

The Mirror: How Writing is the Reflection of an Author's Emotions
The Power of Writing Therapy

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Artist Statement

The Writer

As an individual who suffers from major depressive disorder, my head and my heart aren't always connected. My head always tells me to keep moving. That if I ignore whatever is bothering me, and drown everything else out, I won't feel the emotions I am choking to breathe around. That if I bury the problem enough, it will eventually go away. My head reminds me that I was born into a community that prioritizes the appearance of strength but struggles with its own stability of mental health. That it is only a real problem if I talk about it. That it only becomes real if I speak it aloud. So, if I ignore it, with a pretty smile and cute bow on top, it will eventually go away.

My heart, however, is completely the opposite. My heart screams for me to feel, aches to be acknowledged. My heart breaks piece by piece when I ignore what it is desperately trying to get me to understand. It begs to be heard, to be felt, but most of all, to not be ignored. My heart reminds me that I want to break the generational curses, or more importantly, that I *need* to break the generational curses. That I need to feel now so that my future children will know all emotions are valid. That there is strength in feeling.

My heart will cripple me to the point where I cannot move if I avoid what my heart is telling me for too long, however, if my head reacts first, it will disconnect me from all emotions until my heart repairs itself which can make me emotionless for weeks on end. It's a constant battle that never ends. A war that can never be won. Until I found the loophole with writing.

Writing has always allowed me to feel connected to my emotions in the same way my emotions can make feel distant from myself. Writing is the bridge between my head and my heart, allowing me to talk about my feelings without saying them aloud. The first time I ever

experienced this was when I was nine. Too young to understand the world around me but old enough to feel emotions that didn't have words associated with it just yet. I had just learned that the person I had called my father, my entire life, wasn't my biological father and that there was a man, I had no idea of who was the other fifty percent of my DNA. No memories, just a picture of a man holding a tiny infant I could see held a resemblance to the man.

I was gutted. Ripped between feeling it all: neglected, abandoned, confused, depressed; or feeling nothing at all: numb, empty, desensitized, dead inside. For weeks, I switched between acting like nothing had happen at all, and not being able to get out of bed for school. Too torn up by the idea I just wasn't good enough for someone to love me. Wondering if I had been a boy, would he have stayed? If my mom and I hadn't built a bond from the womb, would he have loved me more? Question after question plagued me and it only got worse as I grew. Did my dad think of me differently now that I knew the truth? Did he secretly love me less due to me not being his bloodborne child?

These thoughts bothered me daily, but I didn't know how to verbalize them. Stuck between screaming and saying nothing at all. And so, I wrote them down. Disconnecting it from myself, and created a new character all together, Ana Marie harbored all the emotions I couldn't deal with personally. I wasn't struggling to breathe, she was. I wasn't hurting inside, she was. She was everything I was afraid to be and afraid to feel. She allowed me to understand everything I couldn't understand by myself. And because of that, things got better. I wasn't the problem. It wouldn't have mattered if I were born a boy and my dad didn't love me any less because we had chosen each other, building a bond that only few could understand. I was his daughter, regardless of what the results of my DNA had stated.

From then on, writing became the outlet. If I couldn't get my head and heart to agree, writing was their common ground. A way to feel without speaking it aloud. A way to separate myself from the problem until I could physically handle the reality. A truth from another perspective. Writing allowed me to feel through all moments of trauma. It was there when I lost the people closest to me because our loved ones don't live forever. It was there for all the times my body was made to feel like it wasn't my own, but most of all it was there to guide me back to myself when I grew lost, unsure of my place in the world.

Before I knew the words for it, writing therapy saved me and has continued to do so each and every day. Writing allows me to look into myself, reflect and understand my emotions without judgement. Writing relieves tension and emotions and helps establish self-control through understanding the situation apart from myself.

And I am not alone. For years, writing has become an outlet for so many others, both authors and patients alike because there is power in words. I see this in writers who have inspired my own work such as Edgar Allen Poe, Dr. Maya Angelou, and Agatha Christie. There's a special place in my heart for writers who don't hold themselves back. Writers who stay true to themselves and their truth through their writing. Writers who don't allow limitations on their imagination. Those are the writers who inspire me to do what I love while also helping others like writing has helped me.

The Vision

Through words we are able to connect. Whether with yourself or the readers you give your words too. When I first started this degree, I wasn't sure if I was making the right decision. I was afraid. It had been so long since I had allowed others to read my work or to even be given

the opportunity to be mentored in my craft. In truth, I had drifted from my path. Years prior, back in 2015 when I first started my undergrad degree, I double-majored in Creative Writing and Psychology with the end goal of using writing as a form of therapy for patients. However, in my first year I was violated by someone I trusted, and then with the cost of education, I wasn't able to complete my degree and dropped out at the end of 2016. I was devastated, unable to believe that I wouldn't be able to continue my education. I tried paying with credit cards, attempted to be qualified for loans, and had even tried joining the military armed forces in hopes that they would pay for the education I so desperately wanted. Nothing worked and so, I put the idea that I was meant to do anything worthwhile out of my head. In my eyes, and I hate to believe I thought this at one point, God had abandoned me. I wasn't good enough for him. He had filled my head with the idea that I was "gifted" and that I was supposed to help others yet how could I do that without any degree on top of what I had been through? I hated myself and I was sure, at the time, God did too.

It wasn't until 2019 that I was able to even consider going back to school. I had been working full time in different positions. I had worked as a salesclerk, a waitress, a caregiver in a nursing home, a receptionist in a hospital, and as a technical assistant for panels for the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP). And what I had encountered was that I was meeting individuals of all walks of life. I would have conversations with everyone, listen to their stories and what their lives were like. And they would tell me, "You are such a good listener" or "you would make such a great counselor." However, I was too invested in working now. There was no way I could see myself going back to a university while also working full time. I had grown up and was past the point of the "college experience." And that's when I learned I had the option to go online. An online education was much more affordable,

and I would be able to go at my own pace. I would have deadlines for certain assignments, but I could do them around my own schedule, not on a schedule the school would give me. And so, I thought, what did I have to lose? I enrolled full time in BA for Health and Wellness. Looking back, I wish I could tell my younger self that God had never abandoned me. That he had protected me and guided my focus. By going to school online, I had less distractions. I was flourishing while also taking my mental health in my hands and getting the help I knew I needed. By 2021, I was getting ready to graduate with my undergrad but also begin preparations for graduate school. I was unsure what to do. I thought maybe I should just get a MA in Public Health. It wasn't what I really wanted to do but I knew it was a degree I could use anywhere. But the school I was currently enrolled in wasn't accredited and so, I found Liberty University.

I was ecstatic to know a school like Liberty had an online program. The master's in public health was accredited and so I had prepared to apply. Until I seen a master's in creative writing. For the first time in a while, I felt a spark light up in myself again. I could see the future God had told me about in front of me once again. I could get a master's in creative writing if they accepted me and then get a master's in mental health counseling before going for my doctorate. I could feel my future in my grasp. But what if I wasn't good enough? What if my grades weren't good enough? I asked my mom what I should do, and she told me to pray about it. And so, I did.

I prayed for forgiveness for straying away. I had begun prayer again, but I had never apologized, and I wanted to make sure he knew I was sorry. And then I asked God what I should do. Was I good enough to even be considered? Was this the right path or was kidding myself? Would it just be safer to do public health? And ever so faintly, I felt and heard him say "*Trust in*

me". And so, I applied for the master's in creative writing. If I wasn't approved, I'd apply for the master's in public health and call it a day.

I created my portfolio and within three days, I was approved. I was filled with awe, and I knew from that moment, this was what I had been prepared to do. I thanked God that evening for believing in me even when I had given up on both of us. I prayed that he would continue to use me as his vessel. To show me how I was supposed to be used both spiritually and physically as I embarked on this journey. That if it was meant for me to do, he would continue to bless me on the journey I was meant to be on. And here we are.

These last two years have been everything I needed. Through this program my faith has grown, and I have homed in on my craft in a way that I never would have been prepared to take on when I first went off to college back in 2015. God knew his plan for me even if I didn't understand it myself. He had shown me what all my lessons leading up to this moment had been for, putting me right on the path we started in the very beginning. I found ways to better express myself but also learned the importance of my craft. Words are powerful and they can do more than many think possible. My vision is to show what writing can evoke, build, and change. That the therapy through writing is always to help us grow. We, as the writers (or even the patients who embark in writing therapy), see ourselves, or our problems, through a different lens when we put our words to paper. The negative emotion, or feeling, becomes outside of ourselves and allows us to view it separate from who we are but also, who we will become after.

My hybrid collection of work will have no "traditional" beginning or end. These are the pieces that are connected by the sole fact that they are meant for healing. Writing has taught me that your experiences are what you allow them to be. That you have the power to overcome and change the obstacles that are in your way. I have overcome some very dark moments in my life

because writing was the light to show me how to get back to safety. Through writing, I feel closer to God and am thankful he put this craft in my life to help guide me through what we call life.

So, whichever piece the reader decides to ingest, they will know pain but understand growth. They will know loss but also understand love. They will see and feel the destruction, but also rebirth brought through these words. I want to showcase that words are more than that. That through writing, we find healing, and we find God continuing to guide us to peace and salvation.

The Christian Scholar

This collection is important to me because I know I've been brought full circle by God himself. I have struggled with believing my dream could ever become a reality yet, here we are. I am closer than I ever saw possible as I begin this thesis and work towards my goal of helping others through the power of words. Second Corinthians 5:7 says, "For we live by faith, not by sight." Every moment, every struggle, every action has brought me to this moment. Though I may not have known the plan, God did, and I am so thankful that he never lost sight of my future even when I lost sight of myself.

When I found myself lost, and pulling away from God, writing brought me back to Him and in doing so, God brought me exactly where I was supposed to be when I was supposed to be there. I am here through trusting Him. My work, my writing, my spiritual connection has strengthened because I trusted that God's plan would never lead me astray. He has a vision for me, and I will continue to follow it, and Him, with my heart instead of my eyes.

Critical Paper

Reflection and Healing: The Problem versus the Writer

Introduction to Writing to Heal

When a writer separates the problem from themselves it builds a new perspective. It no longer becomes this giant emotion they are struggling to understand. In this case, it is now written down and in front of them. Words are healing. Dr. James Pennebaker, a psychologist on the forefront of this research, says, “By writing, you put some structure and organization to those anxious feelings [...] It helps you to get past them” (American Psychological Association, 2002). To coincide with this statement, Dr. Joshua Smyth who is another psychologist on the forefront of this research says, “To tap writing's healing power, people must use it to better understand and learn from their emotions” (American Psychological Association, 2002). The art of writing, as a whole can be and is used to reflect and better understand oneself. In fact, writing can allow an individual to understand their emotions better, helping them to find the path to begin healing. Nonfiction and poetry, specifically, are two genres in which an individual may write their way towards healing. When a person writes about the negative things that have happened to them, the dark things happening in their life, or even about the raw things they may truly want to forget they release it into another format.

In his book, *Reasons to Stay Alive*, Matt Haig, a writer, writes “Because it was, in part, through reading and writing that I found a kind of salvation from the dark” (Haig, 2016). Richard Gold and Elizabeth Jordan explain in their research “Grief, Poetry and the Sweet Unexpected,” “there is a commonality in the way people experience and respond to pain” (Gold & Jordan, 2018). We all experience happiness but, we all experience pain as well and, unfortunately, only one of these is seen as acceptable to discuss in public. If there isn't discussion, there can be no

healing. If we don't find a way to understand ourselves or our emotions, there can be no growth. This is why writers utilize both nonfiction work and poetry as therapeutic tools to heal themselves but also to connect with their readers.

Writing Therapy and The Spectrum of Emotions Defined

To understand why writing therapy and the spectrum of emotions tie together so effortlessly, it is important to understand them separately. "Writing therapy, or 'expressive writing,' is a form of expressive therapy in which clients are encouraged to write about their thoughts and feelings – particularly those related to traumatic events or pressing concerns – to reap benefits such as reduced stress and improved physical health," (The Human Condition, 2021). But to understand fully, we also need to understand expressive therapy. Expressive therapy is the use of the creative arts as a form of therapy. With expressive therapy the creative arts, such as writing, are used to help process negative feelings and traumatic events that maybe hard to discuss. And the beauty of expressive writing is that it can be defined by any genre. However, for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on nonfiction and poetry. Two very different forms of expressive writing that can be used to understand the same problem.

And this is what it means for emotions and how it relates to writing therapy. The definition of emotion is a natural feeling that comes from one's position in life, mood, or relationships with those around them. The reason this is important to understand is because it is a reminder that just like there are positive emotions that we want to absorb and put forth into the world, there are also negative emotions and though we might not want to put them out and into the world, we want them outside of ourselves. Negative emotions like trauma (defined as: "a deeply distressing or disturbing experience"), or PTSD, which stands for post-traumatic stress

disorder (defined as: “a condition of persistent mental and emotional stress occurring as a result of injury or severe psychological shock, typically involving disturbance of sleep and constant vivid recall of the experience, with dulled responses to others and to the outside world”), are not emotions we consciously want to keep in. But to keep from making those emotions our identity, we need to find a way to separate ourselves from them. This is why writing therapy, and the spectrum of emotions tie together so well. Poetry is emotional and nonfiction allows for the writer to reflect (whether it be with an experience or even with themselves), therefore encompassing the necessary attributes for writing therapy. So, by using nonfiction writing to separate the problem from the writer or by using poetry to create an entirely new perspective, the process to heal becomes easier. This is what creates “self” from “experience,” allowing boundaries to be made for the mental well-being of the writer while also exploring new avenues from “victim” to “victor.”

Writing Therapy in the Works

And it works. Current studies are being done every day. In an article called, “*Using Writing as Therapy: Finding Identity*,” by Pauline Cooper, a study was done to explore the use of writing as it pertains to therapy. “This case study was one of 12 client stories from qualitative doctoral research (Cooper 2008, Cooper 2013). The purpose of this practice analysis is to show how Linda (pseudonym), a mental health service user diagnosed with schizophrenia and depression, was able to regain a sense of occupational identity. Working with the author/therapist in a Using Writing as Therapy (UWaT) group, she utilized eight containers that UWaT provides (containers [c] 1–8, see Table 1)” (Cooper, 2014). The conclusion: *Linda* was able to regain her identity through the process of UWaT.

In another article called, “*Writing Therapy for Posttraumatic Stress: A Meta-Analysis*” by Arnold A.P. van Emmerik, Albert Reijntjes, and Jan H. Kamphuis, an analysis was done to find the efficacy of writing therapy for posttraumatic stress and comorbid depressive symptoms by using both structure and unstructured strategies. The conclusion: “Writing therapy is an evidenced-based treatment for PTS and constitutes a useful treatment alternative for patients who do not respond to other evidence-based treatments. Internet adaptations of writing therapy for PTS may be especially useful for reaching trauma survivors in need of evidence-based mental health care who live in remote areas or who prefer to retain their anonymity” (Emmerik, Reijntjes & Kamphuis, 2012).

The last article I’d like to mention is called “The Forgiveness Interview Protocol: A Narrative Therapy Writing-Process Model for the Treatment of Moral Injury” by Desmond C. Buhagar. Inside this article it states,

“During psychotherapy assessments clinicians may recognize that some of their injured and traumatized clients may be wrestling with issues related to a lack of forgiveness linked to Moral Injury (MI). This paper presents the Forgiveness Interview Protocol (FIP), a narrative therapy writing-process model for the treatment of Moral Injury, drawing upon the philosophical work of Margaret Holmgren: “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons” (1993) [...] The FIP utilizes three distinct theoretical and clinical disciplines to arrive at a semi-structured interview intended for mental health counseling, and religious and spiritual care” (Buhagar, 2021).

What they found in the study is that writing could be used as way to forgive oneself after a moral injury over time. It says, “The FIP is intended for collaborative and dialogical use with clients

and not simply for the rapid alleviation of chronic distress concerns and symptoms. While immediate therapeutic benefits may certainly be gained for clients using the FIP, its primary goal is to facilitate a depth restoration of clients' intrapsychic environment, the reestablishment of internal homeostasis, and finally, a means of reengagement with others and the world," (Buhagar, 2021).

The Writer Versus the Negative Emotions

Negative emotions such as depression or trauma can have an extremely negative effect on the body. This is because unexpressed negative emotions can become a part of a person's identity when not handled properly, therefore, the negative emotions can develop a significant impact on the person's health and well-being. In Sara Rowe's article "*Finding Healing Through Forgiveness*" it states,

Unforgiveness harbors the negative emotions of hatred and anger toward someone who has harmed us. Such strong negative emotions can have an impact not only on our emotional state, but also our physical state. Holding on to these emotions causes the body to be in a constant state of high anxiety, which releases the stress hormones of adrenaline and cortisol. When the levels of these stress hormones are consistently high, a number of health concerns can result, including problems with the heart, sleep, digestion, and depression (Rowe, 2012).

And even if the mind doesn't remember, the body doesn't forget. Negative emotions like trauma, depression, post-traumatic stress can be easily triggered when not properly processed by the writer. Trauma expert, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, discusses this in his book "*The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*." In it he states,

Long after a traumatic experience is over, [the body] may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilize disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones. This precipitates unpleasant emotions, intense physical sensations, and impulsive and aggressive actions. These posttraumatic reactions feel incomprehensible and overwhelming (van der Kolk, 2012).

This shows that even after the traumatic event has passed, the body can be easily triggered if not cared for properly, no matter the time that has been created between the event and the trigger (“when traumatized people are presented with images, sounds, or thoughts related to their particular experience, the amygdala reacts with alarm” (van der Kolk, 2012)).

These negative emotions can lead to other negative impacts on an individual. Suicide falls within the top ten leading causes of death in the United States and is also the second leading cause of death in individuals between the ages of 10 to 34 years old. The WHO (World Health Organization) believes “90 percent of all suicide victims have some kind of mental health condition--often depression or substance abuse” (American Psychological Association, 2006).

This is why it comes around full circle. As I’ve stated before, it is important for the person to be able to separate themselves from the problems or issues they might be dealing with. This is how writing therapy comes into play. Joan Didion said it best, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means” (Didion, 2021). When an individual writes it is no longer a part of them. It now becomes its own entity to work with. For example, let’s use Edgar Allan Poe. As most writer know, Edgar Allan Poe was an American writer and poet born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809 and died in Baltimore, Maryland in 1849. A man of many words who had a giant impact on literature as he wrote many works from his

own personal struggles. Let's take the poem "Alone" by Edgar Allan Poe to exam. It says in the first four lines:

*From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—*

(Poetry Foundation, 1993)

This poem is a first person narration. Within the first four lines he talks about how different he was from the other children around his age. Already he is noticing that he doesn't see how other children see or that he isn't interested in the same things other children are also interested in. That his *passions* were not the same as other children his age. That he, as the speaker, is different and feels alone due to this. Then he writes:

*From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—*

(Poetry Foundation, 1993)

In these next four lines, there is a sense of acceptance. A sense of understanding that being different or loving differently is not a bad thing. As the narrator continues, there is a noticeable shift or transition in his words. Now, the narrator has realized that because he is different, he sees, understands, and enjoys the world differently. He writes:

*Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn*

*From ev'ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still—
From the torrent, or the fountain—
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that 'round me roll'd
In its autumn tint of gold—
From the lightning in the sky
As it pass'd me flying by—
From the thunder, and the storm—
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view*

(Poetry Foundation, 1993)

Edgar Allan Poe's first person narration / narrator has reached acceptance at the end of this poem, both the good and bad of himself. The person accepts his difference, and he allows it to flourish throughout the rest of the poem toward the end.

Another example of a writer who used writing therapy to reflect and deal with personal trauma or issues is Dr. Maya Angelou's "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." The book follows her life from the age of three years old to age sixteen, "recounting an unsettled and sometimes traumatic childhood that included rape and racism" (Wightman, 2019). This, as we know, is a very traumatic experience in itself. Though, through reading this autobiography by Dr. Maya Angelou, she is never portrayed as a victim. She is seen as a victor. An individual that overcame many traumatic experiences, such as: racism, molestation, threats to her loved ones, etc., and was

still able to discuss them later on in life and able to prevail. “After the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Angelou was inspired by a meeting with writer James Baldwin and cartoonist Jules Feiffer to write *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a way of dealing with the death of her friend and to draw attention to her own personal struggles with racism” (Wightman, 2019).

Judgment Free Zone

But all victors still need to feel safe. When an individual needs an outlet, a judgment free zone is necessary. Many times, it is hard for a person to open up if they do not feel as though they have a safe space to do so. The definition of a “safe space” is: “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm” (Dictionary.com, 2005). When a writer needs a safe space to understand herself deeper or to deal with grief or traumatic events, writing can create that outlet for her. Genres like nonfiction or poetry can offer that judgment free zone they need to begin the course toward healing. For this, I would like to use myself as an example. As a writer myself, when I am feeling stressed or triggered by an event that has happened in my past, I turn to writing out my feelings. Whether that is a need to reflect on how something is making me feel (nonfiction) or a need to allow my emotions flow freely (poetry), I get to choose how it happens. I get to feel in control of a situation that was against my will or better judgment. I get to choose the setting of where I write, what I write, and how I write it. There is a sense of safety, I feel, when I put the words on the page versus speaking the words aloud. There is no judgment because it is just me, the paper, and the pen. In this space, I am able to regulate whatever it is I am feeling through writing.

This is a level of comfort and security that a person looks for in a safe space. It is important for individuals to find a judgment free zone. Whether within their own space or amongst their peers, a judgment free zone is needed to prosper. An article was written called “*Expressive writing in early breast cancer survivors*” by Melissa A. Craft, Gail C. Davis, & René M. Paulson. In this article the authors discuss how a study was done on whether or not writing therapy could improve the quality of life for early breast cancer survivors. The method was as followed:

“Participants (n=120) were randomized into one of four groups: a control group (no writing) or one of three expressive writing groups: breast cancer trauma, any self-selected trauma and facts related to breast cancer. Participants wrote 20 minutes a day for 4 consecutive days. Their quality-of-life was measured, using the ‘Functional Assessment of Cancer Therapy-Breast Cancer Version’, at baseline and at 1 month and 6 months after writing. Paired t-tests, multivariate analysis of variance and multiple regression were used to analyze the data of the 97 participants who completed the journaling assignment and at least the first assessment, collected in 2006. Intention-to-treat analysis was used.”

(Craft, Davis, & Paulson, 2013).

The result showed that expressive writing was extremely beneficial to breast cancer survivors. That writing about their own breast cancer, writing about breast cancer trauma in general, or even facts related to breast cancer improved the survivor’s quality of life. This is important because it proves the power that writing therapy can create and hold. These breast cancer survivors not only found their own voices in a situation they have no control over, but they were also able to find community through their words, realizing that they were not alone in

their own struggles and doubts even though it may have felt like they were due to the impact of their own personal negative emotions and thoughts.

The Mirror Within the Pages

Once the effort of writing therapy has begun, then the transformation toward healing can begin. This idea is explained beautifully through the article “*Writing Your Way Through Feelings: Therapeutic Writing for Emotion Regulation*” by Merlyn Sargunraj, Himani Kashyap, & Prabha S. Chandra. In this article it states:

This case report presents the use of therapeutic writing for emotion regulation, as an adjunct to psychotherapy. The client had a long history of emotionally unstable personality disorder and persisting clinical risk and socio-occupational dysfunction despite several previous stints of psychotherapy. In addition to thrice-weekly in-person sessions, structured daily writing tasks were designed for her, with suitable probes and questions postulated to help with specific aspects of emotion regulation. Following four weeks of intervention (30 writing sessions and 17 in-person sessions), improvements in emotion regulation were noted [Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale scores 128 (pre) and 93 (post); reappraisal sub scale of Emotion Regulation Questionnaire 11 (pre) and 23 (post)]. The benefits and putative processes involved in such a writing intervention as experienced by this client are discussed. Despite limitations to generalizability from case report findings, therapeutic writing shows promise as an adjunct to psychotherapy in addressing emotion regulation.

(Sargunraj, Kashyap, & Chandra, 2021)

When the writer is able to write out their emotions and look back over them to reflect, they are able to improve their wellbeing. And the best part about this process is that each writer is able to go at their own pace. There is no specified time frame because each writer is different. For some, writing it down and reading back over can create a sense of peace that their feelings are no longer balled up inside of themselves whereas for others, an extended period of time (like this study) is needed to improve an individual's wellbeing.

Conclusion

Writing therapy is a way for writers, and other individuals alike, to reflect on their own personal struggles and emotions. It is a way for a writer to understand themselves better and to improve their own emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing. When an individual harbors negative emotion and is unable to find a way to release them from their body, they run the risk of other ailments taking control of their wellbeing. However, by using writing therapy as an outlet, individuals (such as writers, patients, or normal everyday people struggling with negative emotions) are able to release the negativity from themselves into a more tolerable entity: the paper in front of them.

Annotated Bibliography

American Bible Society. (1986). 2 Corinthians 5:7. In *The holy bible: Containing the old and new testaments; translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently com*

- Second Corinthians 5:7 is a bible verse that states “For we live by faith, not by sight.” This verse was used in the “Christian Scholar section” to show the correlation between the verse and the scholar.

Cooper, P. (2014). Using Writing as Therapy: finding identity. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 77(12), 619–622. <https://doi.org/10.4276/030802214X14176260335345>

- This article is a case study that was used to understand how writing could be used as therapy. In the study a female patient who was suffering from schizophrenia was used as the subject. By the end of the study the woman had significantly improved and that writing therapy enabled a positive cognitive change in the patient.

Craft, Davis, G. C., & Paulson, R. M. (2013). Expressive writing in early breast cancer survivors. *Journal of Advanced Nursing.*, 69(2), 305–315. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2012.06008.x>

- In this article, a study was conducted on early breast cancer survivors and how expressive writing could improve their quality of life. Participants wrote 20 minutes a day for 4 consecutive days. It was proven that expressive writing was recommended for the early breast cancer survivors. It was shown that it did improve the quality of life of the patients.

Dictionary.com. (2005). *Safe space definition & meaning*. Dictionary.com. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/safe-space>

- This is the definition of safe space.

Didion, J. J. (2021, March 9). *Joan Didion: Why I write*. Literary Hub. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://lithub.com/joan-didion-why-i-write/>

- In this article Joan Didion discusses her reasons for writing. She discusses her reasons for writing. She states how she writes to know what she’s thinking, to know what she is looking at, what she sees and what it means. She also writes to know what she wants but also what she fears.

Haig, M. (2016). *Reasons to stay alive*. Canongate.

- This nonfiction book is “Reasons to Stay Alive” by Matt Haig. In this book Matt Haig discusses his struggle with depression.

Meyers, L. (2000, December 1). World Mental Health Day emphasizes the link between suicide and mental illness. *Monitor on Psychology*, 37(11).
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/dec06/healthday>

- In this article it talks about the potential correlation between suicide and mental illness and how it was discussed at the event for World Mental Health Day. One of the key points that were brought to this event was that “mental illness is a major risk factor for suicide.” There is an estimation of 90 percent of all suicide victims suffering from some sort of mental health condition.

Murray, B. (2002, June 2). *Writing to heal*. *Monitor on Psychology*. Retrieved February 11, 2023, from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jun02/writing>

- In this article, Bridget Murray discusses how writing can heal. She discusses that by helping people manage and learn from negative experiences, writing strengthens their immune systems as well as their minds. This is shown throughout studies done throughout different test subject groups (i.e., HIV/AIDS patients, asthma, and rheumatoid arthritis patients, etc.)

Nichols, H. (2019, July 4). *The top 10 leading causes of death in the United States*. *Medical News Today*. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/282929>

- This article discusses the top 10 causes of death in the US. Amongst the top ten is suicide. It is a possibility that an individual who dies by suicide may have lived with some form of a mental health condition.

Poe, E. A. (1993). *"Alone" by Edgar Allan Poe*. Poetry Foundation. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46477/alone-56d2265f2667d>

- This is Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Alone.” This poem was being used as analysis for this thesis.

Rowe. (2012). Finding healing through forgiveness: according to the National institutes of Health, “psychological stress can facilitate the growth and the spread of cancer.” Instead of harboring negative emotions, why not let those hard feelings go and experience a healthier mind and body? Sara Rowe explains why--and how--to unleash the power of forgiveness in your life. *Vibrant Life.*, 28(3).

- In this article we learn how emotions can affect the body. Rowe states how holding onto negative emotions (such as unforgiveness) can cause the body to be in a constant state of anxiety in high quantities, causing the release of cortisol and adrenaline which are stress hormones. Genuine forgiveness can help with healing because it helps with a higher quality of life.

Sargunraj, Kashyap, H., & Chandra, P. S. (2021). Writing Your Way Through Feelings: Therapeutic Writing for Emotion Regulation. *Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Mental Health.*, 8(1), 73–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40737-020-00198-1>

- In this article it talks about how a lack of emotion regulation can be the cause of other psychiatric disorders and looks into if writing can help with emotion regulation alongside psychotherapy. It was determined that therapeutic writing may have potential advantages in regulating emotions.

Van der Kolk. (2014). *The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* Viking.

- In this article Van der Kolk studies post-traumatic stress disorder's effect on the human body. Van der Kolk makes the connection that victims of trauma can experience the traumatic memory even if they are no longer in that specific situation. This is why even when individuals return from deployment / war the sound of fireworks or loud noises can trigger them.

van Emmerik, A. A. P., Reijntjes, A., & Kamphuis, J. H. (2012, December 22). *Writing therapy for posttraumatic stress: A meta-analysis - JSTOR.* *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics.* Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48515268>

- In this article we get to see how writing therapy can help alleviate posttraumatic stress. The methods used were both structured and unstructured strategies. What was learned was that writing therapy helped in a significant amount, reducing both PTS and depressive symptoms.

Wightman, J. (2019). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* work by Angelou. *Encyclopædia Britannica.* Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/I-Know-Why-the-Caged-Bird-Sings>

- This article discusses the reasons behind why Maya Angelou wrote “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”. This article by Juliet Wightman gives the synopsis of the book but also discusses the deeper meaning of Maya Angelou's biography. This article also discusses how Angelou was able to confront traumatic events through her writing while also evolving into her identity of what an African American Woman meant to her.

This Work is Dedicated to the Following:

My thesis director, Professor Anna Anderson, for holding my hand and guiding me to the finish line.

My thesis reader, Professor Heather Paul, for providing the insight I didn't consider.

My parents for always believing in me regardless of if I believed in myself or not.

My siblings for providing the laughter in my darkest moments.

My partner in life, Chace Washington, for keeping me grounded whenever I fly to close to the sun.

My former professor and longtime friend, Glen Retief, for always believing that I'd make it back to this program. You were right.

But most of all, I'd like to thank God for gifting me the opportunity to voice my inner soul into words.

I am so lucky and thankful for all of you.

Acknowledgment Letter

To my graduating class and professors,

I want to start off by saying: thank you. Thank you for being here on this road with me. Thank you for the kind words yet strong critiques. Thank you for your patience and your resilience these last two years as you took in the words that were closer to my heart than I could be sometimes. Whether you would like to believe it or not, I am here with the finish line in sight because of all of you. I am no fool to believe I did this all on my own and though I have had immense help from my family and significant other, nothing can take away or be compared to all of you who have also helped me along the way. So, when I say thank you, I truly mean it.

Our minds can be some of our darkest, or most beautiful, places as writers and though our loved ones will try to help, they will not understand the way your writer peers will. They won't understand the agony of reliving painful moments as we write them across pages or the thrill of reflection as we think back to times as if we ourselves are time machines, allowing ourselves to enjoy sweet moments that only we know of. They won't understand the connections we make with our characters, the love/hate relationship with our world building, or the sorrow and wept tears when a character dies at our own hands for the greater good. The emotions we experience will only be experienced by the ones like us and therefore the relationships I have built with each and every one of you has been necessary, if not vital, for my growth as a writer trying to one day end up on the very shelves that invited us to a world, we were destined to be a part of.

I like to think that all of us meeting was fate. That somehow our paths were meant to intertwine, during this program. Not only to strengthen our writing but also to help us grow as individuals because, at least for me, I almost didn't come here. I almost didn't apply for this program even though my heart screamed for the chance to write again like I had before, to create

something out of nothing like I had use to before. I had originally thought to follow something “practical.” Something that could be easily translated into the corporate world or matched my bachelor’s degree of Health and Wellness. But I remember how my eyes lit up seeing a master’s program for Creative Writing. How my heart skipped a beat as if it were a real love at first sight seeing the major, I truly wanted to have a masters in. My dream job was back in sight.

And then I saw the requirements. My heart sank into the pit of my stomach. It asked for a 3.0 GPA and a portfolio of at least 2,500 words. I hadn’t received a 3.0 for my bachelors and I hadn’t written much to know what to submit to show that I was serious about this program. I wanted this, just as badly as I had wanted air yet, I had said I would do a master’s in public health simply to match my bachelor’s degree and seem more cohesive with my choices, but my heart wasn’t in it. So, I asked my mother what she thought I should do.

“Mom, I don’t know what I should do. I really want to be in this program, but I may not even qualify to be in the program since my GPA is below 3.0 and I have no idea what to put in my portfolio. Am I even making the right decision? I don’t know-.”

“Tamia, relax. Pray on it. If you’re meant to be in it, regardless of your GPA, you’ll be in there.”

“But what if they say no?” I replied.

“Then that isn’t your path right now.”

I nodded, prayed on it, and began to get to work, planning for all possible outcomes. I would apply where my heart was, the creative writing program and if they said no, I would get a master’s in public health like I had originally planned. I’m happy I applied.

These last two years were never a walk in the park, but they have been wonderful, challenging my mind in ways I never knew it could and I’m thankful the for the experiences I

will have to follow. You all have helped me grow and get a sense of who I am through my writing. This is a debt that can never be filled.

My journey may not be over, but this chapter is closing. So, incase our paths do no cross again, goodbye, continue to write from your hearts but most of all thank you.

Author's Note:

This creative manuscript is a combination of prose and poetry. There is a back and forth nature as the prose piece is followed by its poem counterpart. Prose allows for reflection while poetry allows an emotional perspective to breathe.

I hope that by following the back and forth nature of this work, you will witness the beauty that can be found in words.

Because there was Darkness...

Living Chromosomes

Age: 19.

The television watched us as we conversed about family in front of the screen. My siblings were on the couch, as my mother and I sat in opposing chairs. I mindlessly scrolled through Facebook when the conversation switched to one I hadn't been prepared for.

“Well then, how is Grandma Naj our grandmother?” my sister asked.

My finger paused as I looked up from the glowing screen of my phone to my mother. However, it was only to see her looking back at me. We knew one day we'd have to tell them the truth. That it wouldn't be a secret forever. It couldn't.

My mother took a deep breath, lowered the television volume, and said “Well, she's Tamia's biological grandmother.”

Memories of when I first asked, began to play in my head.

+

9.

“What does biological mean?” I asked my mother again for the thousandth time this week. We were sitting in the car this time, the warmth from the leather seats seeping into our skin. I had planned it perfectly this time. She was in a good mood and both my siblings had fallen asleep in their car seats on the ride home.

She looked over at me, as she normally did, and repeated the same answer, as she normally had. “Look it up.”

“But I don't know how to spell it, I'm nine,” I whined, “Why can't you just tell me? How is Grandma Naj my biological grandmother?”

She sat there quietly; her lips pressed tightly together as if they were holding back a secret. And unbeknownst to me, they were.

However, frustrated, I let it go as I'd normally had before. There wasn't much of a point in trying to continue the conversation. My mother had made up her mind and she wasn't going to budge on it.

Upset, I got out the car and raced to the front door as my mom got both of my siblings out of their car seats. I unlocked the front door, entered inside, and went straight to my room. I closed my door and dropped my book bag by my desk, changed out of my usual school uniform, white polo, and navy slacks, and began my homework. I sat with my math assignment in front of me, but the word "biological" playing over and over again in my head.

I remember being so frustrated. So irritated that she was making such a big deal about this one word. Any other time if I had struggled my mom would at least give me a hint. Guide me in the right direction so that I could then find it on my own. But this time was different. She didn't want me to find this word. And it made me so angry. However, looking back, it was genius. She had bought herself an immense amount of time. With my father overseas, I had no one else I felt comfortable enough to ask and so eventually days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. It wasn't until that summer when my aunt, who was only a year and a half older than me, had told me without hesitation. Taylor and my grandmother were visiting from California and Taylor had developed the sense of loving to be seen. It made her feel good when she had the answers someone else had been looking for, especially her niece. I had decided to use it to my advantage.

"Taylor, what does biological grandmother mean?" I asked as we sat in my room. We laid on the beige colored carpet in front my bed, playing with toys as most kids did at our age.

“It means to be your grandma by blood,” she replied.

“Oh,” I responded before becoming quiet. I remember being more confused than I had been before asking her. How could she be my grandmother by blood? My grandma was my maternal grandmother, my Grandma Karen was my paternal grandmother, so how could Grandma Naj fit into the equation?

I was lost and unsure how to bring this newfound information up. I hadn’t learned the word on my own, but I now knew what it meant. More days turned into weeks and more weeks turned into months before I finally gathered the courage to bring my question to my mother again. It was late, a week after my tenth birthday and the first night of a full moon.

I remember preparing myself as I walked to her room. I was so nervous as I knocked on her closed door.

“Come in.”

I took a deep breath and entered slowly. I remember her looking up at me from one of her nighttime reads, her lamp emitting a soft glow throughout her room.

“I know what biological means,” I spat out as if it were word vomit.

“What does it mean?” she asked. She closed her book and set it on her nightstand. She was fully listening now.

“It means to be by blood.”

She thought to herself before patting the space next to her and without hesitation, I crawled into it. I could feel that I was finally going to get the answers I had wanted so badly.

“You’re right, biological does mean to be by blood so Grandma Naj is your grandmother by blood.”

“But how? If Grandma is your mom and Grandma Karen is daddy’s mom how is Grandma Naj my grandma?”

I remember the tears that welled up in her eyes as she tried to get rid of the lump lodged in her throat. When she opened her mouth to speak, words I could never imagine escaped her lips. I remember being confused and not understanding her words. They were foreign to me, creating a whole new world I never knew existed. I remember that heart wrenching feeling. It was cold and malicious, not caring about my age. My young mind couldn’t wrap itself around the words in front of me. The thoughts “What had I done to make him leave?” and “Why hadn’t I been good enough?” played over and over in my mind like a broken record player I couldn’t turn off.

“He was young,” she finished.

I remember being choked up and not having right words to describe what I was feeling in that moment. The only thing I could muster were tears because now there was a new piece of myself that I never knew existed with a whole new set of questions that couldn’t be explained. My mother pulled me close to heart and did the only thing that made sense. She held me as I cried myself to sleep.

+

12.

“Hello?” he spoke. The cellphone sat on speaker in the center of the table.

I remember how hard my heart fell in my chest the first time I’d heard his voice. I was twelve, sitting in the dining room with my mom and the person I had called my dad my entire life. Three years of denial flooded around me. He was a person. Not a cruel joke, but an actual person with a heartbeat. This man was the other fifty percent of my DNA.

“She’s here,” my mom spoke as the words lumped up in my throat. I remember how dry the air tasted in my mouth as I tried to speak. The way my silent tears had felt just as cold as the marble table I sat at. I had thought I was prepared to speak to him, but I just wasn’t. This was bigger than I had even imagined.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wish I could give you a better answer, but I was young, and I wasn’t ready to be a father. It’s not your fault. I was young.”

+

13.

“She knows, Enaj,” my mother replied. We were outside my house, my mom, grandmother, and me. The words spilled from my mother and hung between us like its essence depended on it. The February brisk air was thick around us with leftover snow piled to the side.

“She does?” She whipped her head toward me, a look of awe across her face.

I nodded.

“Well, I just wanted to make sure it was known I didn’t tell her. I addressed him as my friend, didn’t I?” she looked over at me again. I nodded. “Oh, I’m so glad you know now. He wanted to be in your life, Tamia.”

“No, you wanted him to be in her life,” my mom responded.

Grandma Naj looked at her as if she had physically struck her. Words began to fly between them as my grandmother spouted stories I knew weren’t true. If he had wanted me so badly, he would’ve tried to be there.

“Oh, stop it, Tamica,” my grandmother spoke back to my mom.

“He was young,” she replied. “But so was I.”

+

13.

“This is him,” my mom stated as she pulled out the picture from behind a picture of me in my baby album. I had his nose and skin complexion but nothing more. I looked like my mother. I touched the picture, my fingers grazing over his face as if it would bring me closer to what I didn’t know about myself. I remember the tears that welled up in my eyes and the thoughts of “what if” playing in my head again. I wondered what he smelled like and what his eyes would say if we ever met again with me remembering. I wondered if he’d pull me into a hug as if he had lost a part of himself or if he’d stare with the same look of confusion and wonder that I would have.

“Can I rip them?”

She paused before saying “Will it make you feel better?”

I looked up at her and nodded. In that moment I would’ve said anything to make those pictures disappear. I remember shredding those pictures piece by piece only to cry later and feel exactly the same the next morning.

+

14.

I took the knife out of the kitchen drawer quietly, making sure not to make any suspicious noise. My mental stability was crashing as I struggled to make sense of the world. I remember thinking to myself, that this would be the last time. That I was going to stop and that I was only doing this to stop the nagging voices inside my head because I was so tired of hearing everything was my fault. I was the problem. That I was the reason he didn’t stay. I was unlikeable and better off dead. It drove me insane and eventually I began to believe it. I believed if I had been born a boy, he would have stayed. If I were a better student, than I already was, he would like me more.

For every little nag, it was another slice inside my soul, bleeding me from the inside out. I still wish, to this day, I'd found a better outlet when I was younger. I remember feeling so alone and accepting any love to be good because if they loved me than I had to be good enough. I remember when the scars started piling up and a "friend" told me of better places to hide them. I remember the doctors questioning me in my visits even when I'd gone for something else.

"How did you get these scars?" the doctor asked as she turned over my arm. I'd forgotten to wear a long sleeve that day.

I took a glance at my mother who hadn't known and said "When I was at school a couple of my friends, and I were messing around, and I scraped it on the brick wall as I was walking in." I was always a terrible liar, but it was the lie I had so I stuck with it.

The doctor didn't buy it like my mom had. She turned to my mother and said, "Does your daughter have a habit of cutting herself?"

I remember how quickly my heart had skipped a beat in my chest. The feeling of shame washed over me as my mom responded with "No, she wouldn't do that."

"Are you sure?" the doctor continued, "The only reason I ask is because if you look here, the scars are a little *too* neat."

"I'm sure," my mom responded.

"Alright then, I will be right back," she smiled before leaving.

My mom turned to me and said, "Let me see."

Hesitantly, I showed her my arm again.

She looked it over and said, "She's right."

Bile burned at the back of my throat as I tried desperately not to vomit in the middle of the doctor's office.

She looked up at me and said “If you are, you need to stop. We don’t do that and if I find out that you are cutting yourself, I’ll beat you myself. Are we clear?”

I nodded.

+

17.

“What happened to your arm?” I asked my sister as we moved some of our stuff in and out of storage. Scratches, much like my old ones, were graced across her once smooth skin.

She tried to cover it. “One of the boxes scratched me the other day while we were moving.”

I grabbed her arm and sat it between us as I said “Don’t bullshit me, I know what those are. I’ve done it.”

I remember how frantic her eyes were as I stared back at her. I still to this day have never seen my sister look so scared.

I took a deep breath. I didn’t want to scare her. I didn’t want to be like mom.

“Talk to me.” I sat down next to her in the trunk of my 2001 Green Expedition.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“The beginning is normally a good spot,” I replied.

She looked straight ahead, not really looking at anything. “I don’t know, I guess I’ve just been feeling a little unloved, ya’know?”

“I know that feeling. It gets easier. You just have to find the right outlets.”

“How do I know which ones are the right ones?”

“Talking to someone who’s gone through what you’ve gone through normally helps and so does taking it day by day.”

“You can’t tell mom.”

“Trust me, your secret is safe with me. I don’t think our parents could handle knowing they’ve got not one but *two* mentally fucked up kids.”

She laughed and said “Yeah, probably not.”

I pulled her close and said “I’m always here if you need me, I promise. Besides, what are big sisters for anyway?”

+

18.

I struggled a lot after that moment and before long, those nagging thoughts were back by freshman year of college. It was so gradual; I missed the signs. Little by little, they were smothering me. I realized they never truly left. I’d somehow how thought they were gone. That I was finally free and here I was back at rock bottom.

“Tell me why you’re here today, Tamia?”

Tears spilled down my face as I said “Because I want to get better. I’m losing my mind and I want to get better. I’ve tried to explain to my parents, but they don’t really understand. My dad says I’m allowed to have bad days, but I don’t know how to explain to him that sometimes these bad days turn into bad weeks and these bad weeks turn into bad months. I don’t want to be like this anymore.”

The school’s therapist smiled at me and said “I get it and that’s a start. I want you to get better too. Tell me what’s hurting you?” She handed me a tissue.

I sniffled and wiped my face. “I get these thoughts.”

“What do they say? Do they tell you to do things?”

I shook my head. “Not anymore. They normally just tell me things about myself.”

“What do they say?”

“They tell me that I’m not good enough, or that people don’t really like me, or that it’s my fault.”

“And what does this voice sound like?”

“My own.”

She nodded as she wrote things down on the paper in front of her.

“And how do you sleep?”

“Not well. Some nights I don’t sleep at all. Sometimes my thoughts keep me up at night.”

She scribbled some more on the paper. “And where do you think this comes from?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is there anything that’s happened to you that may have upset you when you were younger?”

And that’s when I spilled everything to her. Every little thing that led me up to this point in her very chair.

She nodded as listened and scribbled stuff down as I spoke.

“Do you think I’m crazy?” I finally asked.

She shook her head and said “I think you’re just a little lost with some pain. I think you need closure and that’s going to take time.”

“And the thoughts?”

“They’re not true. I’m sure sometimes they may sound and feel so real but they’re not true. When a thought comes to mind, I want you to acknowledge it. I want you to take it in and then separate yourself from it and say “I acknowledge that you’re here but you’re not real nor true. I’m not saying it’ll work all the time. Recovery is hard and depression isn’t something that

can truly disappear. You may have bad days, but those days will get easier, and it'll become more manageable. I like you, Tamia. I've only just met you and I like you already so automatically those thoughts can't be true."

+

18.

My fingers lingered on the mouse as it hovered over the "Add Friend" button. I knew it was him. I'd always known it was him but could never bring myself this far. Until now. I clicked the mouse. "Request Sent" popped up on my screen. I scrolled through my timeline and focused on the picture that had brought me to his page to begin with. A bouncing baby boy sat on my grandmother's screen with "My Beautiful Grandson, Chauncey. Born February 5, 2016" as the caption. My heart fell into my stomach as my hands got clammy. The saying "Third times the charm" couldn't be more accurate but I felt in my sick heart it was time for complete closure. I clicked on his page again and clicked message.

"I know this might be awkward for you, but I wanted to personally say congratulations and to let you know that I'm truly happy for you and your wife, Vanya. There are no hard feelings and I hope for the best for you and your family."

Two days later my phone dinged with his response.

"...it's not awkward at all..."biologically"...you are my daughter...and you reaching out shows what wonderful parents you have...and what an incredible young lady you have matured into...thank you for your well wishes..."

Not knowing what else to say, I responded with "No problem." Thinking on it now, I know I didn't have to say anything else. We both just knew there was forgiveness between us.

+

19.

“I’m so glad you’ve decided to come,” my grandmother smiled behind her Prada sunglasses. My bags sat in the back of her silver jeep, my mom in the rear view mirror still waving.

“Me too. It’s been a long time since I last saw you,” I replied. The leather seat stuck to the sweat building up beneath my legs as I began to fidget.

“You’re nineteen now, so six years.”

“*Yeah, it’s been six years,*” I thought. I looked out my window and stared at the traffic on the highway around us.

The car ride was quiet between us, but the sound of the radio filled the empty space. We pulled up to her home in no time.

“Do you remember being here?” she asked.

I shook my head no. The outside exterior held no sentimental value, no recollection, and no memories. It was just another white home with dead grass surrounding it.

“Maybe it’ll look more familiar inside.” She smiled as we walked inside. The interior sparked memories, photos I remembered seeing in an album. The staircase was the same and the cleanliness of white still washed over everything. The only difference was that the inside kept up with the time.

We headed upstairs to show me where I’d be staying.

“This used to be his room when he was younger,” my grandmother said as we walked into the room and dropped my bags. The walls were painted white now, hints of yellow and of stripes underneath. A nightstand sat next to the bed with a picture of her, and two little boys, I’d

seen before. One in the same position as I and one the product of marriage. Third times the charm, I guessed.

“These are your brothers, ya’know?” she smiled.

I gave her a half smile. They were biological by sperm and blood. Nothing more, nothing less.

“I’ll let you get settled in,” she said with a smile before leaving and closing the door behind her.

I grabbed the pictures off the nightstand as I sat on the bed. We shared the same noses and skin complexions but no memories. They were fragments in a life I was still putting together but had no intentions of living. I knew in my heart I wouldn’t search for them, but I would never deny them the right of knowing me if they wanted the chance to.

I placed the pictures down and laid back on the bed I sat on.

+

19.

“So, is she me and Tj’s grandmother?” she asked.

My mom took a deep breath and said “No, she’s not.”

“So how is she Tamia’s grandmother?”

I could see the wheels spinning in my sister’s head, but she wasn’t putting together the connection. I was tired of lying.

“It’s about time you told them, mom,” I said aloud.

She sighed. She knew I was right. “Okay, well, Tamia has a different father than you and Tj which is why Grandma Naj is Tamia’s grandmother,”

My sister began to laugh hysterically as if she had lost her mind. “Nuh uh, you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying and if you want to ask your dad. Tamia has a different father, biologically, than you and Tj but your dad is still her dad.”

My sister’s laugh began to fall short as her breath began to pick up. It wasn’t long before she was bursting into tears.

I stood up, knowing this would hurt her the most. I pulled her into a hug and held her close like my mother had done to me all those years ago.

I made her look at me before I spoke. “It’s okay. I’m no different than I was yesterday. I’m still your sister. I’m still going to annoy you and I’m still going to love you unconditionally. It’s okay to be upset but nothing has changed. Dad is still my dad. Our dad. You and Tj are still my siblings and we’re still a family. What’s the difference on how we all got here?”

I wiped her tears and pulled her back into the hug. I knew she needed it but truly, we both did.

Enough

To the person whose face is mine
 But whose memories are not,
 Hello.

I wish I could give you more
 But there aren't enough pieces to finish your puzzle.
 Not enough colors to create the picture you are looking for.
 Not enough ingredients to keep you full.
 Not enough letters to spare to someone who wasn't there.
 But I can tell you what I do have enough of.

I have enough shoes you never taught me to tie.

The kind of shoes where the laces are replaced with happy smiles and covered in giggles.

I have enough dresses that you never saw me buy.

The kind of dresses where they shimmer and for a glimpse, I'm five dancing on your feet
 with missing teeth in your eyes again.

I have enough stars to gaze at with the wonder you never gave.

The kind of stars that wave across the sky sending messages between the loved ones that
 are here and the ones who have died.

I have enough hugs you could never lend.

The kind of hugs that not only kept me warm but also kept me safe, the world too afraid
 to shake the ground we'd walk on.

I have enough skills you never taught me to do.

The kind of skills, that remind you that even during our fights, I'm listening as I continue
 to grow into the woman we could only hope I would be.

I have enough memories you were never apart of.

The kind of memories shared at holiday dinners for years to come so that we live on even
 after we're gone.

And I have enough laughs that I'm not willing to spare.

Enough love.

Enough light.

Enough happiness that you didn't help me make.

You see they say one man's trash,

Is another man's treasure.

But I guess you didn't get the message.

Tattered shreds are sewn together.

Broken pieces are glued.

And missing hope is found.

You, may share my face

But we are not the same.

So hello, thank you and goodbye.

Hello, because my parents never taught me to be rude.

Thank you, because if you never left, I would have never been lucky enough to choose my dad.

And goodbye because I'm ready to close this chapter of the story.

You see, I may not be enough for you

But I'm okay with that.

I will no longer try to force myself into your cookie cutters
So that I may one day be what you are looking for.
Cutting off the bits and pieces of me
That make up who I am
Only to open old wounds
You left to bleed.
I'm ready to move forward.
Ready to start my journey.
And I am ready to be enough.
Not for you.
But for me.

#MeToo

We all carry one story that changes the course of our life. The story that without having wouldn't have made you who you are. I never expected mine to be my first time because they always say your first time having sex will be memorable. That even ten years from now, you'll remember it like it was yesterday. What they don't tell you is that it'll stick with you whether you'd like to remember or not. They don't tell you that you'll remember the fear or that if you think about it for too long, warm tears will fall down your face as if you're right back in that college dorm room all over again. They don't tell you that you'll remember the number of breaths it took for you to finally push your drunk boyfriend off of you after your 'no' was coerced into a 'yes' or the dark humor you'll make at your own expense because you have a hard time dealing with the trauma of it all. They just tell you that it will be "memorable". And for that, they're right. I remember my first time like it was happening now.

+

"I don't think I'm ready to have sex yet. I thought I was, but I really don't think I am."

The room was dark, but I could still see and feel his erection as he hovered above me. I remember how my heart pounded in my ears so loud I couldn't understand how he couldn't hear the panic rising inside of me. I now know that it's because he wasn't worried about me.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he drunkenly fumbled with taking my clothes off, but he wasn't slowing down. He was determined.

"I'm pretty sure."

"That's not convincing." He began to kiss me, and I think now maybe it was to shut me up, so he didn't lose his hard on.

"I don't think I'm ready. I think, we're just moving too fast."

“I can go slower. You just need to relax. You’re so beautiful.”

I remember feeling scared but most of all stuck. I was in between a rock and a hard place. I had nowhere to go if he kicked me out. I had been sleeping in his bed for the last couple of weeks because my roommates hated me, almost as much as I hated myself, and I was so desperate to be liked. Desperate to be wanted or needed by another individual and here he was. But this wasn’t what I asked for at least I thought. I know now, I hadn’t.

“So, do you want to have sex?”

My tongue felt like sandpaper, yet I felt like I was drowning by how much I couldn’t breathe. I had to do this. Besides, he had told me he’d done this before, so he knew what he was doing, and this was what a good girlfriend did. It was my only job.

“Okay.”

I remember how big of a smile he had at that one simple word. I was making him happy. I was giving him what he wanted even though it wasn’t what I wanted. He had just won the jackpot and I had just buried myself alive.

Without hesitation, he pushed himself inside of me.

Instantly, I felt pain. I remember how the weight of him on me only made the sensation of fire between my legs worse. I cried out but immediately shut myself up by biting down on my bottom lip. Tears silently poured down my face as I stared up at the green and blue stars scattered across the ceiling from his roommate’s outer space lamp.

I wasn’t ready and I didn’t want this. My brain reminded me with every distraction I tried to create.

Fifty two. Fifty two shallow breaths as the panic began to swallow me whole.

Thirty seven. Thirty seven blue and green stars stared back at me as I laid in disgust about what I was allowing.

This will all be over soon. I blinked the tears from my eyes.

Fifteen. Fifteen thrusts before the door opened and the hallway light blinded me.

“Dude, put a sock on the door!” his roommate yelled as he quickly slammed the door.

One. One door slam to knock me out of the typhoon of emotions spiraling inside of me.

“Stop. Stop. Please stop, I don’t want this. I can’t do this anymore,” I say as I’m pushing him off of me.

He finally hears me and pulls himself out of me before sitting beside me. We sit there in silence before he says “It’s okay, we can try again some other time. If it makes you feel any better, that was actually my first time too.”

I remember how quickly my head whipped towards him as tears began building up in my eyes. I was lied too, and speechless. I wanted to scream and cry all at the same time, but nothing came out. An overwhelming sense of numbness is the only words I could use to describe myself in that moment.

We laid there in silence before he told me he needed to use the restroom. I didn’t say anything, only nodded, as I tried to continue ignoring the pain radiating from my groin. A heat so strong, I could only think my body was punishing me for what I had just let happen.

“I’ll be right back.” He kissed my cheek before getting up and leaving me alone in the darkness that was his room.

I remember feeling so small in that bed as I waited for him to comeback. And as I waited I began to feel more and more disgusted with myself. How had I let this happen? What was

wrong with me? And what was taking him so long? I didn't want to be with him, but I didn't want to be alone more.

My mind raced as I waited. Eventually, the darkness and my anxiety got the best of me. No longer able to lay there, I stand up and peak outside of the room. My blood runs cold.

He's not in the restroom. He's in the hallway with all of his friends and they are elated for him. They're all patting him on the back as if he's won the biggest prize.

"You did it, man."

"Finally, ditched that V-card."

"How was it?"

One of his friends notices me before he can get into his side of the story. I close the door and rub back to the bed. I lay there and pretend I've fallen asleep because anything is better than being caught.

In that moment, I hate myself and I hate myself even more as he comes back to the room pulling me against him as if everything is perfectly fine. Being close to him feels like a sick joke but I have nowhere else to go.

He eventually falls asleep, the pattern in his breathing shifts to one in deep sleep.

I open my eyes when I finally hear his snore, his roommates now also sleeping, a slumbering storm brewing in the room. I gently remove myself from his arm and pull my pants on before sneaking out of the room. I remember not knowing where to go. The only thing I was sure of was that I didn't want to be in that room. So, I ran to the bathroom.

I'm sitting on the toilet, hoping something will happen because I know I am supposed to pee after sex. And I think I have too, but I look down and see the blood in my underwear and it

takes everything in me not to throw up. Tears are spilling from my face as I dial the only number, I think will listen to me at this hour.

“Hello?”

“Bee, I really need you.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the bathroom upstairs and I’m bleeding.”

“Okay, I’m coming. Meet me in the lobby.”

I remember cleaning myself up before going into the lobby to wait for her. Minutes felt like hours until she showed up and asked, “What’s wrong?”

I started to cry all over again as I said, “I didn’t like it, Bee and everything still hurts.”

“You had sex? My baby is growing up. It’s just because it was your first time. It’ll be better next time.”

Her words sent shivers down my spine. How could I tell her that I didn’t want there to be a next time? That I hadn’t wanted this time? I decide not to argue because in that moment all I want was to accept the comfort of her hug as it felt like the only thing holding me together.

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To this day, that night haunts me like a moth to a flame. It took me years to realize and accept that I was raped. That it wasn’t my fault. That being raped wasn’t just about saying no and someone taking the luxury of assaulting you anyway. Being raped also included all of the “no’s” coerced into a single “yes” slipped from a quivering lip like teardrops from empty eyes.

I remember hating myself for letting it happen to me. Being filled with so much rage because I had allowed someone to take something from me that I hadn’t been ready to give. I was disgusted at and ashamed of who I was. My depression and anxiety reveled in the

exhaustion and deterioration that was my mental health. I had already been struggling with my depression and anxiety before, but this had made it worse.

I didn't tell anyone for a long time. The void inside of me worsening, festering, like an infection that needed proper treatment to heal. I was eighteen when it happened, and the first real person I told was a therapist I was assigned to when I was first diagnosed with depression at nineteen.

"You know it's not your fault, right?"

My fists tightened at her words.

"I let it happen to me and I said yes." I tried to blink the tears away.

"But only after your no wasn't accepted. A coerced yes is not consent. You were also the influence-."

"So was he."

"It doesn't matter. You can't give consent under the influence. I know it's hard to hear honey, but this was rape. And it's not your fault."

I remember crying in her office as if a dam had opened up inside of me and was unable to be stopped because in that moment, the truth had been said aloud.

However, I didn't tell my parents right away even after seeing the therapist. I didn't tell my mother until I was twenty-one and my father until I was twenty-four because even though I had learned it wasn't my fault I was terrified of what they would think of me. Would they see me differently? Would they love me less? I worried about how this would affect our relationship because I was struggling with how I saw myself even though I now knew it wasn't my fault.

Getting control of my mental health and sticking to wanting to get better, was the beginning of me truly *being* better. Dealing with trauma can be hard. Separating yourself from

your trauma can be harder, however, it is possible. I started with taking my mental health seriously, taking the medicine that was prescribed to help me and it did. I started to acknowledge what had happen to me that night because denying that it was real was only making it worse. I allowed myself to cry and accept that *I* was still me and continued to remind myself that the people that loved me would still love me even though they knew. But most of all, I reminded myself that I wasn't alone.

Though this was something that affected me negatively, it truly has made me into the person that I want to be. I can say that I have become a very strong and independent person who fights for the rights of others. And though I've always been a caring person, I don't know if I could truly relate without being the victim myself. It is easy to tell someone to get up and leave or to tell someone that they should have told someone immediately, but the truth is, it is hard. There is fear in how the world will see you after, fear in how people will treat you after, fear in how the situation will be handled but most of all it's different when it happens to you.

I am working to become a Creative Writing Therapist that helps others deal with the traumas in their life because I understand the struggles of dealing with it alone. I want to help them all but if I could help just one person to understand that there is more to them than the trauma that has a hold on them, it would be a dream come true. There are many things that can shape us into who we are as people. Stories both big and small that are the reasons we are, who we are. Those stories are the turning points in our lives but it's how we handle those stories and I want to help every person I can understand their own.

Inner War

Frigid waters
Heavy breaths
Silent screams
Burning eyes
Destructive waves
Thrashing for freedom
Release

Sweet girl
Drowning in Daylight
Swallowed in Darkness
Frigid lips split into a grin
Gatekeeper teeth
Hold secrets
And an aching soul

Grasping hands
In pitted Abyss
Shred the Soul
Her No
Accepted as Yes
Her Silence
The Greenlight to Go

Bladed grass
Cool breeze
Angel kisses
Fairy wings
Prayers are answered for Peace
Sufferable silence heard
The first breath fills the air

Sweet girl
Floats in Daylight
Fluttered eyes
New Mornings
Bring new Beginnings
The soul shines
The heart beating once again.

Senses

Your stare was the first song I ever sung, Innocent and Alluring
But now I've lost my voice and I'm scared

Your smell was the first spark of an open flame, Warm and Resonating
But now the fire has died and I'm alone.

Your voice was the first home in my heart, built from Ashes and Patience
But now it's haunted and I'm dying

Your touch was the first sip of white wine, Delicious and always left me wanting more
But now the bottle is empty and I'm a Lush

Your smile was the first breeze of Spring, Gentle and Inviting
But now it's storming and I'm freezing

My problems
Begin and End
With you
And I'm certain
I may too

Poet

There is something in writing poetry

Something in knowing that

As my fingers tap against the keys

My emotions speak

In the way I can't

Something in knowing that

The person who reads this

May understand me better

And know what it feels like

To be awake in the middle of the night

Looking at a screen

Hoping it will write the words

That are locked in a room

But has no key

Words that beg to be heard

But has no mouth, no voice

No outlet

And is left

Feeling

Empty...

...There was Healing...

HER

To my younger self,

I have owed you an apology for a very long time. And not the kind of apology that is just easily given. The kind of apology where you take the time to think about what you want to say. The kind of apology where it really needs to matter. And because of this I've avoided writing this letter for a very long time. I wish I could say I waited so long because I wanted to make sure it was perfect. That I wanted to make sure I said everything that needed to be said. But if we're being honest, a part of me has always just been afraid that you wouldn't forgive me. That you wouldn't even consider my apology because I wasn't worthy of the forgiveness I desperately wanted from you. But I've learned it isn't about forgiveness. It's what you deserve and for me to continue to grow, I need you to heal. Therefore, this is where our letter begins.

I want to start off by saying "I'm sorry". As cliché as it is, I'm sorry I let her cripple us into believing we deserved less than what we were worth. I'm sorry that *her* voice was always louder than our own, silencing us into submission. I'm sorry I allowed *her* to get this far in our lives but most of all, I'm sorry that I didn't protect you when you need me the most to do so. There aren't enough words to describe how I truly feel about how I've wronged you, but I feel as though this letter is the best place to start.

I remember the first time her voice appeared. It was a whisper but clear as day. We had just gotten in trouble for taking candy out of the candy dish when we were told to wait after dinner.

"What's in your mouth?" my mom asked.

"Nothing," I lied. The chocolate in my mouth was beginning to melt as I tried not chew in front of her.

“Open your mouth, then.”

I didn't move and began to look down.

You are a terrible child.

“So did you lie to me?”

I nodded.

You're a liar.

“What's my rule, Tamia?”

I swallowed the chocolate in my mouth. “Not to lie you.”

“Didn't I tell you to wait?” my mother asked sternly.

“Yes, ma'am,” I replied.

You're a bad daughter.

“Go to your room and think about what you did.”

We walked upstairs with her voice rolling terrible words and thoughts over and over in our head.

You're such a bad daughter.

You know she hates you, right?

You can't even follow simple directions.

How can anyone love you.

When my mother called us down to dinner after, I remember apologizing.

“I'm sorry for being a bad daughter, mommy.”

She looked at us with concern. “I accept your apology but you're not a bad girl, Tamia.”

She's just saying that to make you feel better. You're terrible.

I wish I could say that was the only time I let her win but we both know that wouldn't be the truth. She began to fester, growing with us as we grew to know the world around us because she never left our side after that moment. I'm sorry I allowed that to happen. I'm sorry that she took some of our darkest moments to use against us because cutting was never the answer to feeling something more than numb. When you were thirteen it wasn't your fault that the boy who liked you grabbed your ass, and no one listened to you when you said you didn't want him too. When you were sixteen, it wasn't your fault that a grown man pinned you against the wall to grope you while your parents were in the other room and his only response to why was that he thought you wanted it. And when you were eighteen it wasn't your fault that you were pressured to say yes. It wasn't your fault that you had nowhere else to turn and saying yes, after saying no so many times, was the only answer your boyfriend wanted to hear. I need for you to know, that none of those moments were your fault and if you take anything from this letter, it's thought I wish I could have done more and that you know I love you beyond words can express. I know you never imagined we could love ourselves, that we were too damaged to be loved, but I do and every day I am working on making sure that you will one day feel it.

I am trying to heal the wounds and trauma you so desperately need, and I hope you know I do it all for the future you wanted for ourselves. We've made it to therapy, and we are loved by an individual who understands that we are more than our body. He listens to us, and he tries every day to do right by us more than the day before. He knows about you, and he loves you just as much as I do.

She was never right about us. She was always wrong. She drove us crazy. Allowed us to do her work for, but she's contained now. I work to silence her every day for the time you lost

because of her. I can never say it enough, but I love and do this all for you. I hope one day you will forgive yourself and me as I continue to heal you as you need.

I love you. Forever and always,

Me

HOUSE

I am a House.

I am a House, with stories and hidden complexities.

My exterior is inviting,

But my interior is cold.

The draft too heavy
to keep the coals alive.

I am a House.

Filled, with broken promises and forgotten words,

Memories locked inside the rooms with

‘Do Not Disturb’ signs and

Laughter silenced within the air.

I am House.

My mirrors are shattered like spiderweb cracks.

While glasses are splintered beyond repair.

On the walls are love notes that never made it.

Returned to sender; lost and forgotten.

No longer stating from who, but only to whom.

You say we buy “Ugly Houses” but why not me?

Am I not good enough?

Did I not reach your standards?

I am falling apart,

An infestation of dark emotions that cannot be controlled.

Because I am a House,

Who desperately wants to be a Home.

MDD

I never realized how much of myself I poured into the relationship with my ex until it was over. How much of myself I lost trying to please him in every which way I thought was possible only for him not to be happy because enough was never enough. Our relationship had its own monthly cycle. Almost like clockwork, every 30 days he'd say he wasn't sure he wanted this anymore and I would give more of myself to him than I could give to myself, constantly wanting to prove to him that we worth fighting for. That I was worth fighting for. I was desperate for him to love me, regardless of if things weren't healthy at times because I needed to know *she* was wrong. Before the pandemic had started, *her* voice had begun to grow ever so slightly. I had stopped taking my meds again and had assumed I could beat *her* without them. And for a while I did but I didn't realize just how wrong I would truly be when everything began to close around me.

April 30th, 2020. The pandemic was in full swing, and I had been feeling him pull away from me for weeks now. He was colder than usual and more distant than he normally was. Nothing I did was right, and I was beginning to lose sleep over it.

He hates you.

No, *she* was wrong.

You disgust him.

It wasn't true.

He's going to break up with you because you aren't good enough for him.

I remember messaging him immediately.

"Hey, I know you're probably busy, but can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

“Do you want this?”

“Honestly, no. I don’t think I do.”

I remember how hard my heart fell into the pit of my stomach.

I told you. He doesn’t love you.

“What does this mean for us then?”

He began typing but then his icon disappeared. His name lit up my screen and I answered immediately.

“You don’t want to be with me?” I jumped right into the conversation. We were passing the introduction.

“It just isn’t working out anymore.”

“What am I doing wrong?”

“It’s not about that.”

“I can try harder. Or we can just take a break. I know the pandemic is making it hard, but we can make it work.”

“A break is too much of a gray area. We wouldn’t be able to see other people.”

“But I don’t want to see other people.” Tears were filling my eyes, but I refused to cry on the phone with him.

He was silent and then he sighed. “Look, I’m not treating you the way you deserve and so I want to end things.”

The phone was silent now on both ends before I muttered out, “Okay.”

When the call ended I remember how badly I wanted things to be a terrible joke. How empty I was beginning to feel. I was alone now with *her*, and she sprang right into action.

You’re pathetic.

No one loves you.

You're better off dead.

+

May 4th, 2020. The day my mother put her foot down. I had been drowning for weeks but now that I didn't have my ex as a distraction I was unable to stop crying at the slightest mention or thought of him. I wasn't able to keep *her* voice out of my head and I couldn't bring myself to eat in the four days since our breakup. I needed help.

I remember how she walked into my room with clear concern on her face. "Tamia, I think you should set up an appointment with Ms. Bonita and maybe get back on your antidepressants. You wouldn't have to go in the office. They're doing tele visits now due to the pandemic."

"Okay," I replied as I laid in my bed, tears still spilling from my eyes.

"You may even be able to get in today if you call her now."

"Okay."

"Tamia, I need for you to try."

I sat up from my bed and said "Okay, mom. I'll call now."

"Thank you." She walked back upstairs.

I dialed the doctor's office. The receptionist answered on the second the ring. It was Ms. Jessica.

"Thank you for calling Walnut Street Family Practice, this is Jessica, how can I help you?"

"Hi, Ms. Jess. It's Tamia, I need to set up a tele visit with Ms. Bonita. I need to be put back on my antidepressants."

"Let me see what she has. I can get you in today at noon for a tele visit. Does that work?"

“Yeah, that would be great.”

“Okay, I’ve got you scheduled, sweetie. Hang in there.”

“Thanks, Ms. Jess.” I hung up the phone and laid it beside me while tears fell from my eyes. Everyone was right. I needed help.

The two hours between making the appointment and the time of the appointment were quiet. I logged into my telehealth appointment at 11:45am and Ms. Bonita was already there.

“Hi, Ms. Bonita.”

“Hey, sweetie. What’s going on?”

“Ms. Bonita, I need help. I need to be put back on my antidepressants,” I said into my cellphone. I sat on my bed, wrapped in blankets that felt like they were the only thing holding me together at this point. Salty tears stained my face, and I was sure if I’d seen my reflection, my eyes would be bloodshot. I was beginning to really feel the effects of me not eating at this point. I truly was a mess, and I was afraid what would happen if I didn’t get help. In retrospect, I should have never stopped taking my meds.

“Okay,” she said gently. “What’s going on?”

“Ms. Bonita, I’m falling apart. I can’t do it anymore and I really need help. I can’t do it by myself anymore.”

“Okay, I’m going to ask you a series of questions and I need an answer between zero and three. Zero being not at all and three being every day, okay?”

I nodded before croaking out an “Okay.”

“Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? Little interest or pleasure in doing things?”

“Two.”

“Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?”

“Three.”

“Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much?”

“Two.”

“Feeling tired or having little energy?”

“Two.”

“Poor appetite or overeating?”

My stomach growled. “Two.” I lied, because in these last two weeks I hadn’t really eaten.

“Feeling bad about yourself – or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down?”

“Two”

“Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television?”

“One.” I lied again. All I did was sleep and when I wasn’t sleeping, I aimlessly watched the television, never truly paying attention to what was on it.

“Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could notice? Or the opposite – being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual?”

“One.”

“Thoughts that you would be better off dead or thoughts of hurting yourself in some way?”

My mind flashed back to the night before as I washed the dishes. How easy everything would have been if I had followed through. “Zero.” I couldn’t let them commit me. I *wouldn’t* let them commit me.

“Okay, well, it looks like you were on Zoloft when you were first diagnosed. How did feel when you were on it?”

“I felt okay. There was an adjustment period but after a while I felt normal again.”

“Okay, we’ll start you back on that and see how your body adjust to it again. If you notice anything abnormal, please make me aware as soon as possible.”

“I know.”

“If an adjustment is needed, we will reassess it in a couple weeks”

“Okay.”

“You know, your mom told me that your brother and sister are going down to Georgia. Are you going too?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t planning on it because I have to work and I’m not sure when they’ll have us come back to the office due to the pandemic.”

“I think it would be good for you to get out of Hagerstown for some time, especially while your body is adjusting to the medicine. Give yourself a change of scenery.”

“Okay.”

“You’re going to get through this, Tamia.”

“Thanks.” I hung up the phone when I heard the dial tone.

My mom popped her head in. “How’d your appointment go?”

“Ms. Bonita is putting me back on my antidepressants. She says I have major depressive disorder. I should be able to pick up my meds sometime today.”

“That’s good.”

“She also thinks it would be beneficial for me to go down to Georgia with Tarin and Tj, but I don’t know. I still have to work.”

“I think it would be beneficial as well and at the very least you can ask if it’s a problem from you to work from Georgia. I just think you should think on it.”

My mom left my room as I laid back down in my bed pulling my blanket closer around me. I was so tired, and I didn’t want to fight anymore. What was the point?

You are a waste of space.

Do us all a favor and kill yourself.

Tears welled up in my eyes. This was why. I couldn’t let *her* win.

After that night, I emailed my job the next day. I needed to get out of Maryland. I wasn’t taking the breakup well, falling apart every second throughout the day was becoming a new normal and I didn’t want it to be. I needed to surround myself with people I knew would understand what I was going through. My parents had tried hard, but they had never dealt with major depressive disorder. So, I lied.

“Hi, Jenna. I know we’re currently working from home, but I need to know if I can work from Georgia. My grandparents are needing some assistance because of the pandemic and since I’m working from home currently, it would be convenient for me to be down there with them.” My grandparents hadn’t needed my help. Even though they were in their sixties, they were doing just fine but I wanted to make sure my manager wouldn’t say no.

“How long will you be down there?”

“The rest of May.”

“Well since we’re still working from home, that is fine but if we come back to the office before you are back in Maryland, you will have to use PTO.”

“That’s fine.” And it was. As long as I was getting out of Maryland for the time being, I would be fine.

And so, I began to get my ducks in a row.

I went to the pharmacy to grab my antidepressants after that appointment to start taking them immediately. I needed my body to start getting used to the meds again, but my parents were a little nervous. I couldn't blame them though, there was a lot of information that came with antidepressants, part of it saying to look out for suicidal signs.

"What does this all say?" my dad asked.

"Basically, to watch out if my antidepressants make me want to kill myself more." I remember how monotoned my voice was. It was as if life was washing out of me every second of every day.

"Isn't that what it's supposed to prevent?" my mom panicked.

"Yes, but it can get worse before it gets better. I just need to be monitored."

They looked at each other before turning back to me and nodding.

My parents watched me like a hawk while I was home. They made sure I took my medicine like clockwork and made sure I wasn't alone for too long without be checked on. Things were going mostly smooth. I wasn't crying every second of the day and I was beginning to get out of bed more often. The only issue that had arose was my lack of an appetite because it wasn't just about eating food. It was the thought of food entirely. Just the thought of food would make me nauseas. After the first week of meds and another three days without eating, my parents had finally brought it up for discussion.

"Tamia, you have to eat something," my mom stated sternly but the look of concern was etched into her brown eyes.

"I can't. I'm going to throw up."

"What if you just eat a little bit?" my dad asked.

I shook my head no. “You don’t get it. Literally the *thought* of food makes me want to throw up. I’m getting nauseas just talking to you guys about it.”

They exchanged looks of concern.

“I’ll drink another smoothie, and I’ll even toss protein powder in it, but I can’t eat right now because it’s not going to stay down.” I knew they could hear the panic in my voice because it scared me too. I had dropped five pounds in one week all because I couldn’t keep food down. I could feel the hot stinging sensation of bile at the back of my throat. I forced it back down.

“That’s better than nothing,” my dad noted before nodding towards the blender. And that’s what we did. My dad would wake up in the morning and mix all types of fruits and veggies into smoothies then he would leave the extra in the fridge for me to drink throughout the day.

Before I knew it my uncles, Uncle Ricky, and Uncle Dark, were here to bring us back to Georgia with them. My sister, Tarin, was excited to be driving her car down and my brother, Tj, was cool to be sitting in the back. Uncle Dark decided to ride with her and so I rode with Uncle Ricky. Originally, the plan had been for my siblings and I to drive down to Georgia ourselves, but with antidepressants in the mix, they thought it would be safer for my uncles to come and get me and honestly, I couldn’t blame them because I didn’t trust myself, at that time, to get my siblings or myself there safely.

“Hey there, kiddo,” Uncle Ricky looked at me.

I smirked. “Hey.” We’d always been close. From the day I was born, Uncle Ricky had always been my favorite uncle.

He pulled me into a hug and said “You’re gonna get through this. You’re strong. Always have been. Always will be.”

Tears pushed to the surface as I nodded and really fell into the hug. This trip away from here was what I needed. I needed to get out of Maryland and just be around more family. I would be able to spend time with my younger cousins that looked up to me, my aunts, Anie, and Aunt Dani, and also get to see my grandparents.

This would be good for me, and it was. The month I had spent down there had been some of the best time I had had in such a long time. But that didn't mean my demons had left me alone. No one truly warns you about the ugliness that comes with adjusting to antidepressants. People caring about me would irritate me, I would have the energy to do the things but would be mentally exhausted, and so many nights that had seemed wonderful turned catastrophic when fully alone because when you're fully alone the only thing you have are your thoughts.

You are a worthless piece of trash.

No one loves you; they just feel sorry for you.

You'll never be good enough.

This is why he left.

You'd be better off dead.

My head was a dark place to be. I was fighting the voice that sounded like me but wasn't my own. She wanted to win. To see me fail. To see me fall.

Prayer became a big thing for me during this time because I couldn't fall if God was there by my side. It would hurt and I would have to work to see through the storm, but I wouldn't fall. And I didn't.

I've been diagnosed with major depressive disorder for three years now. Some days are better than others, but I don't stop fighting. Because there are days where *her* voice is so loud, I

want to let her win, but I remember my uncle's words: You're gunna get through this. You're strong. Always have been. Always will be."

Battle Scars

My body is at war with itself.
Fighting to die
But also fighting to live
Fighting to give up
But also fighting to win
I am somewhat alive
Yet barely breathing
And so, she stares at me
Waiting for my sweet surrender,
My silence,
To deliver her final blow
But still, I fight
With my sword in hand
and gritted teeth.
My bruised skin
Wanting to scream defeat
But a spirit that has only just awoken
Bright and bold
Knowing I have something to live for
Something to hold
The pieces of my heart
That have been injured in battle
Are collected like stones.
Pieced together
By those who care most
Giving the light
That helps my heart glow
Toward the victory
That is mine to take.
Battle scars are forever
But a hopeless fate is not.
The war rages on
And I will forever
Be ready to fight

Sitting with the Block

To my Past,

~~———— I sit with this and think about all that you have gone through and all that I can't change. I think about what life could have been like but also what you've been able to persevere through. I know that you may not see it yet, but you are a warrior, and I am so thankful for who you were and how you've made me, me. I'm.~~

~~I won't lie and say that I don't wish I could freeze you in your current moment. Take our moment as a child and freeze it in place when you were the happiest, bright smile and all. I would be lying if I said things have always been easy. That the days of wanting sweet and peaceful silence, that last forever, doesn't slip into our mind from time to time. But we are better than that and we have become so much stronger than that as well.~~

I am sitting with the block.

Dear Me,

Despite fighting with your brain all week to write something for class and only coming up with this, you are enough. Writing is hard and though you are getting better, there will be times where a week won't be enough. Where the hours will feel suffocating, and the deadlines seem like they're reaching the finish lines before you are. Your setbacks are not the end. You are not an imposter. You were meant to do this.

There are days where everything will make sense. Where your words will fall across the page as if they were simply waiting for you to type them, creating your thoughts in written form. But then there will be times like this. Times where you aren't feeling enough. Times where deadlines were not met and where you struggled to even have single word. Those days are okay too. People will understand. The world will understand. You are human and right now, you're sitting with the block.

You remember what that means, right? Our own little coined word when we decided writers block was to lame to be used for our lack of creative thought. A creative term for our lack in creative thought. That my friend is what we call *cheeky*. Keep that part of you and never change it. Because your creativity will always come at times you least expect it. In times of wit and in times of strength. In times of sadness and in times of pain. Your words carry more than you will ever give yourself enough credit for. You have made it this far and this all because of you.

I know that it's scary. But the idea that you've made it this far and are continuing to do well is not a fluke. You have earned your spot and you should know that this small setback is not the end. Though it may not seem like it, these moments of sitting with the blocks will strengthen your skills and make you only fight harder for what you love to do.

So, let's start here. With what I don't want out of you, anymore. No more, "I can't do this" and no more "I suck". No more, "I'm not good enough" and no more "I should stop while I'm ahead". No more endless nights of wishing you were better and that you were someone else with "grander" ideas. No more imposter syndrome because you wouldn't be here if you weren't good enough. You are here because you are meant to do great things. Even if that is writing a letter to yourself to remind you that it is possible regardless of what you may feel in the moment.

Bottom line, I'm writing this to remind you that you can still do this. This isn't the end and eventually moments like these will be fewer and farer between. Your words will fill the page with ease again. You won't sit with the block forever. This is a setback for a major comeback.

You can do this.

Sincerely,

Me

Believing in something without proof is hard.
Evidence is vital
As we search for what is truth.
Yet we're expected to believe in something we cannot see.
With blind eyes and Open ears
Karma.
God.
Fate.
A narrow path of wonder
So easily faltered by destruction.
Inner peace
Longing for answers and prayer.

Yet, at the sight of you
I knew all three were true
Only Karma would allow my rightful acts to finally be recognized
Only God would force me to fight through Darkness to find the Light
And only Fate would bring me to you.

I would trade nothing for you.
Because with Blind Eyes
And Open Ears
I finally heard
The most beautiful song

...And so, there was Light

Watchful Eyes

There was something in knowing that I was always being looked over. Something in knowing that there was a love for my life that could not be explained. A peace if you will. Though I could not see him, I knew that God was real. I could feel the craving of his guidance in my soul when I was unsure of my path. I could sense his love when I was losing it within myself. And above all, I could hear his words of wisdom always telling me to keep going when I felt like my life had nothing left to give.

My story is not a gentle one. My story starts before I was born and continues every day. I am alive because as the bible says “No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it” (*New American Bible, revised edition Version, 1 Corinthians 10:13*).

I was always the problem child. Not a problem in the sense of a “bad kid” but problem as in, I came with the most health issues and was very accident prone. From the moment of birth, I tried to walk out of the womb like my feet were meant to come out first, making a very difficult labor for my mother. My mother had been hospital bound when she had gone into labor at 32 weeks. The doctors had explained I had needed at least another four weeks because I was not fully developed. Four weeks had passed and, fully developed or not, I made my entrance into the world a month before my actual due date. I was a premature baby, with a whole in my heart and weighing just over five pounds, but my mother loved me all the same. She was taking on the world as a mother with me by her side. My biological father was not in the picture and the man who became my father was overseas fighting a war my tiny world could not comprehend yet.

When I was three months old up until the age of one, I had a habit of not breathing. A premature baby by the hands of God had become healthy and yet would stop breathing in her sleep. My mom worried about me, sleepless nights she would stay by my side. Monitors and wires were always attached to me, signaling to my mother and myself the moment I was no longer breathing.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Beep.

The noise would startle us both awake. My mother would run to my rescue, and I would start the breathing process once again.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

She prayed over my tiny body and with time, it disappeared.

When I was five, I cracked my skull open. It was a late night and like any five-year-old I bounced around with the excitement that I was getting to stay up late. I remember the soft light of the computer screen in front of my mother's-tired face. She had just fed and put my sister bed and had only a moment of peace.

As I bounced around the couch, the cartoons watched me aimlessly.

"Tamia, please, sit down or you're going to bed," my mother sighed.

I plopped onto the couch with a huff. Energy bounced inside my tiny body. I needed to move.

My legs swung against the couch until something caught my attention. On the side of the couch, was a tiny red firetruck my sister would ride on sunny days. Catching my attention, I felt

the need to look at it closer. I leaned over the arm of the couch before falling headfirst onto the toy.

My mother turned towards me, her eyes now the color of black and not their normal brown. “Tamia, go to bed. Now.”

Not wanting to get in any more trouble than I was already in, I scurried up the stairs and into my bedroom. Already in my pajamas, I turned off my light and slid under my blanket and turned on the tv. The black and white Adams Family glowed from my screen.

I remember being hot. The feeling of what I thought was sweat began to drench my forehead. My tiny hand touched my sticky forehead and looked at my fingers. They were dark.

I jumped from my bed and ran to the bathroom. When I turned on the light, I stared back at myself with blood pouring down my face. Terrified I ran to my mother.

“Tamia, didn’t I say to go to-,” my mother began to yell before looking at my face in horror. She screamed.

I remember crying. Tears were hot on my cheek and fear engulfed me the moment I heard my mother’s panic. If my mom was scared, it truly was bad.

“What happened?” she asked as she rushed to my side.

“I f-fell,” I choked out.

“On what?”

I remember pointing. I was now too far gone to be able to answer her.

Her eyes followed my sticky finger, to the red truck.

She picked me up and ran up the stairs to her and my father’s bedroom. Flipping on the switch, she held me close.

My father tossed over with sleep in his eyes before horror took over.

“What happened?” He was fully awake now.

“She fell on top of her head on Tarin’s toy.”

“You need to apply pressure.”

She took me to the bathroom and sat me on the counter. The light was still on from earlier. She took a damp cloth and placed it on top of my head, while taking another cloth to wipe the blood and tears from my face.

“Momma, it hurts,” I sniffled. I wiped my eyes, collecting the tears she had missed.

“It’s going to hurt but it’s going to get better.” She removed the cloth and placed a Band-Aid in its place. “We’ll get it looked at first thing in the morning.” Her gentle lips brushed my forehead before I heard her prayer.

The next day, I was seen by the doctor. She had removed my bandage gently; afraid the bleeding would start again.

“There’s barely anything there,” she stated.

My mom stood to take a closer look.

“The head does tend to bleed more but she won’t need stitches. Try to keep the bollies out of that area and it’ll be good as new in no time.”

When I was six, I was dragged by a dog. The neighbors across the street had two golden retrievers, Charlie and Cooper, and a little girl, Alex, I had desperately wanted to be friends with. Being a military brat meant I did not stay in the same place for too long and it was hard to make friends. And although this time we were staying on a military base, I was the only kid on my street. Until her.

This particular day was warm. The sun shined without a cloud in sight. We walked the golden retrievers on the path back to her backyard.

“Thanks for helping me, Tamia,” she smiled.

“Of course. Do you want to go to the park after this? We could get on the swings.”

“Sure, let me just ask my dad first.”

When we reached her backyard, she opened the latch to get the dogs inside.

As I reached for the notch to release Cooper, I heard her scream. I turned to see her dog, Charlie, running out of the gate and her following.

“Charlie, stop! Tamia can you keep Cooper inside?”

Before I could respond, Cooper began to follow.

“Cooper, no!” I grabbed his leash and pressed the lock button to keep him by my side. Instead, I went flying, flailing helplessly behind Cooper. “Cooper, stop!”

Cooper ran, full speed ahead and before I knew it, I felt a sharp pain in my knee. I let go of the leash and grabbed my knee and felt something wet. I looked at my hand to see blood, my knee was split open. I look behind me and see the inground drain.

“Tamia, are you okay?”

I turn to see Alex with her dad, Charlie, and Cooper.

“I don’t know what happened. I tried to keep Cooper back-.”

“Tamia, it’s okay,” her father said calmly. “You need to get your knee cleaned up.” He helped me up and helped me home.

I knocked on the door.

My mom answered. “What happened?”

“I got dragged by a dog.”

My mom let me in and as I walked to the bathroom she talked to the neighbor. She walked in after me and sat me on the bathroom counter. Skin laid open around the center of my knee.

“You have got to be more careful, Tamia.”

“I know, Momma. When you finish cleaning it though, can I go back outside?”

She stopped for a moment and looked at me. “We’ll need to get this looked at. I’ll make an appointment but if you go back outside you have got to be careful.”

“I will!”

And with one doctor’s visit and a knee sized Band-Aid, it was healed in a week. Leaving nothing but a small scar that resembled an upside-down umbrella if looked at closely.

When I was thirteen, I tumbled down the stairs. A cold winter school morning filled with the hustle and bustle of running late. A pair of chunky heel boots, bell bottom jeans, a white button up long sleeve and a black Saint’s tank top would be the outfit of destruction this particular day.

“Tamia hurry up! We’re running late which means you’re going to miss the bus,” my mother echoed up the stairs.

“I’m coming,” I yelled down as I scooped up my belongings for the day. My coat, my bookbag, my binder, my homework, and my lunchbox. Unable to see over the pile in my arms I still tried to rush down the stairs as if running faster would make up for the time we had already lost. Instead, the clocked stopped.

My heel missed the step and instead launched me from the first step to the cement carpeted floor in the basement, missing all fourteen stairs in between. The white flash in my brain came at the same time as the impact.

My mother screamed as my brain tried to register what was happening. I was instantly tired, a brain fog beginning to take over and I couldn't see.

"Where are my glasses?" I asked as I looked around the room. Everything was such a blur and my head hurt. A lot. "I've got to go to school."

"You're not going to school. I need to get you to the hospital after I get your siblings to school."

"I'm tired."

"Do not go to sleep. Please, just clean yourself up and wait for me to drop off your siblings at school. I will be right back."

"Okay," I responded as I found my glasses, my head swimming. I made my way up the stairs; much slower than how I had come down. Each step was another flutter of my eyelids, the fog beginning to consume me.

When I got to the bathroom, I saw the small stain of blood on my white shirt. I grabbed a paper towel off the roll while I sat on top of the fuzzy toilet seat cover. I pressed the paper towel to my temple and winced. I pulled the paper towel from my head to see traces of blood. I placed the paper towel back. Why was I so clumsy?

I leaned against the bathroom wall and felt the coolness of the wall through my shirt. I placed my head against the wall and felt the cold ease some of the pain in my head. Yes, this was what I needed. Now, all I had to do was close my eyes.

"Tamia, wake up!"

My eyes opened to see my mother. “I wasn’t asleep.”

“Yes, you were. Come on, let’s get you in the car.” My mom helped me up and down the stairs safely, before getting me in the car.

My head throbbed and all I wanted was for the pain in my head to subside.

When we got to the doctor’s office the fog was overwhelming.

“How are you feeling?” The doctor checked my eyes and ears.

“I’m really tired and I just want to go to sleep.”

“She’s suffering from a mild concussion but other than that, she’s okay. Get her home and allow her to rest. Have her take some ibuprofen for her head and wake her every few hours, just to check on her.”

Within 24 hours I was back in school.

When I was sixteen, I developed hypertension. The pulsating pain of a migraine was forming behind my eyes as I sat in my fourth period class. My head thumped to a rhythm I couldn’t keep up with.

The nurse’s office. I would go to the nurse’s office and get looked at because something was wrong.

I raised my hand and waited to be called on.

“Yes, Tamia?”

“Can I go to the nurse’s office? I’ve finished my work and I have a really bad migraine.”

My teacher nodded as I gathered my belongings to go to the nurse. I made my way up the stairs and opened the door to Nurse Jackie’s floor.

Nurse Jackie sat her desk, eating her lunch, when I knocked on her door.

“Come on in, how can I help you?”

“I have a really bad migraine and I’m not feeling so well because of it.”

“Well, let’s check your temperature,” she smiled as pulled out her thermometer. She ran it across my forehead and waited for the device to beep.

“Well, you don’t have a fever, 98.7. Do you normally get migraines like this?”

“They’ve been getting worse lately.” My head pounded at the same time the thought of checking my blood pressure popped into my head. “I know this is an odd question to ask but can you check my blood pressure?”

“Sure, do you have high blood pressure?”

I shook my head no.

“Does it run in your family?”

I nodded.

“Okay, well let’s just take a look.” She opened her white cabinets covered in stickers and pulled out her blood pressure cup. Hooking me up, she started the machine.

The machine began to inflate, released, and began to inflate again before releasing again and beeping.

Nurse Jackie looked at the machine with concern. “Well, that can’t be right. Let’s check your other arm.” And so, she did it again. Once again, the machine began to inflate, released, and began to inflate again before releasing again and beeping. “Your blood pressure really is that number. Okay, let me write that down.” She scribbled 140/95 on a sticky note.

“Am I okay?” I asked.

“Your blood pressure is a little high, but I want you to lay down for the remainder of fourth period and I’ll check it again while you are laying down and again before lunch.”

As I laid down, fear began to swallow me whole. The darkness of the room was a reminder that the pain in my brain was real. I closed my eyes, hoping the pain would subside. Would I get in trouble? Would my mom be upset? The more I thought about the “what if’s” the more my brain pulsated with an indescribable pain.

Nurse Jackie walked in and checked my blood pressure and like before it did the same thing. Inflate, release, inflate, release, beep. She scribbled the numbers down and said, “Just keep laying here”.

Before long fourth period ended, and it was time to check my numbers again.

“Okay, let’s see if it’s gotten any better,” she smiled but it didn’t reach her eyes like it normally did.

The machine began to inflate, released, and began to inflate again before releasing again and beeping. The smile slipped from her face.

I looked at the number she scribbled down, 148/105. From the look on her face, I knew this was beginning to get serious, but I was scared. Scared about all the “what if” scenarios I had created in my head.

“Nurse Jackie, can I just go to lunch? Please?” I didn’t want to be here anymore.

Her brows furrowed as uncertainty crossed her face.

“Please,” I begged.

“Alright, you can go to lunch, but you have to come back here afterwards so I can check your numbers before your next class.”

“Deal,” I gathered up my things before she could change her mind and left her office. I ran down the stairs to my locker to grab my lunchbox. As I made my way down the steps to

freedom, I saw Nurse Jackie waiting at the front office. She turned around and began walking towards me.

“I’m sorry but I can’t let you leave my office,” she said.

“I thought you said I could go to lunch?” I asked as she ushered me to the elevator to take us back to her floor.

“I know but I called my Head Nurse and she said that you cannot go to lunch. Your blood pressure is too high and with your age and how high the numbers are, you could have a stroke.”

My face fell. This was becoming extremely serious.

We made it back to her office and as I sat down to eat, she began to pull out the blood pressure machine.

We did the normal routine and so did the machine, 149/115. We kept at this and so did the machine. It was time to call my mom, or the ambulance would be coming to take me to the hospital themselves.

“Hi, Mrs. Branch, it’s Nurse Jackie from Barbara Ingram. I am calling because Tamia’s blood pressure is extremely high and unfortunately, she cannot be at school with the numbers that she has. We will need you to come pick her up or the ambulance will have to take her to the hospital. Okay, she’ll be here.” She hung up the phone and turned towards me. “Your mom is on her way. Let’s check your numbers again.”

By the time my mom arrived, and I left the school, my blood pressure was 150/127. She drove me to urgent care, my best friend’s parents meeting us there for the keys to my car that was still parked inside the parking garage across the street from my school.

My mother and I waited to see the urgent care doctor and when he finally took us back, he checked my numbers, 149/130.

“I’m sorry, her numbers are too high for us to help her. She needs to go the ER.”

Rushing me to the emergency room, my mother and I were beginning to panic again.

What was wrong with me?

The ER worked diligently to help me and find the answer to my continuously climbing blood pressure. From the moment I entered, I was rushed to a hospital bed via wheelchair. At this point, I was lightheaded and couldn’t walk, the pain in my head was excruciating, and we still didn’t have answers.

“Her blood pressure is still climbing, doctor.”

“We’re still waiting on her lab results for her blood and urine. In the meantime, let’s do a lumbar puncture.”

My heart monitor blared, causing the ring in my ears to amplify. My blood pressure was 165/130.

“Can you please turn that thing off!” I cried out.

My blood pressure was 190/151 when they admitted me to ICU for the night. There just weren’t any answers as to why a healthy sixteen-year-old girl’s blood pressure was on the verge of killing her. No bleeding in the brain, no positive tests. I was healthy but my blood pressure was on the verge of killing me.

“We’ll need to forcefully bring her blood pressure down with medication. That is all we can do at this moment,” the lead doctor had concluded.

“*God, please don’t let me die,*” was the last thought I remember having that night before falling asleep.

The overnight nurse checked on me throughout the night, waking me every so often to make sure I was doing okay. I remember looking over at my mom, sleep in the chair wrapped in

her black jacket as if it were a blanket. I peeped at the heart monitor, 142/100. My blood pressure was finally coming down. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

I went home the next morning. My blood pressure had become stable and low enough for me to go home but I wasn't out of the woods yet. I didn't return to school for a month. Until it was consistently under 140/90, I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. They never found the reason for such a terrible spike and decided it was hereditary hypertension.

When I was twenty-two, I lost a lot of blood. I was at work and attempting to live life without my medication. I didn't take it consistently and would forget if I had even taken it at all. I was living a much healthier lifestyle, had lost over forty pounds, was exercising regularly, what did I need to take blood pressure medication for?

"Tamia, I think your nose might be bleeding," Becky pointed out to me as we were concluding our quarterly meeting.

I rushed to my desk to look in my mirror. At the entry of my left nostril was a small red string. I grabbed a tissue and wiped it away. As I began to type away at my keyboard, something wet fell on my lip. I touched my lip and looked. It was blood.

That's when it began to pour. Blood began to spill from my left nostril into my hand as I grabbed tissues to help it stop. I rushed to the bathroom and grabbed paper towels as the blood began to seep through the tissues.

"Are you okay?"

I turned to see an older coworker, Ms. Gupta.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm okay. Just a little nosebleed."

She stepped closer to the sink and saw the amount of blood I was losing. “That is not a little nosebleed. Tilt your head back, we’ve got to get your nose to stop bleeding.”

Ms. Gupta began to take over the situation and for a moment, the blood stopped. The end of a clot hung from my nostril and even though I had gently removed it, the bleeding had begun again. By the time we had finally got the bleeding to stop, the sink was covered in red and white tissues, paper towels and bloody water.

“It looks like a murder scene in here.”

I looked up to see my task lead, Amy, in the doorway.

“I’m cleaning it up now and will be out shortly,” I smiled to her before turning my attention to the mess at hand.

When I made it back to my desk, I was beginning to feel lightheaded and with each passing minute it was getting worse. I needed to get home.

I got up and walked to Becky’s office. Inside was Becky, my manager Jenna, and my task lead Amy inside.

“Tamia are you okay? Amy was just telling us you were having a severe nosebleed?”

“Yes, ma’am. I think I need to go home though so I can see my doctor. I’m feeling a bit lightheaded and would like to be on my side of town in case it gets worse. I can sign on at home.”

“Don’t feel rushed to sign back on,” Jenna cut in. “Let us know when you make it home and what the doctor says.”

I nodded before gathering my things and leaving. The car ride was a blur, and the only thing I could think about was making it home. A fog was beginning to wrap around my brain when my mother called me. I answered through my car.

“Tamia, where are you?”

“I’m in Hagerstown. Almost at the house.”

“Just come straight to my job.”

“Mom, I really don’t know how to get to your job right now. The only thing my brain can focus on right now is the house.”

“Okay, head to the house. I’m on my way to come get you.”

I sat in my driveway with my car on when my mom pulled up. The amount of time I had been sitting there was unknown and quite honestly how I had gotten there in the first place was too. My brain was shutting down.

My mom worked with my doctor and before we were in the building, they already had a room ready for me. The nurse checked my blood pressure.

“Her blood pressure is very high,” the nurse stated.

“Her body is trying to release the pressure,” my doctor responded, “Tamia, have you been taking your medicine?”

I began to cry as I shook my head no. “I didn’t think I needed to, and I don’t want to be on medicine for the rest of my life.”

I was put back on my meds that day. My job had me work from home for the next two days so I could fully recover. I never stopped taking my meds after that.

When I was twenty-three, the pandemic hit, and I had a mental breakdown. A relationship I knew was toxic to my health and the thoughts I had been forced to finally sit with were suffocating me. I laid in my dark room and just cried. I was tired, emotionally, physically,

mentally, and spiritually. I had nothing else to give into something that I was too dependent on to lose because I was afraid of being alone. Afraid of what I would do if I were truly by myself.

And then it happened, April 30th, 2020.

“I don’t want to do this anymore. I know I’m not treating you the way you deserve so I think it would be best if we broke up.”

“I told you; you weren’t good enough.” The words whispered in the back of my head.

“Is there anything I can do to fix this?” I asked tears spilling from my eyes.

“No. I’m not putting in the effort. I think this is for the best.”

“You aren’t worth it.”

He hung up the phone and I was left alone, with my thoughts.

“Trash.”

“Worthless.”

“You should just kill yourself.”

I laid in my bed for two weeks after that. I barely ate, I barely drank, I barely moved. All I could do was lay in my bed and will the thoughts to pass. I needed help.

“God, I don’t want to die. Please, give me a sign on what I should do,” I cried.

The following day after those two weeks, my parents told me that my siblings were going to Georgia for the summer and that they thought it would be good for me to tag along.

“I don’t know if my job will let me go, even though we are working from home. I’ll ask,” I responded at the dinner table as I played with my food. I wasn’t hungry.

“Have you talked to Bonita about how you’re feeling?” my mom asked.

“No, but I’ve been thinking about possibly getting back on my antidepressants again.”

“I think that would be a good idea but only if you’re actually going to take them.”

I scheduled an appointment with Ms. Bonita the next day and like the doctor she is, she squeezed me in the same day.”

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Ms. Bonita, I can’t manage my depression. It’s getting bad and I need help,” I cried.

She diagnosed me with Major Depressive Disorder and put me back on my meds. “I heard your brother and sister were going to Georgia, are you going?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“I think it would be really good for you if you can.”

“Okay.”

The next day I messaged my job and asked if it were okay if I worked in Georgia for the month that I would be gone. Without hesitation they agreed if we were working from home, it was fine.

With my new meds in tow, I packed my bags and left for Georgia the weekend after Mother’s Day with my siblings. The adjustment period with my medication took three months. I lost weight, couldn’t keep food down and I was on constant watch with my family, but they didn’t give up on me. Days were passing and I was slowly getting better, feeling better. Being alone wasn’t scary and the voices began to disappear. Then God sent me an angel.

“Hi, my name is Chace.”

At twenty-four, I am mentally stable and loved by a man who also knows there is a God.

Melanin War Cry

In a world full of color

How do we only see in black and white?

In a world full of infinities and make believe

How do we only see in ones and zeros?

As if there aren't any heroes

To save me

My people

The ones different than you

Because my melanin is not a curse

Not your verse to sing about

My skin is my song

That's been aching for far too long

For justice to be served

And for our voices to be heard

For you to wake up and listen

So, we can stop coming up missing

I will no longer stay silent

About the violence written in my history

About my nightmares becoming a reality

I will not be hushed

By the hands that clutch my broken soul
Watching the people that look like me
Across the screen and wondering
Will I be next? Will my brother be next?
Will anyone I love or know be next?
Because I'm not trying to be here for a good time
I'm trying to be here for a long time
Long enough to plant my seeds and grow my roots
Blooming my future into what I choose
So bare witness for the time to come
Because we will be a part of it
And when the war is won
We will be one
No different from one another
Learning how to share love for each other
That's the future I want to tuck me in at night
The future that kisses my head and says "Everything will be alright"
The future my ancestors wanted me to have
But the future our children will have
Because we have begun
And we can't stop until we're done.

What is Adulthood?

If you look up the definition of “adulthood” you will see that it says, “The state or period of being fully grown, fully developed, or of age” (Dictionary, n.d.). This is important to know because in no way does it mention adulthood is where you have the answers or, at the very least, have your life together. You are simply in the next chapter of the book we call life. My mother always told me that children don’t come with manuals but now, at 25, I’m realizing she forgot to tell me adulting doesn’t come with one either.

It’s incredibly interesting to think back to my childhood because it seems like yesterday but also as if it were miles away. Little moments of wanting what was inevitable, thinking if I wished it hard enough it would come faster than it already was. When I was five, I wanted to grow up because I didn’t like being told to take a nap, afraid I’d miss something in the time that my eyelids were pressed together. When I was seven, I remember wanting to grow up to stay up past my bedtime because it didn’t seem fair that I had to go to bed at 8:30pm but my parents got to stay up longer. When I was nine, I wanted to be older so that I could do whatever I wanted without my parents being able to tell me no. There are a million tiny moments that fill my life and like stars, make up my universe and this very moment of my adulthood. Everything I ever wished for came true and yet, now as an adulthood, I sometimes wish to be a kid again. To not have responsibilities, to see the world for the first time again and to relive in the moments of imagination and make believe.

Adulthood use to scare me. The moment you realize that adulthood is just you “winging it” and hoping for the best is when you realize your parents did the best that could with what they had. My parents messed up, a lot. But now, as an adult, I know they tried their best. They tried to give me the lives they didn’t have and made sure I knew I was loved regardless of our

differences because they were, and still are, doing “adulthood” the best that they can just like their parents and their parents before them.

It’s interesting how your perspective changes as you grow, which I think is what adulthood truly is. It just a different perspective of life. My father and I were watching a show, leaned back in the reclined chairs of my parent’s living room, with a glass of wine each, when in the episode of the show we were watching the child character said, “Adults have all the answers” and I burst into laughter on que.

My father turned towards me. “What’s so funny?”

“The fact that, that kid is in for a rude awaking. I can say, as an adult now, we mostly definitely don’t have all of the answers. That’s the secret. Adults are faking it until they make it.”

He smiled and chuckled to himself. “So, you figured it out?”

“Oh yeah. Adults are really just bigger kids with responsibilities and a bit more freedom, but we know nothing. The world is too vast for us to have all the answers. What adults do have, however, is alcohol. So, I’ll have this glass of wine with you and keep trying to figure it out.”

He chuckled and raised his glass to me before we continued to watch the show together. It was that moment when I realized adulthood was perspective and what you made of it. Just like your childhood, it is truly your view of the world and how you decide to proceed with the information you are gathering from it. You are never done learning because you will never have all of the answers. There is only one being who will have all of the answers and that is God himself. I like to think sometimes that when we die our life after this will be filled with some of the answers we didn’t gather before but the only people who knows what happens after this life are the ones that are already gone. However, while I’m still here, I’m going to keep learning and keep growing because that’s adulthood.

Epistolary poem (Letter poem) To my Unborn Child

To my Unborn Child,

I write this hoping that you will know I will love you more than I love myself. That you will be the best parts of me. The parts of me that I was afraid to love. Afraid to use. And afraid to be. That you will be both the aquatic skies and the cotton candy clouds. That you will be the free dancing stars and the disco ball moon. That you will be both the rising and setting sun in my eyes. You will be my favorite hello and my saddest goodbye.

I write this so you will know I will protect you before myself. From the minute my body is your home, you will know what love is. You will feel my heartbeat with yours as I nourish you and let you grow inside me. And when my womb is too small, know that my arms will always make room for your growing frame. Know that the world is your oyster, and I am just so lucky to be a part of it.

I write this so you know I am ready to be your mother. I am ready for the kind of love that cannot be replicated. The kind of love that is truly at first sight. The kind of love that only we will share. I am ready to watch you grow into the dreams I collected from dust but let you mold into art. You are all I could ever dream of. So, even when the clouds cry or the world is dark know that I am here because there will always be light. Know that my love goes beyond our fights because there will always be peace. You are a part of me, my heart in human form.

I love you forever,

Your future mother

Thank you kiss

On nights like these

Where I am wide awake

Right next to your resting form

I sit and wonder

How someone like you

Looked at someone like me and thought

I will teach them the beauty in love

How light rains are tiny kisses

And sunrises are hello

That windy days are my caresses

And that goodbyes don't exist in true love

That even apart

You remain in the heart

That true love is more than words can explain

Our love is more than words can explain

Oh, how did I

Get so lucky?

To be loved is one thing

But to learn love is another

Because I can't love you

Without loving me

So, thank you

Thank You

To the woman who did the work,

We did it. We really did it and I just have to say, thank you. Thank you for never giving up on our dreams. Thank you for always fighting for what we wanted in life. And thank you for always believing in us even when it wasn't the easiest thing to do. You are so strong, and I am just so incredibly proud of you.

I won't lie, there was a moment where I almost forgot who we were. Almost forgot who *you* were. I almost forgot how powerful you could be when you set your mind to something. I almost forgot how important making a difference or changing the world for the better is to you. I almost forgot how smart you could be and how you've always wanted to make sure no one ever felt alone on your watch. I almost forgot the best pieces of what make you, you.

The ability to make it this far used to be a foreign idea to us. When we first started in undergrad we couldn't get pass the fact that college was expensive. And for the longest two years of our life, we didn't know how we'd make it work when we had to take that break. But then we said enough was enough in 2019. That our credits were collecting dust and needed to be used for something, anything. And so, we picked ourselves back up and got to work. We finished our bachelors in 2021 and immediately started our masters after that.

It wasn't easy. None of the work was ever easy but all of it has been worth it. Every second, every minute, every hour, every smile, every tear, every moment has been worth it and has put us directly on the path for where we need to be in this very moment. Our first master's degree is about to be in the books, and our second master's degree will begin very shortly. It will come as its own chapter with challenges and struggles I know we'll be able to overcome. You're a fighter and there isn't anything you can't do when you set your mind to do it.

I know you've wondered from time to time if we've made GG proud. If she's watching us smiling at everything we've accomplished. There isn't a doubt in my mind that we're making her proud daily.

So, thank you. Truly thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely,

The woman crossing the stage

Because there was Darkness there was Healing, and so there was Light.