'RE OUT." Man, haven't you changed. Remember you used to be the peanut butter to my Reese's cup, the laffy to my taffy, the star to my burst? I was Thing One, and you were Thing Two. Remember I gave you the name Bookie Boo? You were my right hand man. We would text day and talk night. We were glued together like a king and his knights. We grew distant. Now our sun doesn't shine that bright.

Ring, Ring, Ring!

A call from my cousin...

"Nae' I got some tickets for the Hornets game. Do you want to go?"

"Yea sure! Why not?"

"Well, I have two tickets! So bring someone along."

"Ok..."

Two tickets to the Hornets game, I wonder who I'll take with me? Maybe I'll call Britney or I'll call Mally. Or maybe I'll just text and ask him and see if he will put an effort into spending time with me. I doubt it. I may as well not even bother or maybe I will.

A text message to him...

Hola...

Hey Butterfly...

Hi Hun...

Wyd

Nothing, I'm going to get something to eat and trying to find someone to go to the Hornets game with me.

Oh, so what you going to eat?

Maybe I said it wrong. If I told you I was trying to find somebody to go to the Hornets game with, what you think that means? It seems like I didn't even say anything about a Hornets game. Remember, you were the one who said you wanted me to be a part of your life. But yet we don't even do anything together. You're supposed to go everywhere with me, even to the bathroom. Two images of you: the one who loves and cares for me and the one who ignores me and walks away. I want the one who treats me like a queen, but often I get the one whom I can't agree with. I expect more from you. Be the man that you're supposed to be. You can't give me more than you're offering? We can't even do the simple things like going to church, eating out, jogging in the park, or even going to the movies. I need you to step up to the plate and act like my man. I thought my BF was supposed to love me, be crazy about me, and adore me. Fooled me! This isn't Mariah Carey. Obsession doesn't exist around here. To say he's my BF, he can't even be straight forward with me. What's so hard about saying, "no I don't want to go," "I'm busy," or "I don't have a ride?"

Giving me your attention sometimes or when you think you need to put a little bug in my ear in order to keep me is not enough. That just doesn't float in my boat. Today at lunch I was surprised. Maybe my journal hit you with a little fire and gave you some sense. Or maybe you were just being a typical boy — telling me what you know I want to hear and doing what you know I want you to do, so I won't hit the road and leave you looking like a jack. I'm Tina Turner ready to strike back. There isn't any more breaking my heart. I'd prefer for this stress revue to fall apart. I put all of my feelings on paper, so you can see how I feel.

You're not supposed to change after a few months. Be yourself from the jump. I deserve better. It's funny how I can text you, but you won't text back. But I can text one of my guy friends, and he'll text back in an instant. Nonetheless they don't stop texting me like you do. He'll text me until the crack of dawn, while you continue to ignore me. I wait for your good morning and good night messages, but I get one

from everyone but you. Unlike you, they don't look at my messages and just close their phones. They even respect me enough not to answer me with a harsh "NO" or "What" like you do.

Being the person that you are, you will deny ever ignoring or dissing me, but actions speak louder than words. Remember this number (832) 466-8751? Or should I say, "Hi, I'm Kim." You know what you did, and I have every right to throw it in your face, but I'm not like you. You are such a liar. Why betray me of all people? I remember it would be some days when I would ask you questions or just send you a friendly greeting, and you wouldn't answer. But I could pretend to be a girl named Kim, and you'd talk to her like she was an angel in your eye sight. It hurt so bad, I pretended to be some chic just to talk to you.

~a message to you...

"Good Morning."

~no answer

"Hi!"

~no answer

~a message from Kim

"Hey"

"Hey IMY, Wyd..."

Not only would you answer her, you would say things like how is your day going, I miss you, what are you doing, I been thinking about you, etc: Things that I had to force you to tell me. I still can't believe you sent her, well some girl named Kim who was really me, a picture of your penis. But you claimed you were mine. You loved me and the rest of your lies. Did you really want to have sex with her? Did you ever love me? Was it just lust? Did you just like me because I'm smart or for my physical features? I fade away from her ... lol. You're an ass hole! You would tell a complete stranger anything she wanted to hear and stab me in the back. And for you to tell her she was prettier than me. You brought joy to my day. If I'm your girl friend, you shouldn't have to talk to other girls, but maybe that's it. I'm a girl who's your friend. I thought you kept your talking on a friendship level. Hmmmmm... I should have talked to other dudes and played you like a fool. Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you. Well I was loyal, faithful, honest, loving and caring. I never did you any wrong. I can't

even find the strength to trust you. Matter of fact, I don't trust you. I even gave you an opportunity to be real with me and tell me what was up. I texted you three times, and you didn't answer me for hours. All the while I was texting, you were acting like I was another chick, and you lied to me when I asked you why you hadn't been responding to my messages and you claimed you were asleep but you were texting Kim. Oh I mean you were texting the girl who was in love with you. I asked you if you could tell me that you were really asleep with all honesty, and you said YES! You don't deserve me.

I know I can act like a pop rock sometimes, but some jokes I just don't take lightly or kind. Some people make jokes just to cover up how they really feel. In case you don't remember, when you were clowning around the other day, your comment was you would chose money over me any day. If that's how you feel, we can cut it now. I don't know what kind of girls you have dealt with in the past, but believe me when I say, I am well taken care of. I don't need a man to supply me with any materialistic item in any shape or form, and I especially don't need him for his money. Let me remind you: I'm going to medical school to become a doctor or shall I say a pediatrician. You put me down in front of both your friends and mine and laughed in my face when I confronted you. As my boyfriend, those words should have never come out of your mouth whether you were joking or not. Haven't you heard the old saying, "Money doesn't buy happiness?"

I'm tired of analyzing old memories of how you used to be, and I'm tired of you making promises that you can't keep. The difference between promises and memories is we break promises, but memories break us. Promises are like babies: easy to make but hard to deliver. I thought I was the perfect girlfriend and anything that you could ever want, but it seems that I'm just another girl who's going to be added to your list. I was your soulmate, at least I thought I was. I thought I made you happy. I await your day of truthfulness and commitment. You messed over me, but unlike the rest, I had your back.

Surprisingly, you actually sat with me during lunch today. That's a simple thing; even pre-school lovers sit in the sand box and spend time together. Maybe that's it, you're not really in love or maybe you're just confused. You should try to sit with me as often as you can, but you would rather sit around a bunch of dudes laughing and giggling. Now that's gay!

Sunday, I was in New Orleans. You texted me non-stop during church. Finally, I asked you what you were doing, and you responded by saying nothing just lying down. I asked you where you were, and your response was, at home. You asked why, and I said because I want to see you, and you never texted back. I don't understand why I have to tell you what you should do. In my mind, you're supposed to act like I want you to, and you're supposed to do the simple things that I ask of you. I gotta face reality and realize that's just not you. The man I picture is the man you're not. I have been picturing you as someone you're not. Maybe my expectations just don't fit your character. You have to want to be the man in order for this to work, but what I'm thinking about is Strike Four and me and you will be no more.

Most people say the relationship you have with your father will dictate the relationship you'll have with every man. Well time is moving, and I'm maturing into adulthood. I'm spoiled to the t, and I get what I want, when I want it, and how I want it because I'm daddy's little girl. But yet just like you my father has his flaws and sometimes turns his back on me too. As I push away from my father's love maybe the problem is I've always had a man in my life, so now I look to you. Now, I'm wondering am I on a typical love search or have I found that rock to make my foundation solid. Maybe not...

Come on. I know you can do better. I love you, but I'm not going to let you mess over me, and I'm not going to continue to be a fool for you. It's time for you to pull up your pants and tighten your belt, because I need you to be a man and to give me 100%. Halfway doesn't work. It's all or nothing. Deal or No Deal! I'm tired of making excuses for you and letting you slide. I deserve better!! Remember you told me you act this way because you are afraid to lose me, and you think about that phrase and see how that doesn't add up. The time has come for you to lay it flat on the table. Are you ready for a real relationship or are you still in the midst of playing childish games? Apparently, I'm wearing the pants. I want you to chose; be a woman or be my superman. I had faith in you, but the reality is I've always been stupid for you.

Have a nice life...

You were my biggest mistake...

Writer Who?

Sidnie Jackson

Senior Class President of 2010, lover of music, runner of track, Christian, a thinker, a lady, a daughter, but a writer... I am not.

I am not a writer. My words don't kiss your emotions in that special place to make you lean in closer becoming all ears to what I have to say. Each sentence doesn't flow like the melody of a song, infectiously drumming beats in your ear. The paragraphs in each piece I write idle on the page like a broken puzzle. Random thoughts, plain words, doodles if you will... point-less, meaningless, and unimportant they are.

Wondering why I haven't acquired the talent, I thought back to my childhood. Growing up with my grandmother a retired English teacher and graduate of Dillard University, and my grandfather a political science major, college president and graduate of Harvard, I was always surrounded by knowledge.

If grandmother and I were baking, I had to read the ingredients, figure out which is that ingredient, measure if needed and total the baking time on a clock that had dots where the numbers would normally go. Confusion, that's all I can say. Not only did we bake, we practiced reading and writing. Never once was a word spelled for me. I used the oldest, creepiest dictionary in the house because it was the biggest which is better for your eyes according to grandmother. And when I finally broke free from her, I spent time with Fa (my grandfather). Chilling in the backyard with a pair of overalls and on hot days a bare back with slippers, clouded in a cigarette smokey haze, we talked. He told me of life values (which usually consisted of education, money and wise use of my credit), from where he came, and how I should treat sister better. Once he completed my "life lesson" for the day he pulled out my mom's old bike from the shed and said "now we play."

School was a different scene: books galore, and work to accompany them. Never did a day pass that I let my mind slip away from my

tasks, because I knew when I got home my grandparents would be waiting to hear the news. When it came to getting straight A's, I was a hopeless failure. But A's and B's were my result. My first achievement besides excellent behavior was the ability to read and comprehend on a level higher than my class. I was a third grader reading on a fourth grade level. Yet I was never requested to be placed in gifted reading.

Thinking back on my childhood at home and school, I wonder why I am not a scholar, a tremendous result of my grandparents' teachings, a perfect portrait of what my school challenged me to be. Sure I have written on hundreds of pages in stacks of journals for personal reasons, but that has done no good. None of my writings were published, only read to family when I wasn't held back by stage fright.

A poet I was thought to be, a reader I was said to be, a listener I chose to be, a writer I am not...well not yet.

A Lifelong Recollection

Stephen Gladney

1. INTRODUCTION

...Inspiration Inspiration Inspiration.

Constantly in search of.

I find myself stuck.

...Inspiration Inspiration Inspiration.

There's so much going on with me, but I don't know where to start.

-Coltrane-

My number one inspiration.

Why not there?

A long time ago, way back in the 6th grade, I remember hearing my first jazz CD. It was *The Very Best of John Coltrane*. My mother had randomly purchased it for me, and eventually it would turn out to be the single greatest and most influential thing she could have ever done for me aside from birthing me. There was something about the whole occasion, but I never thought too much about it. So I inserted the CD into the computer, and I gazed at the track listing once it sprung up on the screen. Intuitively, I clicked on "My Favorite Things" and continued on with my browsing of various web pages while waiting for the song to play. As soon as the first piano chord was struck, I knew that I was in for something good. So I removed my hands from the keyboard, moved into a comfortable position, and closed my eyes to allow the steady $\frac{3}{4}$ pulse of the song to take over me and encompass me, unwillingly, and whole-heartedly. The song was a perfect counterpart to the winter atmosphere around me. It was the time of year when the heater would be turned all the way up and yet our hard wood floors were still too cold to walk on. But I was complacent with what I couldn't change. I was at home amongst

the positive vibrations that I felt from the music. The coalescence orchestrated by the vibrations from the heater and the warmth from the music would be...To be...Indescribable by words, and so then I turned to music...

-----Music, in my eyes and in my soul, is an escape from the struggles and problems of everyday life. Music is my outlet, my input: my everything and nothing. I find the answers to many of my questions and the solutions to many of life's puzzles in the most unobvious encyclopedia known to me: music — simple, yet remarkable. There's an indescribable underlying truth surrounding my passion and participation in this art. It's an understood mission that I seemed to have found myself wrapped up in.-----

And now I find myself in retrospect contemplating the origins of this quest I'm embarking on, unintentionally, BUT, actively.

--\\Inspiration///---

And

((Inner Peace)).

...Inspiration Inspiration Inspiration.

May, 2008

Yesterday while loitering in another SAC writing class, Kalamu brought up an interesting point that seemed to stick with me throughout the duration of the class period, and it followed me home into the night. He said something along the lines of "Philosophers say that what children don't finish in their childhood, they struggle with as adults." I tried to figure out how that coincided with me, and the first thing that came to mind was the relationship between my father and me, or rather the lack thereof.

I've been struggling with that realization for most of my life. Every day I'm searching for the answer to a question that I haven't yet asked. I've been trying to tie the loose ends of my disrupted upbringing, but how do I go about that? How can I truly be a complete human being without the input of both people contributing to my birth? Although all of this conflict may make me a stronger person, it doesn't solve my issue. It doesn't give me the closure that I need. I sought out this man, who apparently was a part of me. I shall start by seeking out myself.

2. I WAS AN INQUISITIVE YOUNG BOY

I was an inquisitive young boy living with my mother and two older sisters. We lived in a two-story shotgun house, which was (along with everything else) big to me at the time. Our house had hardwood floors and tall ceilings, so you can imagine the fascination stemming from simply gazing upwards and the memories of trotting tip-toed across the floor in the winter time. Our family didn't have much, but what we did have, (or at least what I was blinded by) were these arms of love and security that each person contributed to and benefited from. I felt at home within them.

If you haven't already noticed, there are some people that I have left out of my household. First, my grandmother. My grandmother is still very much so "alive and kickin'." I love my grandmother very much, and she shows a lot of care and concern, but it wasn't always that way. My earliest memories of my grandmother were of when we used to live with her while my mother traveled. Adrienne, my second oldest sister, and I lived with her for maybe a year or two. I was still too young to understand things and to evaluate situations properly, but now when I look back on it, that time period was pretty miserable. My grandmother was both a smoker and an alcoholic. The few memories of my grandmother that I still retain were of when she drank. After the many years wasted away at the bottle, she had perfected a process to her liquor ventures; after a few drinks, she would turn off her little black TV that sat high atop her chest of drawers, pull out her radio and sit it on her night table, move to the edge of her bed, and smoke her troubles away. After so many times through the routine, the mirror on her dresser became a foggy gray collage, a visual interpretation of the decades wasted away.

My grandmother spent many of her nights at her favorite bar, Alfred's Alley. All the while my sister and I were left at home, and on many occasions she left me at home alone. Being as how I was nine at the time, I was terrified of being alone. Unknowing, confused, and afraid were I, but the more and more I faced those emotions, the more and more self-reliant I became, and I learned not to worry and to occupy myself when there was no one there to be with me.

Once, my mother told me about a time when my grandmother gave up liquor for Lent. She said that it was almost as if she had never drunk a day in her life. What I don't understand is if it's so easy for her to stop, then why doesn't she? Obviously she was an alcoholic by

choice, not by addiction. I remember firsthand when my grandmother stopped smoking. I was in the front seat of her off-white Oldsmobile Aurora (her 2nd one because the first, a champagne-colored one, was stolen.) We rolled up to her usual pharmacy on Caffin Ave, H&W drug store. She went in for her usual green box of Benson & Hedges, but something was unusual about this visit. While I waited in the car for her to come out, I imagined her exiting through the glass double doors, purse over left shoulder, brown bag in hand. But this time there was no brown bag. Instead her fist was on her hip, and she gritted her teeth as she neared the car. When she got in the car she handed me her purse, (as always) and mumbled various colorful phrases illustrating her feelings toward the recent rise in cost of cigarettes. I never saw her smoke or drink again.

My mother, sisters and I have all had bad luck with fathers and men in general. Ever since my grandfather, fathers have become occasional presences in our lives. My grandfather wasn't always in my mother's life. My grandmother and grandfather had gone through a divorce, and he moved off to New Jersey while my mother was still a child. My two sisters have also gone through their own unfortunate situations, and I was destined to have mine.

The story goes without saying: my mother and my father fell in love, with me as the product of that. Soon afterwards, everything went downhill. Thomas was his name. According to my mother, Thomas quickly became an underhanded person, and he could not be trusted; this has been proved true on the many occasions that he stole money from her purse, later to find out that he had taken it to support his drug habit. Thomas has spent half of his life in jail, mostly because of possession of illegal narcotics, both for pleasure and for profit. On one occasion, this fool found himself following some tourists up to their room in a hotel with intent to purloin. The situation turned on him and evolved into him being chased by the cops down Canal St, which made the front page of the newspaper. When he was in prison, mysterious men would appear on our doorstep looking for him. Who knows what they wanted. My mother was terrified for our lives. She warned Thomas not to come around until he straightened up and flew right. It's unfortunate that he has yet to catch the beat of that tune.

I remember a photo of my mother and me. It was one of those pictures that didn't show much to the unknowing eye, but it held a lot of sentimental value, partially because it was of me at the earliest of

my memories, the youngest of my recall. We were sitting on the floor in our house, and I was in between her legs in my brown overalls. It was one of those pictures where everyone is looking downwards, and the photographer's finger was present in the corner. I never noticed it until one day I dropped it, and my finger no longer hid his. I took the picture to my mother and asked her whose finger it was, and as soon as she said it was Thomas', my feelings on the matter became indistinguishable. It was a concoction of joy, confusion, and indifference. My father? I tried to make sense out of it all, but sense wasn't working for me. Seeing as how I recall no memories of him ever being around, it was hard to accept that he slipped from my memory bank. Since I hadn't gathered any natural memories, I created my own. I imagined Thomas being there, my mother, he and I laughing and having fun, and I also imagined the picture being taken. Since I don't have an accurate representation of him, I forged one, and the picture served as a placeholder for him within me, and whenever I gazed upon the Polaroid picture, I felt his presence, although he wasn't ever truly there.

3. THE TRUTH IS

I'm insecure. But I can't help it.

All my life I had to struggle being myself. I was always so different from all the other guys and people in general. I was never "hood" or "jock" or anything. I hated sports, probably because I've never had anyone there to teach them to me. I was never really into many manly things, although I was into girls. But all my life I found myself trying to suppress who I really was, in all senses. I've been in a few deep, beautiful relationships. But I've struggled with them because of my insecurities with myself and with relating to others. My appearance, my accent, my demeanor, all of them gave me issues, that is until a few years ago when I decided to finally release the "inner" me and embrace myself for who I was.

So I had a best friend. For the first time ever, I really had someone there who could relate to me and with whom I could really express myself. It was such an amazing feeling! To be understood. But that relating turned into something else, and our conversations turned into games of 20 questions in which our innermost secret thoughts and hidden desires came out on the table. I asked him if he had ever

been interested in a guy...And he said yes. He asked me the same... and I replied with a similar response. And slowly but surely, we began becoming close on another level, and that led to some other stuff...But he became my first boyfriend. I was so utterly confused. I hadn't any idea what I had gotten myself into. But I wasn't ready to get out, and the experiences we shared showed me another side of life, the side that was always a part of me, but it took him to bring it out. Ever since then, I've recognized myself as bisexual.

With a newfound understanding of myself came a new attitude on life and a new perspective of myself. I began expressing myself in other ways — through music, through writing, through my appearance, and through rebellion. I began playing music because it made me feel good, it made me feel free, and the connection you can make with other people musically is profound beyond my wildest beliefs. Music knows no racial, gender, or sexual boundaries, and I feel at home the most within the vibrations. My appearance began looking more like how I viewed myself, as opposed to how the world saw guys. I always had an issue with my skinny figure, but I began accepting that I'm a slim person, and I began dressing accordingly.

I chose not to immediately reveal myself, afraid of what many would say or how they would react. Maybe I was more afraid of the outcome as opposed to how they would react, as in, I was afraid of being disowned or becoming an outcast. But eventually I found the courage to open up, slowly, and express who I am, and although there will always be those who don't agree, the few whom I opened up to didn't sharply disapprove or show much differentiation in the way they viewed or treated me. I think that I chose the best way of going about sharing myself, because I allowed people to get to know the me that my sexuality has no bearing on, and as a result, they shouldn't have had any problem with knowing one more fact about me. I believe that if all people didn't think in terms of sexuality, then many would be more accepting to those with different sexualities. I may seem like a complicated person, maybe even standoffish, but that's because I don't open myself up to many people immediately. I don't show my true self unless you prove to me that you're not someone who just wants to use me or just wants to blackmail me. I don't get down with that, and I don't tolerate childish people. I have a tough exterior as a defense mechanism. Although I've reached many realizations in my life and have changed magnanimously, that doesn't mean I'm going to give myself away easily, but I have become a more understanding

individual, and my experiences in life have shaped my methods of living and solving both simple and complicated problems; I now have a more open mind and that helps me to better address concerns and situations and to react appropriately. But the truth is, I'm human. And humans are imperfect, so my flaws and all are justified.

---But I digress...Gracefully

4. CHILD OF TWO WORLDS

Torn between the two, I struggle to find my own identity. I struggle to discover who I am, uninfluenced by what's around me, and what is expected of me. I don't want to be a product of my environment, but it seems inevitable.

Born into blackness. Unwillingly. Born into midway poverty, wasn't my choice. Reared in the ghetto, struggling to survive. Trying to keep a straight head, wasn't the life I had in mind. The things that I was and am still exposed to, the issues I face, the things I witness, wasn't at all what I wanted, but it's all inevitable. I get lost in a haze of weed smoke, bounce music, and money strewn about trying to find purpose, but once I escape that typhoon of doom, all I'm left with are weed-drenched clothes, an earache, and empty pockets. Where do I go from now? According to my surroundings, this is who I'm supposed to be. This is the norm, but it's just not appealing to me. Sometimes I wonder if I'm just too different to be who I'm "supposed" to be, according to the society which reigns supreme over all others fitting my characteristics. Niggas trying to make a quick dollar, fuck as many hoes as they can in one sitting, live the life of an accomplished rapper, rep the ghetto, sell the hood, be the stereotype: "Man you stepped on my shoes, we bout to fight?" ...Sorry, someone must have given me the wrong address for the enlightenment convention; this is convention street, right? "Nah, it's conviction blvd." I found myself at the auditions for the Lil Wayne stunt doubles in the upcoming film that's said to be the next *Boyz N Da Hood* called *Niggaz on Da Block*. Definitely not my area of expertise. I was born into this, yet it wasn't embedded into me.

Where do I belong? Come on. I'm black. I'm a 17-year-old male. I have dreads. I should have at least smoked two pounds of weed in the last week. I should be chillin on the corner, throwing up signs for a

neighborhood that no longer exists while tryna holla at some random chicks. Well, at least, that's what the movies taught me. That's what my friends tell me. That's what I see around me. Shouldn't I have a limp in my walk by now? A sluggish style of speaking? At least a frown in every picture I take? No? Come on. At least let me rag on how big my dick may or may not be, or how fresh my Cole Haan's are. My Easter fit? No? Well who the hell am I then?

At an early age, I converted from nigga to Negro and from ghetto to Jazz. I dropped the fake chains for some headphones and lost the tin-foil grill for an album. I hadn't yet latched on to the ever-popular Hip Hop/R&B music, so my ears were fresh and ready to be de-virginized. I ran into Coltrane. Wooow. Talk about a 180-degree shift. I got lost in the music. It was as if I had been baptized. I was reborn. Or rather the reasons for my initial birth had become clear to me. Indeed, I was the anomaly. As I moved into my new religion, life began to take on new meanings to me. My newfound society was more welcoming than any other. My society consisted of wise men, old and new, whom I'd never met, who would never judge me for what I looked like, how I spoke, what I wore, whom I expressed interest in. Indeed. Life was grand, in my mind. You see, it was great growing up with Coltrane, Elvin, McCoy and Jimmy, but did it matter, if it was all in my mind? Once the batteries ran out and the headphones broke, slowly but surely the marijuana would suffocate me, the niggas with the loud-ass car stereos would ride into my eardrums' neighborhood, and the money in my pockets was sent cascading through the air surrounding me, just centimeters from my reach.

5. TWELVE YEARS TOO LATE

Sunday April 5th, 1992 at 1:05 PM saw the ushering in of yet another black boy in this cruel and unusual world. He did not foresee what he was getting himself into by not clinging onto his mother's womb while he had the chance, or by surviving the emotional weight placed on his soft head while housed within a house of love and despair. As I was dragged from my home of nine months and onto a metal platform, my eyes opened to a bigger, wider atmosphere with bright lights and feasting pupils, dilated with the excitement of a new life being delivered to their arms, but I wasn't joyous on this occasion. I cried, high and loud in prelude to the lifetime I would spend mentally and emotionally handicapped on the matter,

because at such a tender, malleable age of 30 seconds, I knew something was amiss, because missing along that assortment of eyes, were yours, and this is my tragedy.

My mother told me that I used to always ask about my father.

“Where is he?”

“He went away.”

“When is he coming back?”

“I’m not sure if he is.”

“...”

I ruminated the words that slowly seeped from my mother’s sullen face, and all that came into fruition from my seconds of thought were soaked valleys of tears and bawls of “Why?!” and “I want my daddy!” I refuted the notion. I detested the thought. I would not accept uncertainty as a fitting solution to my dilemma.

Occasionally, you called. I heard your voice, and my minute, fragile heart was placed on the floor of a china closet while an intoxicated bull performed somersaults nearby. You told me you loved me. Knowing not what the words truly meant, I simply reciprocated the phrase. You told me you’d come to see me today. The exhilaration that brimmed from my little, jumping feet can not nearly be captured in words. I was overcome with a terrible case of bright, shining eyes, and a smile from cheek to cheek. I was perfectly fine with dwelling in my cozy stupor, for it gave me a break from the depression that I was overcome with most other moments of the day. When we finished off our conversation and the phone was hung up, the bull slipped onto my porcelain figurine. I knew he’d never come, because this wasn’t his first promise broken, nor was it his last.

As the months, and years lulled on, my woes began to take new shapes, and cover new ground. This question dangling high above me like a noose to a soon-to-be lynched black man found a way to transform from “Where is he?” to “When are you going to find me a new one?” There were several men my mother tried on for size, but with each came their individual issues, and the hunt left her less and less inclined to search any longer.

Not too long afterwards, I gave up hope. As life moved on, so did I. My life began managing without the presence of him, and my heart

became content with the absence. After my sisters moved out, it was just my mother and I alone, to take on this world, together.

I ran into you in 2003. Through the New Orleans Public School system, and through my mother's work, she found you. As usual, you were perched over a laptop, and your face was twisted in a way that mirrored the million thoughts probably running through your head as you typed. Your clothing was borderline-ragged, and your figure wasn't big and tall like the ones of TV, but you'd do. There was something about you that caught her attention. Could her hunt be complete? Surely my naiveté would come back to haunt me later on, but I was exhausted from the searching, and so I gave in.

As my mother and I sat across from you in that week's Wednesday Coalition meeting, I whispered to her "Is he married?" I'm guessing my comment caught her off guard because she adorned a blush, to be quickly replaced with a "mother's smile to her little boy's harmless joke." I was a mature 12-year-old. And no, I was serious. Was the damn man married? I wanted to know because I grew angry of seeing her alone and feeling within that she was yearning for someone who would make her days a thousand times brighter.

I then whispered, "I like his hair." That was enough to send her on her way.

Abruptly, you treaded into our lives, and we into your house, and just as soon as you built your crib in her heart, my foot shoved up your ass. Fast-forward a few years, and we were at each other's throats.

The issue surfaced when you felt you had attained the respect to impart your authority onto me. I simply wasn't having it. As with all parents, there are disputes, and so there were arguments between my mother and me, but tempers began to flare when you felt the necessity to step in between the two of us, and by doing so, you commenced a five-year war.

Shades of vocabulary constantly spew from my mouth's brush to paint deviled images on the canvas of our relationship. I always was careful to use every hue imaginable in this dispute, minus "stupid bitch ass dumb motherfucker." Those I'll save when age isn't a factor. It always did, and still does, amaze me how someone with your wealth of knowledge and intellect can allow yourself to go back-and-forth with a teenager and to act just as, if not more, childish and immature as he. When the speed of the light that guides my eye

lands on you before I have time enough to look away, a light bulb is shone in my mind revealing my true emotions in regard to your role in my life. Huge fluorescent bulbs once illuminate are suffocated, one-by-one from a deadly black fog in a highly-rehearsed manner as each and every nice thought and good vibe I attained from you, and manifested within myself, are taken over by this dark, unusual emotion within me. I truly never felt hatred, until I stood face-to-face, ego-to-ego with you in a dispute the likes of a worldwide slave revolt; you were the slave master, but I held the gun.

You wanted to be my father, and quite frankly, I wasn't having it. You seemed to fail to realize that your job was cut out for you when you decided to become involved with a black woman whose children were exposed to the stereotypes of black-white race relations. Honestly, I think you had a break seeing as how you entered the picture once two had exited. I acted-out in a variety of ways; I simply would not obey your orders, nor respect your wishes, and to this day, I don't see the need to do so. What have you done for me? "You are, and will never be my father, so please, wipe that thought from your mind" was some of the content of my objection. I constantly had to remind you that you married my mother, not me, and I am NOT your step-anything. There is no "we." This is no "family," just two separate pairs of unfortunate-ass people, tied at the external hip. We haven't an affiliation, besides the fact that we have a woman in common. I'm constantly reminded that by law, you are my stepfather, but law has no bearing on my heart. Law doesn't deter me from speaking my mind. Can you tell me this? Where was the law, or better yet, where were you when I needed you? Where were you when I called your phone over and over? Where were you when I was left home alone in a cold house with no food for 2-3 days? Where were you when as I walked home from a friend's house late one night, I was dragged behind a vacant house and my childhood innocence was bent over and penetrated to leave a deeply bruised and transformed state of mind, and the remains of my childhood seeped out of his now folded-over member after such a dirty deed was done. Until you can give me a good explanation for that, then you shouldn't mind accepting that we only relate on paper, and nowhere near my heart, and there's no changing that.

As I reach the 18th anniversary of my birth, I must compose one more tear-laced, heart tightening, energy-consuming invocation to the Gods above, and the Gods around, a prayer that they see me

through to the next year, and that they may push the instruments of self-destruction further and further away from my grasp. It's unfortunate that it must be this way, but so is my circumstance, so is my struggle, but after 18 years, everything seems to become a repetitive cycle of sentiments, and another year in which most of my time is spent with head down, headphones on as I glide across the bumpy pavements, narrowly dodging the notorious New Orleans potholes of never-ending misery, while contemplating the many wonders of life, those questions that few are brave enough to investigate, and even fewer are bold enough to publicly articulate. Slowly I approach a tombstone, buried deep within my being. No, this gravesite doesn't welcome flowers to honor the life of the departed; there'll be no wreaths hung here expressing condolences. It goes without saying that this year, my candles won't be blown out with the image of a returning father posted on my mind's walls, and neither will one single candle be extinguished with the thought of you occupying the now cemented-shut cavity deep within this dark heart.

The Abhorrent Truth

Thao Nguyen

My eardrums vibrated as soon as they heard the bumpy beat of a hip-hop song played and a rapper who joined in the beat-less rhythm and rapped about his ghetto life. I was to touch the icy snow that in my mind only existed on TV. My nose would no longer have to experience the pollution that disturbed the beauty of Ho Chi Minh City. I was not only to eat foods whose main ingredients are rice and vegetables but more nutritious foods like gumbo that contain more than enough nutrition to lead one to obesity.

I, a modern immigrant, came to acknowledge the gap between two different generations from Lan Cao, a '75 immigrant. In *Monkey Bridge*, Lan Cao caught my attention due to the opposite interest of hers to mine. I wasn't like Lan Cao at all, not a bit except the fact that we're both Vietnamese immigrants. Anyway, what my senses had experienced, that's all I liked about being an American. And it was not so much about the English language that motivated me in being an American. Opposite of me, when hearing the English language spoken from the tongue of an American, Cao's hope was to "continue that way forever, playing the movement of sound itself."

For me English marks my indifference to the rest of the society. It separates me from the group of vulgar people. My Vietnamese tongue had its victory moment when it came to arguments and giving criticism, but now it has to admit its defeat, the defeat upon itself not being able to distinguish the un-needed Vietnamese fluent speaking — "FOBby" speaking — and the needed English fluent speaking. Usually if someone challenged me in a nerve-poking game, I would take them down by either force or with all the appropriate words that I know. But I could only use this skill when it came to bad Vietnamese guys, because my Vietnamese words never run out. However I can't do such things in English toward true Americans, because not only are American people way tougher than Vietnamese, but also Americans will eventually find it's funny instead of being serious when the curse words come out of the mouth of someone

like me whose every syllable carries the accent along with it. It's really embarrassing to even mention it. On the contrary, English and its fluent speakers appear to Cao as something extraordinary, a "standard for perfection." Cao was astonished by how wonderful the language sounded, and it exhorted her to work harder in improving her imperfect English. Thus, would you want to be someone like me who yearns for a little Elysian leisure from the tiny yet tight space she has in the American land? Or would you rather work hard on your English like Lan Cao, thinking that being able to master the language can lead to your success in the future?

I'm not a useless person nor is Cao a nerd. We each have our own perspective on living our life. I can be like Cao relishing and studying English, but every time I try to do so, I again feel chagrin for carrying the FOB identity. The term *FOB*, "fresh off the boat," was made by the second generation of immigrants to mock those who had just arrived to the United States. I first thought that this term only referred to those immigrants back in '75, so I never took offense toward it, not till the day when a question was asked about my identity.

"Are you new to this school?" The girl asked while rolling her eyes in all kind of directions as to judge me.

"Yeah!" I timidly responded.

"So how long have you been here?" Since this wasn't the first time someone asked me this question, I gave her a quick response just like how I could cite the alphabet, without holding back anything. "Two years." I expected her to ask me similar questions such as "what's your name?" and "do you like America more than Vietnam?" so that she might know me better before we became friends. Unexpectedly she gave me a quick judgment as if she knew me well. "So you're a FOB," she said. I paused for a while, trying to settle my mind before giving her a response. "No, I came by airplanes not boat." The girl immediately gave me a disgusted look and said, "you're new to America, can barely speak English, and have a heavy accent as you talk. That is all needed to be a FOB."

I guess the girl who spoke her mind wasn't wrong at all. I can't be mad or blame her for being ruthless. She told me the truth, the truth that not just her but most Vietnamese-born American kids hold to. Maybe 10 more years or even 20 years later, no matter how well my tongue can handle the English language, it can't ever hide me from

the acknowledgment of people that I once was a FOB and thus will always be a FOB. I myself start to think deliberately about whether or not I am, because the public and I don't know much about one another. That's why it's possible for them to have such ruthless thoughts about me. What if it was someone who's close to me and actually knows not just the outside of my presentation but the inside? Would he or she still judge me as a "FOB?" Well, soon enough I discovered the answer to this question when we had a discussion of one of Amy Tan's writings in our English AP IV class.

It was Tan's essay "Mother Tongue" that our class had our attention on. The majority of the students in class didn't care much about participating in the discussion, because to them it was just another reading, but to me the reading had its own significance. In the selection, Tan talks about her mother and her broken English. When giving criticism toward her mother's speaking, Tan does not use the perspective of how bad and FOBby the imperfect English of her mother is compared to a native English like what the public usually judges me on, but instead Tan uses a more thoughtful view point when making her reflection. In other words, it's the poor in state of sound and its outside appearance that the public has based my reputation on, and it's the inside and out that Tan has allowed herself to listen to, which enables her to think of her mother's English as somewhat "vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery." Furthermore Tan was willing to help her mother out by pretending to be her mom on a phone call. Pause here. If it was me in the position of Tam's mom, and I asked one of my American friends for help, 99.9 % they'll say "do it yourself," afraid that if they help it's going to embarrass them and their coolness. I could test out my friendship with my American friends with these embarrassing requests, but I choose not to because if I do so, I might not have any friends left. It's better to live off a false friendship than having no one at all to share your sadness and happiness moment. This is an axiom in which I've long believed.

When making a relation between people, the gap in age might unbalance the accuracy of the analysis. However in this case, Tan's mother's and my age don't interfere with our progress in learning English. What really matters is how well each of us can adopt the language. Tan's mother's English isn't bad at all. It's even better than my mom's English. What makes both of us broken-English speakers is our habit of speaking English with our mother tongue language

dominating our minds. We speak of words that were harvested throughout the years. It might take a while for us to think of the right word to use, but when the word is ready for the tongue to release, oh yes it sounds as fresh as the “FOB” identity of its speaker. Of course there’s no way we can avoid making any grammar error in our speaking, unless we’re one of the pure English speakers.

True, some of the ethnic groups have the undeniable advantage over others when it comes to learning English. Chang-Rae Lee, a Korean immigrant, has attempted to distinguish the disadvantage of his being a Korean in his novel *Native Speaker*. Unlike French, Spanish, Vietnamese and other languages that actually use alphabets as their writing system, languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean use symbols in place of alphabets. “In Korean, there are no separate sounds for *L* or *R*... There is no *B* and *V* for us, no *P* and *F*.” This explains Lee’s weak comprehension skill upon interpreting the sound of alphabets, thus becoming a bigger torture to Lee, since he already has the accent to deal with. Learning how to read wasn’t a challenge for me just as long as I could recognize the structure of the word. From there I can break down the word to its simplest form. Since I already know how the alphabets sound, with the exception of “F” and “Z,” I can immediately figure out the pronunciation of the words without having a clue of what I just read. This advantage doesn’t work all the time, especially with big vocabulary like terminology for instance, but yet it works in most cases. I tend to listen to American people closely when they talk because it’s the act of creating sound that I need to work on. I believe that by being able to master the syllables and their sounds, I can one day soon be like Lee’s Aunt Mary and speak in nothing but a “constellation of gorgeous sounds.”

In contrast to Lan Cao, Lee, and me, all of whom struggled in mastering the English language as immigrants to the U.S., Kenyan writer Ngugi Thiong’o has to adopt English due to the colonialist expansion that took over his country. Each of the three of us can use English any time we feel like it as long as we’re comfortable. Thiong’o is not as fortunate as us in that he and his people are to live under the oppression of the colonial laws and are being forced to speak English as their official language. Thiong’o allows the world to know about his country’s misfortune through his nonfiction work, *Decolonizing the Mind*. In this book-length essay the readers get to know about the injustice that interferes with the normal life of Thiong’o’s people. “Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught

speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school...The culprit was given corporal punishment...with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY.” After reading *Decolonizing the Mind*, I myself and also other immigrants are grateful for having the opportunity to live in a country where the natural rights of citizens are guaranteed and that the government does not work as the absolute ruler but the citizens’ representatives. Furthermore, knowing about the stable democratic government of our country, many foreign people wish to build their futures in America without knowing exactly what they’ll have to go through when they get to the destination. It’s we, the experienced immigrants, who know about it all: From the mockery of the public on one’s FOB identity to feeling pessimistic for not being able to catch up with the similarities real Americans share.

If someone asks to check out a book that contains all the history line of the Vietnamese immigration, there will be no such book, for the stories of immigrants have no endpoint. It’s endless just like how coffins are being placed in the cemetery every day. If the goal of fair and healthy citizenship is to assist and fight for the improvement among immigrants’ lives, then the work of the U.S. Immigrant and Customs Enforcement will never be enough. The life of an immigrant cannot be well built on his or her first day on the new land, unless she is a billionaire and Bill Gates the Second. The government can give us immigrant families support financially but not mentally and physically. It’s we ourselves who must endure all the obstacles and let each of them be a life lesson. It’s also part of our job to let the public know more about us through our writing and songs. If not, no one will know the “real” us beside the publicly given identity — FOBs. I’m a FOB, and therefore I feel the need to let people know about my true feelings not so that they will pity me but to understand that it’s not easy at all living as an immigrant and that sarcasm and unwanted abuse just make my life more miserable.

Reconnected

Tram Tran

My mp3 player comes with me everywhere I go. Every morning, before rushing out to my bus stop, I always make sure my mp3 player is in my back pack. I listen to it on the bus on the way to school. I listen to all sort of music that teens in America are listening to today, with one exception - country music. My favorite song right now is "Breathless" by a popular singer in the UK named Shayne Ward. I have it on repeat in my Mp3 player. In the summer of 2008, that mp3 player followed me half way around the world. I brought it with me on the trip back to Vietnam, thinking it could keep me company when I needed. It was my first time coming back to my hometown after eight years.

The first few days living in Vietnam were relatively hard for me. Taking a bath was a struggle. There were no showers, just a bucket of water, and I had to bathe in iced cold water! The burning hot weather is another reason why I wasn't comfortable in Vietnam. My family and I stayed at my grandparents' house in a small village called Suoi Nho, which mean *Grapes Lake* in English. It is also my hometown where I grew up. I always wondered why it was named "Grapes Lake," in spite of the fact that no grapes can be found there. Even though it is now the 21st century, many villages in Vietnam still do not have AC or other advanced technologies that we use back in America. I really thought I was going to die if I had to stay there for a month. I tried not to complain, but I guess my cousin, Vi, could tell that I was getting impatient with the heat. She suggested that we take a quick ride around in her motorcycle. I liked the idea. "Anything to feel cool again," I said happily.

As I flew down the road with my cousin, I took in the scenery around me. We passed by where my old house used to be, which is right next to a high school. So much stuff happened in that house. Back in the day, we sold food and school supplies to the students there. I remember my parents would wake up early to prepare everything. It would usually get really busy after school. The students and

their friends would sit in front my house and eat their *banh mi* (Vietnamese sandwich). I sort of figured it wouldn't be there any more, since we gave it to a family member when we left Vietnam. It had been almost 10 years. It's now occupied with some pottery business. From the view of a 17 year old, everything seemed different. My little town isn't feeling so big to me any more. I examined everything that was happening in that quick moment. Everything felt so foreign, yet familiar.

After inhaling a good amount of road dirt from the wind, I decided to come with my grandma to the one and only local market. This was the only place so far that looked exactly the same — crowded with people and animals. The fishy smell filled the air. Loud noises came from people trying to sell their food and shoppers negotiating with the seller. The honking and beeping sounds from the motorcycles made the market sound even louder. Walking through the small aisle, I felt so popular. I could feel all eyes were on me. "Is that your granddaughter?" a lady who sells fruits asked. "Yes, she came home from America," my grandmother politely replied. A smile spread across her face. I knew she was proud of me. Who knew a quick trip to the market could be so much fun. I wanted to get everything. My grandma bought a bunch of fresh fruits. I was excited to go home and eat it. It had been a while since the last time I ate Durian.

The electricity went off — it happens quite often. The fans weren't working. I was to the point of melting, because it was so hot. I couldn't stay in the house, so my three little cousins and I decided to hang out in my grandparents' backyard. I immediately grabbed my mp3 player, thinking it could help me forget the blazing heat. The backyard was filled with shade from bamboo trees. I sat right under one of them. Swiftly, I looked around. There were also a few dragon fruit and pineapple trees — a quick flashback from the past when my cousins and I would try to build a house from banana leaves in the grandparents' backyard. We were very close to each other. I didn't realize how much time had passed away. Everyone had grown up and moved away to the big cities. Some of my cousins, who are around my age, had already gotten married and had families of their own. My thought was quickly interrupted by one of the kids. Tuan shyly asked to see my mp3. I handed him my tiny red music player and showed him how to use it. "Do you listen to Bao Thy?" He asked. "Her new song just came out." I could see the excitement in his face as he looked through my play list. I was guessing she must be a current

famous singer in Vietnam. I blankly stared at him for a few seconds. “Do you have any Vietnamese music?” he continued. That question hit me like a thunderbolt. I didn’t know what to say or how to answer his question. A feeling of shame pounded in my stomach.

“No, but I can put some in there if you want,” I answered.

He excitedly announced a few songs that I had never heard of. He then handed me a piece of sugarcane. I didn’t care if it was dirty or not. I ate it anyways.

A few more hours had passed, still no electricity. This was the time when I realized my lack of appreciation for the AC back in the US. My three little cousins and I decided to play “*o an quan*” a Vietnamese traditional game, which is similar to Mancala, to pass the time. I used to play this simple little game when I was younger. The few drops of rain fell onto the chalk coal board we drew earlier on the ground. Then it got harder all of a sudden. My grandmother standing on the front porch, called us to come inside. I felt the rain pouring all over my head, and it felt so good.

My family and I stayed in Vietnam for about a month, yet it felt like a week. Time went by so quickly. I was having too much fun. A few days before we started packing up our things, I decided to come with my little cousin to the computer place nearby his house. It is the only place in town where the all youngsters come to play. Apparently, online chat is quite popular in Vietnam. With a few American coins, you can play with the computer for a few hours. I quickly downloaded all the songs that he wanted me to have. He was amazed at how fast my fingers moved on the keyboard.

For many years, I tried to be an American and adapt to the lifestyle of the American. It is hard to be an immigrant in a foreign country, so I tried my best to learn English. I ate American food and went to American schools. As time progressed, I slowly forgot who I really am – a Vietnamese girl. I lost touch not only with my family but also my birth place. My cousins and I continue to communicate through Yahoo Chat Messenger. Once in a while, they send me new songs from Vietnam. Until today, I still have those songs on my mp3 player. I became obsessed with them after leaving Vietnam. Bao Thy became one of my favorite singers, next to Shayne Ward. I even brought back a few of her DVDs and CDs. Every day, for about a month, I would put on the video and watch it over and over again...

He Never Said I'm Sorry

Wendy Williams

He never said I'm sorry
For all the years he has been gone.
"Since I was two, where were you?"
Fourteen years in prison, missing in action,
And he never said I'm sorry.

He never said I'm sorry
To my mother for beating her throughout her whole pregnancy with
me.
I hated you then, and I hate you now;
His clothes are big as if fitted for a fat person;
Running the streets, selling drugs and cheating
And he never even said I'm sorry.

He never said I'm sorry
When he came home in 2008.
He found a girlfriend and married within three months,
Put her before me and loved her more than me.
When he tried to be in my life like magic,
I didn't let him
Because of all the promises he broke
And all the lies he spoke.
I refused to speak to him,
Ignoring him constantly,
So he caught up with me
And his hands were like 20-pound weights.
He sucker-punched me like another man on the street.
His appearance was a dizzy stare, drinking liquor like it was water
And it was all because he realized he has a daughter
Who loves him unconditionally, and he didn't want to lose that.

But he never said I'm sorry.
He betrayed me,

Made me feel like I'm just another
African American child, fatherless.
He is the cause of society today,
And I don't blame it.
I tried to let him come back into my life,
But it's too late; he had a chance but made a mistake.
When I offered him another try,
He chose streets before family.

Dad, what kind of man are you
To never say
I'm sorry?

AFTERWORD

One Of The Three R's Is A 'W'

Kalamu ya Salaam

Reading, writing and arithmetic. How much do we do each day?

We can count our money, but that rarely requires more than simple addition and a whole lot of subtraction — dollars go out so much faster than nickels and dimes come in. Beyond making a deposit or paying for stuff we buy, we don't really use much math. So somebody tell me, why did I have to take Algebra II?

And given the choice between reading the book or watching the movie... well, you know, it's a lot easier to look at a movie for an hour than to read a book for fifteen minutes.

And what was that other thing? Oh, yeah, writing; well, I can sign my name. Do texting and Facebook count? If I'm not in school, I really don't need to write, do I?

.....

Do you journal, keep a diary, write poems to someone you like a lot, maybe even love? Perhaps you once wrote a story about flying to the land of Oo-blah-dee where all the women were beautiful and all the men never cheated. Only thing is, in order to get there you have to run through twelve rings of fire, swim across five rivers full of alligators, fight vampires at midnight without a flashlight, and... clean up your room (which, unfortunately, means you had to get out of bed) — oh, well, maybe next lifetime.

So what were we talking about again... oh, yeah, writing.

Students at the Center is serious about putting students at the center of the education process. We must begin to genuinely consider the lives and viewpoints of young people. In an SAC class you can get an 'A' for writing about what you know best, i.e. yourself: your experiences, your aspirations, even your fantasies and desires.

When we study the literature of others, we require our students to find out something about themselves. In this way we teach not only

grammar and other language skills, but more importantly we teach critical thinking and the inter-relatedness of human diversity.

When our students write from this perspective, everyone benefits. Obviously the reader learns about others, but the writer benefits even more because writing helps the author answer the three major questions of life: 1. Who am I? 2. What is the world? 3. How do I change, love or leave it? As a bonus, writing enables us to share our intimate answers to these tough questions not only with people today but also with readers for years and years to come. Writing can be our life after death.

In 21st century America, graduating from high school is widely viewed as a major step into adulthood. Most of us can now vote. Many of us begin living on our own outside of the supervision of parents. All of us make small and large life decisions: food, sex, clothes, finances, college, work, military. We make real choices.

Writing helps us identify the realities and repercussions of our choices, identify the desires we hope to fulfill, identify where and how we enter (and sometimes exit) different aspects and areas of society.

In order to write out our experiences and emotions, our perceptions and imaginations, we have to “find the words” that communicate those complexities — and that’s the rub about growing up: nothing is simple any more. Gone are the days when we could check “yes,” “no,” or “maybe” in the small boxes next to the major questions of the day.

While our individual responses may be particular to us, the larger truth is each of us has to respond to the same questions. Is our writing real? Are our words true to who we are and what we have experienced? Does our poem, essay or story have meaning for us and precisely what (and why) do we want to share with others?

Responses from classmates and peers tell us whether our writings successfully communicate our messages. Indeed, feedback also lets us know whether we actually had a message or whether we were simply sharing confusion. We teach that there is no simple, always and forever, right or wrong, one size fits all response to life questions. Things change and writing helps us identify both what is and what’s changing.

The acts of writing and sharing “encourage” and “enable” us. We learn that we can grasp and understand what is happening to and within us. We learn to appreciate our place and potential within our particular social settings. And we learn to communicate what we have learned.

Where previously we only perceived shadows, now we see the shadow, we see the puppets, we see the fire, we see ourselves looking at all of that, and we also learn the very important skill of sharing what we have learned.

SAC believes in social learning. We not only write; we also share. When we listen to and comment on the writings of others, we invariably learn about ourselves: how we are alike or unlike someone else, how others deal with some of the same issues we face, or even the sometimes startling fact that we are not the only ones dealing with what we thought were personal, intimate, and one-of-a-kind issues. Shared writing brings us together even as it also helps us define our differences.

Here are words from the graduating class of 2010, young people who are not only tomorrow’s leaders but who also are a newly emerging generation of today’s adults.

Let us throw our arms wide open and welcome them with a warm embrace. Let us listen to what they have to say, learn from what they have written, and give them feedback. Let us use this occasion to extend the dialogue of life.

Mother, father, family, friends: our children are grown. Let us take our next steps together as conscious human beings committed to creating a better and more beautiful world.

Co-director Students at the Center
Algiers — New Orleans, LA, April 2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to thank the families, schools, and communities that made the writing in this book possible. And thanks most of all to the student writers of the class of 2010 and the Students at the Center (SAC) class members from 1996 to 2010. As in all things of worth, the work produced by the high school graduates in *Next Steps* would not be possible without the writings of previous SAC class members and the families and friends that shape the lives of the class of 2010. Indeed, it was after students in classes at McDonogh 35, McMain, and Reed received copies of *Men We Love, Men We Hate* (SAC 2009) that seniors in those schools conceived of the idea for this book.

The writings in *Next Steps* were written, discussed, and revised in two distinct but related settings: 1) as part of SAC classes at three public high schools in New Orleans: McDonogh 35, McMain, and Reed and 2) in monthly writing workshops hosted by United Teachers of New Orleans (American Federation of Teachers Local 527). Sometime in the late fall, the workshops at the teachers' union hall switched from once to twice a month, at the request of student writers attending these workshops with teachers. Thank you to principals Philip White (McDonogh 35), Bridgette Frick (McMain), and Donald Jackson (Reed) and to United Teachers of New Orleans President Larry Carter for supporting students and teachers in their writing.

Write to Change, Andover Bread Loaf Writing Workshop, and the Bread Loaf Graduate School of English (directed respectively by our dear friends Dixie Goswami, Lou Bernieri, and Jim Maddox) have trained our teachers, taught courses about us using our materials, and provided professional and emotional support amid attacks both locally and nationally on public education systems that helped us produce this collection of writings. Community Book Center has always provided a home for SAC community workshops and an audience for our young writers: thank you Mama Jennifer Turner and Mama Vera Warren-Williams. Crescent City Peace Alliance and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies have both served as fiscal agents and programming partners in the early years of SAC. More recently The Renaissance Project and its executive director, Greta Gladney have provided much more than fiscal sponsorship and administrative support; they have stood shoulder to shoulder with us in ensuring that youth in New Orleans have a safe space to explore their lives and share their views.

Thank you especially to the student writers and high school graduates from McDonogh 35 (Ariel Burks, Britney Winfield, Dejonique Magee, Glenicia Welch, Jessica Thompson, Juanisha Moxley, Kiara Williams, Lashondra Thompson, Neshia Ruffins, Shanae Franklin, and Tiera Randolph); Eleanor McMain (Alisha Lewis, Arnold Burks, Brittany George, Chelsey Melancon, Chinonye Emezie, David Tran, Destiny Knatt, Huy Nguyen, Ireion Smith, Jennifer Le, Juliana Ratliff, Mack McGinnis, Minhvan Nguyen, Ngan Vu, Sidnie Jackson, Stephen Gladney, Thao Nguyen, and Tram Tran); and Sarah T. Reed (Andrew Nguyen, Antonio Williams, Ariel Estwick, Baralyn George, Derranique Jenkins, Edmond Coleman, Jasmine Robinson, Kabbrisha Bryant, Marquita Nash, Roachell Sterling, Russell Lopez, Sean Burrell, and Wendy Williams). Mathilde Nash, an exchange student at Math and Science High, participated with Students at the Center through teacher Judy Demarest and SAC staff member Brandon Early.

COLOPHON

Typeset in TheSerif, part of The Thesis font family, designed by Lucas de Groot, 1994.

Design and production by Big Tada Inc (www.bigtada.com)
with Ian Hewitt-Woods (www.ihwdesign.com)

SAC

Students
at the Center

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

Students at the Center (SAC) is an independent program that since 1996 has worked within public schools in New Orleans. The students of SAC participate through English and elective writing and social studies classes in their schools. We teach both regular and advanced core curriculum classes that are open to all students. In addition to the daily classes, since Hurricane Katrina, SAC graduates have worked as key staff members, serving as resource teachers in public school classrooms, organizers for youth involvement, and producers of youth media.

For more information on Students at the Center visit the following web sites or contact Jim Randels at jimrandelssac@earthlink.net

<http://www.sacnola.com/nextsteps/>

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/nola_voices/



EDITED BY *graduating seniors* Tiera Randolph (McDonogh #35),
Glenicia Welch (McDonogh #35), Ariel Estwick (Sarah T. Reed),
Chinonye Emezie (Eleanor McMain), AND STUDENTS AT THE CENTER STAFF