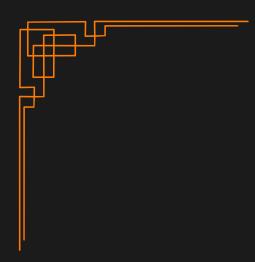


"WHEN THE WORLDS ON FIRE"

BY: MALACHI DAVIDSON

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS, SHORT
STORIES, POETRY AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
PHOTOGRAPHY

TREASURES FOR ANOTHER DAY"
- MALACHI, THE POET



FOR BLACK MEN & BOYS

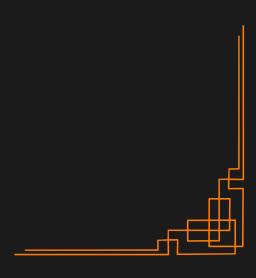


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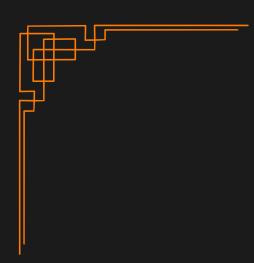
Trapped, watching as the world around us has been set ablaze. This fire blazes in the souls of everyone who's sick of this "world."

As we've grown older, we've started to notice things. It's not as simple as we've been fooled to believe. Things are bad—really bad. Despite what we've been taught to think, there's hope. Things are only this bad because someone, or something wants it that way. They hate us, and it's only fair, because we hate their world.

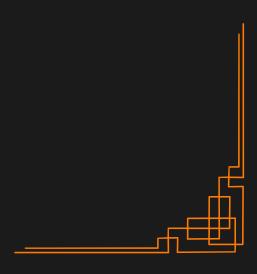
This fire an heirloom, a relic, born from a passion much older than us. It ain't nothing to play with. When used incorrectly, we're lost...and we know it. So many are lost, it's easy to lose yourself in their world. As quickly as you find your way, you could lose it again.

Just as you lost your way, you can find it once more. If your flame is weak, let the flames of those around you empower you.

Together, our fires will clean this world.



WORLD'S ON FIRE



Royalty By: Malachi, the Poet

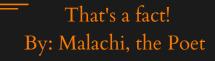
"Keep your lineage in mind, And your scepter in hand. The Chosen Ones, the truth to find, No onslaught you can't withstand"

Echoes always in my head, The wise teachings of the Sage: "Trust yourself or you'll be dead, Free your mind from out their cage."

The Chosen Ones By: Malachi, the Poet

They disagree? That's fine with me Cause ion need *their* recognition. My family fought hard me, I'll bring my dreams into fruition

Without permission, I am great.
Throw your shade, my glow is true
Your proven "truths" we will deflate
The Chosen Ones, we're comin' through.



We ain't falling for your tricks, Or, your f*cking politics. Know a scam when we see it— That's a fact!

'Strength' runs through my lineage,
My spirit cannot be stripped
Live my life to the fullest—
That's a fact!

Try to thwart us with your lies; White supremacist disguised... They agendas bout as dangerous as sugar— That's a fact!

"It's always bout race."

Come and say it to my face,

But you afraid to face your demons—

That's a fact!

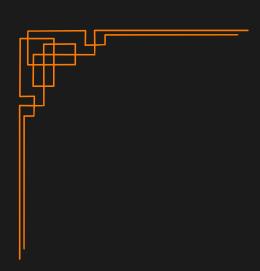
There was a time, not long ago
My people hanging from them ropes
Killing us is part of your culture—
That's a fact!

Askin' "how could you blame me? His-tory got me angry" Victim blaming, yeah, they do it all the time— That's a fact!

I been fighting for freedom Don't care if *they* not believin' Imma get it if you on my side or not— That's a fact!

Times are changin.'
Power structure's rearranging.
Keep fighting for the goal—
That's a fact!

It's liberation we chase, And degradation we hate. To hoard is to kill— That's a fact!



"change" By Malachi, the Poet

Hopefully with some time, all of this sh*t will change.

Since I opened my eyes, everyone's gone insane.

We all see the same problem: "The Man" steady robbin'.

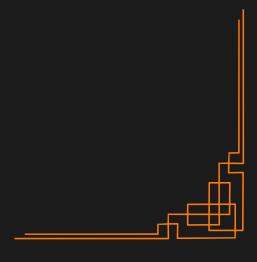
Another life lost:

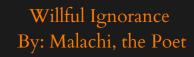
To the ground or the cell.

They tell me to pray for God, don't—

Tell them, I pray for hell

Cause what did I get by turning the other cheek?





I look around,
And I see that we are lost.
We not in search,
Yet we know we pay the cost.

We live in a world,
With a price on our lives.
We live in a world
In pursuit of a vice,

And like mice,
You can catch us chasing the cheese.
Many fall for the trap,
Caught 'em slippin' with ease.

Can you blame the mouse?
For falling for *their* trap?
Desiring things they were told to believe?
Acquiring things that were never of need?

One could say they never learned How to look 'tween the seams. Naive or ignorant? Either way, it's serene!

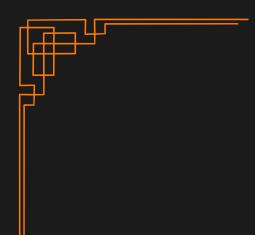
The way they sacrifice life, Tie themselves to the track; Choosing to never know, Rather than fighting back.



<u>Let the Fog Clear:</u> By: Malachi, the Poet

My head is foggy, I—
I need a break. I—
I been working, I—
Might f*cking break.
Drums are steady beating, I—
Can feel the sounds,
With every pulse I shake, I—
I—

Pressures rising up
My high is coming down.
Was going pound-for-pound, but
Could I last another round?
I just need a little break...



Are You Alive? By: Malachi, the Poet

A consistency of life is fear
As simple as can be.
All forms of life experience it
All cannot overcome.

To experience fear is to be alive But to live by it—is to die, Suppressing imagination by way of fear Is not to be alive.

Fear, most influential of them all Limits, alters, obstructs and destroys. Fear tricks the mind, fools the eyes, and grasps the heart. Fear swallows the bravest of souls.

To live under limits is a façade.

To live is to experience,

To challenge, to love, to choose;

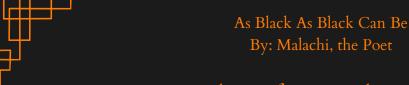
To live in fear, is to avoid all of the above.

Then what is fear?
The hand which pulls the strings?
The thought which drives the conscious?
The butterfly quarreling in your gut?

Fear dresses in blue, as deep as the ocean, Fear inverts one's world; Fear turns the unknown to the unventured; Fear's source of strength is your weakness.

It exists in between, not to be seen
It's filter alters one's perception,
It turns a spider to creature, the shadows to a monster;
It's true fear is to lose control.

To challenge is to fight
To fight is to grow.
Fear is yet another tactic of the Simulation.
In fighting fear, you'll learn to live.



I was born on floating wood
I drifted beside the graves
of many before me.
I touched land and found hope
had gotten lost while out at sea,
I was forced to find it on my own.

I am a Survivor

I watched as venom rampaged
through the souls of the lost.
I felt pity for the doers,
misunderstanding the cost.
I knew hatred sought a home
in this broad chest of mine
but in me, one could not find.

I am a Survivor

I followed the trail of the goddess
who strongly wished upon a star
in constant pursuit of a north so far.
I found solace in my freedom
but found pain with the thought
of those who were left behind.
I am a Survivor

I drew a line in my skin
for every soul that was lost
 until I was black as black can be.
 I learned to seek love for the pile
 of all the bodies defiled
 and change the world a single tear at a time.

I am a Survivor

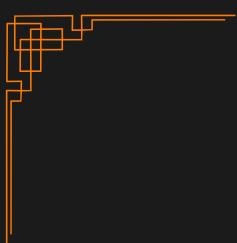




Life By: Malachi, the Poet

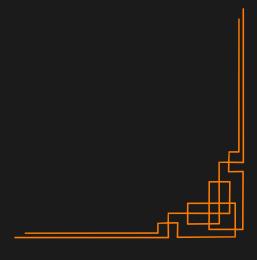
Fatigue's in the air.
Wish I were unaware.
Avoid the glare of its eyes.
Subtle, but I do try
To catch the fleeting breaths
For the wind has left me dry.
Gasping,
In desperate need,
Chasing the fleeting embers of life
Until I'm left cold
Only to be warmed by rest.
Though, rest, in this world
Comes with death.
And for me, death is lame.
Why wait when that's all we do?

Though fatigued, cold



Redemption By: Malachi, the Poet

Hymns of redemption, we chant them out loud
Conjuring strength; making ancestors proud
All the pain that they suffered, and the power we've mustered
Means nothing if we lose the will to fight
So, with all my might, I keep pushing--despite the challenge in my way
Cause in my heart I know we're meant to overcome today
By the pain that courses its way through my veins
I know we're not on the same leveled plane
In my soul burns the fire of every father and mother
That used their life to shield that of another
And in their strength and retort, I found the will to fight
And if I don't use it right, I know together, we might.

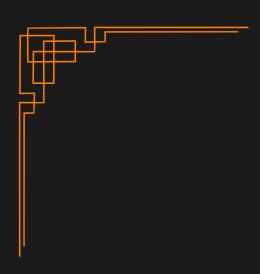




Blurred vision, these mistakes from my past
Unfortunately harass
and won't allow me to heal.
I'm strugglin' keepin' up
With my end of the deal.
That's why I'm working on myself
Cause I love you for real.

Lost and never found
Until you came around.
You ignited the light.
Encouraged me to fight.

Sometimes I stare in the mirror and I don't know who I am The image which I perceive is that of a broken man.



Stand Tall By: Malachi, the Poet

Stand tall, Black man,
For all is in reach.
Grab the curses of old
Throw 'em all below your feet.

Keep your stride, Black man For you MUST rise True failure never visits Those by whom it's despised. Designed By I By: Malachi, the Poet

Will they ever understand me? Would they try if they could?

It's easy to label me.

Use all the terms that come to mind— Just know that you could never Define me. I am of my own making.

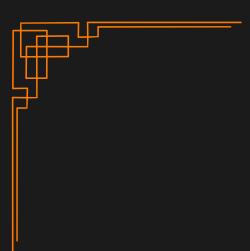
The future's for the taking.

My tries have been forsaken

By the people deemed

"Important."

Reality is distorted Right before our I's.



Blur By: Malachi, the Poet

Living outside the light, Being myself 's a fight. Stressin', high as a kite I pray my future is bright.

Vision blurry as hell.
Drowing, but they couldn't tell
I'm stuck under a spell
The depression is real.

My focus is scattered.

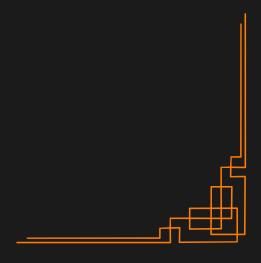
Do my feelings matter?

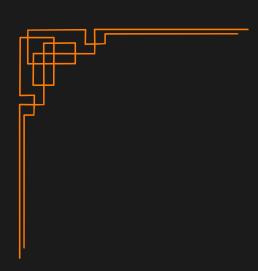
My confidence has been battered

I'm not deserving of love.

Just Playing the Hand I Was Dealt By: Malachi, the Poet

I encourage your challenge, It brings the best out of me. It forces me to acknowledge Parts of myself I don't see. Without your challenge of survival, Where the hell would I be?





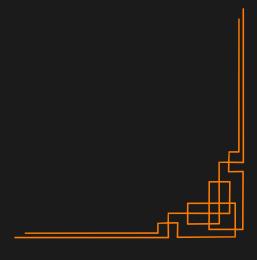
A Boy Named "Justice" By: Malachi, the Poet

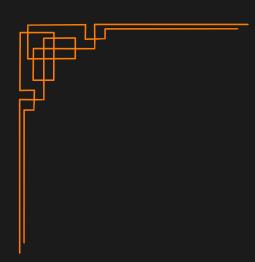
What a useless word in a world like this.

He prefers "Jazz,"

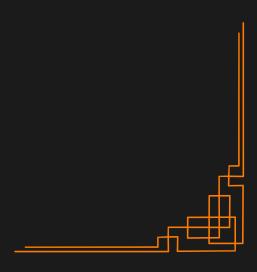
it's Black and riddled with blues,

just like him.





ASHES



Jazz on the Block (Part 1) By Malachi Davidson

Everything he'd worked for has finally come to fruition. Like every teenager, Jazz swore that he's already seen it all. He learned all there was to know: his life was fixed, his future dim, and his chances low. The concept of hope is foreign to him.

Jazz is sitting across from his attorney at central bookings.

His lawyer, the slim white guy who clearly drinks too much coffee, is in a rush to go wherever someone with that much hair gel spends a Thursday evening.

"What will it be, Mr. Walker?" he asks, checking his watch for the third time in the last minute.

What's the rush? Can't he read the room? Does he not see the graduate? Smell the refreshing scent of success in the air?

Maybe not. Jazz didn't smell it either, which was odd.

Justice is a kid from the block, plain and simple.

The rules of the Block are as follows: make money and stay alive. It's easy, in theory; just remember that the hunger of the starving knows no bounds.

On these streets, "crime" is a pseudonym for business. The hood is full of businessmen, and they made money, *real* money. In just a day, the block saw over a million dollars, and everyone knew it.

That's A LOT of money, especially on a block where kids go to sleep hungry most nights. They would do *anything* to eat.

To eat is to survive, which means seeing the next day. That's why workin' the block is the most dangerous job in the country, and there aren't any benefits either. No 401k, no dental plan, nothing; just a chance to get some food on your plate.

Justice knew from a young age that he wasn't shit, and that he didn't have shit either. That was okay with him, because he knew that surviving was just enough.

There was too much to protect and not enough to lose, that's why Justice never took any chances. Death is common 'round these parts, as common as the graffiti which seasons the dull building which crowd the streets. He watched his back. He sat facing the door at restaurants, he never went somewhere without first knowing who was expected to be there, and he never left without his gun.

Justice had seen some outlandish sh*t in his life. He'd seen people be stripped down to their underwear in the freezing cold for their designer gear. He'd seen friends he'd known since kindergarten lying still on the concrete. He knew very well what people were capable of, and in that, himself.

He grew to become desensitized to this world, and his feelings; it was the only way he felt he could survive in this life. He learned that there was some thrill when living this way, a sort of gamble. The odds are off, and the chances at failure, *or worse*, is extremely high, but, with some luck, if he did things the right way, was at the right place at the right time, and stayed true to the rules of the game, he'd have a shot at some real money.

It's safe to say that Justice was very familiar with Death. They saw one another often, but only in passing-Death was always too busy to hang around.

In all honesty, he preferred it that way. He didn't care much for Death, and feared that if he ever got too close and showed even a sliver of contempt, Death would visit him next.

The first time they met while Justice was awaiting his first breath. Joy Walker, Justice's father, was murdered just days before Justice's birth. It was 5:54am when his body was found, frozen on the cold streets of the block.

Everybody knew Joy Walker. He was a large man with a broad frame and a grim face to match. One of those faces that made you think twice before you tested him. He was a hardworking family man, who was very sweet once you got to know him.

He grew up on this block, and worked as the principal for the local high school. He sought to raise, not just his own, but every kid born on this block. He wanted a better life, for his community and himself

"Your father was a better man than you could ever imagine J."

Justice had heard his mother recite these words too many times. He'd grown sick of them. He couldn't tell if it was true, or just another of her attempts to steer Justice away from a life in the streets, after all, it was the streets that had killed his father.

On a block like this, there were many different companies. Where there's money, there's competition, and one of the fiercest competitors was *The Apostles*. They're known for their business savviness and domineering market tactics.

The head of *The Apostles* was Mr. Q.

Since Joy's death, Mr. Q and his wife looked out for the Walkers. They lived across the street from them, and their youngest son, Gabe Jr., was the same age as Justice.

Mr. Q, despite what his chosen career path might indicate, took great care of his family, the *whole* family. He loved his wife and children dearly, but they weren't the only mouths he had to feed. His employees were young, wild and hungry, and he had to keep them satiated, or morale and productivity rates would drop.

Mr. Q was known on the block, and throughout the whole hood, and Justice thought it was the coolest thing ever. Whenever they would go anywhere, everyone greeted Mr. Q, and Justice respected that.

It wasn't long before everyone noticed Justice by his side. He was, and would always be known as Joy's kid. His father's legacy was too grand to be ignored, and though he welcomed the love he got from the hood, he hated that it was always tied to his father.

"Why does this man haunt my every move?" thought Justice.

With time though, Justice learned to ignore it, or at the very least, keep his anger bottled inside without alerting others of his real feelings. He was more concerned with making a name for himself anyway, and luckily, he had someone by his side who knew exactly where he was coming from.

Gabriel Jr, or Gabe for short, was Justice's best friend. Mr. Q made them promise that, no matter what, they'd have each other's back. It was a promise Justice had taken with the utmost certainty.

They had always gone to the same school and sat in the same classes, so it made sense that when the time was right, they'd start working the block together too.

"You boys are gettin' old," says Mr. Q, "How old are yah now?"

"Come on Pops, you know how old I am. And Jazz is like 16 now right?" says Gabe.

"Well, in like 2 days I'll be" says Justice.

"That's great man," says Mr Q, "I was a lot like yah, except I had waaaay more money. Y'allYa'll motherfuckers is broke. Like real broke. Now, I ain't had no problem feeding yall, y'all my sons, so I look after yah, but you ain't gonna be moochin' offa' me forever."

"Yeah Pops, I know man. I want my own money anyway. You won't even let me buy them new Brons" says Gabe.

"Man, if I was making my own money, my momma wouldn't have to work so hard," said Justice aloud. He didn't mean to share his thoughts, usually during these conversations he's quiet and attentive, but the topic at hand was of a particular interest to him.

He valued money, he knew that it's what made the world go round, and he desired it more than anything. In fact, he dreamed of having so much that he could lose some and wouldn't be able to tell. With money, he'd never have to worry about anything again, and neither would Momma. He could move her off the block and into one of them nice houses. It's what she deserved.

Surprised by Justice's outburst, Mr. Q continued on with the conversation. "You know, if yah are serious about making some money, we always got room for new interns with *The Apostles*."

Justice's mother had put much effort in dissuading her son away from these companies. She had already lost someone to that senseless violence before, and refused to let it happen again. He never saw these companies in the same light which she did, but out of respect for her, he had his reservations.

He had already spoken up, and he knew that Mr. Q wasn't one to ever let up. So instead of going through the full five minutes it would take for Mr. Q to squeeze Justice's answer out, he gave it before he could even ask.

"No thanks Mr Q," said Justice, "my mom would be disappointed in me if I did."

"Saw that one coming" whispers Gabe.

"Shut up man, you don't know nothin" says Justice with the clapback.

"Listen man, you know I love your mom, but you're not always gonna please her. You gotta live for you man."

"Nah man, my mom is all I have left man, you wouldn't understand."

"Nah nigga, you don't understand. Pops is here giving us an opportunity to make some serious money and you're gonna turn it down? Even after saying yourself that you could use this money. How mad would your mom be if you made enough money to move her off the block? That money is out there nigga, you just not lookin'."

"Alright, that's enough. Justice don't gotta do nothing he don't want to," says Mr. Q, "I won't lie tho', it's a lil' disappointin' to hear you shoot it down like that. There is some real money to be made out here, I wouldn't steer you wrong, you know that."

"Yeah, I know Mr. Q. I'm sorry."

"Aye man, if you change your mind just let me know. I'm headed to the office," says Mr. Q as he leaves the room. Gabe and Justice sit in silence. Justice felt...weird. Gabe was right, he did want to make that money, he even unconsciously spoke his mind at the very thought of it. That, and the idea of disappointing Mr. Q sat heavily on his mind.

"You probably could've paid your mom's rent if we went to work with him," says Gabe.

"Yo, shut up nigga, damn. At least give me time to think about it." says Justice.

"Yeah yeah, take as much time as you need, but time is money, don't ever forget that." says Gabe.

For the rest of the night, and all of the next day, all Justice could think about was money. It was a very tempting offer. Of course he wanted the money, he *needed* it, and so did his mother.

"Would she even take the money if she knew where it was coming from? I bet with the right amount, she'd have to take it. What's she gonna do, keep struggling when the solution is right in front of her? She may be upset, but I think she'd at least understand," he thought to himself.

Two days later, and after some deep-thinking, Justice, Gabe and Mr. Q went out to grab a bite to eat and celebrate.

"Happy birthday lil' nigga," says Mr. Q to Justice while patting his shoulder. "Your old, man, damn near a grown ass man now"

"A grown man by street standards" interrupts Gabe.

"Yeah, you're right Gabe," says Mr. Q, nodding at his son's remarks.

"Thanks Mr. Q, I guess I'm "old," but I don't really feel it." says Justice.

"It's cause we broke," laughs Gabe, "if you was making a grown man's money, you wouldn't feel like a boy."

"Whatever man," shoots Justice.

"Well, since it's the topic at hand," says Mr. Q while reaching into his pocket and pulling out a thick manila envelope, "here's a little gift, courtesy of *The* Apostles."

After reaching into the envelope and finding what looks like a thick stack of \$100 bills, Justice was stunned

"Wha-What am I supposed to do with all of this?" he asked.

"Pay yo mama's bills?" asks Gabe in a sarcastic manner

"You could do that, or you could buy whatever the hell you want. The thing is, that's just a piece of some of our profits from today. Fridays are always the busiest." says Mr. Q.

Justice sat there in shock. He had honestly never seen this much money at once, right here in his lap. And it's his. He was lost in thought going over all the ways he could throw that money away, until Mr. Q began speaking again.

"You know Justice, this isn't me trying to force you into being an intern with *The Apostles*. The choice is yours, as is this money. Figured out what you're gonna do with it yet?" asked Mr. Q

"I think--I think I should give it to my mom. But if I were to take up that internship, how long until I make this much money?" asked Justice.

"That amount right there, that really ain't shit J. It's only three bands, we make that in a few hours man. *The Apostles* really got the block on lock." replies Mr. Q

"Wait, did my ears just deceive me, or is he *actually* coming around to the idea? I thought you wasn't tryna disappoint mom dukes?" says Gabe.

"Yo man, you a special kind of asshole, you know that right?" replies Justice.

"Yeah, I know, and it's why everyone loves me. But seriously man? Why the change of heart?" asks Gabe.

"If I'm being honest, I've been searching for a way to the paper for a long ass time. Really ever since I found out what money was. My Pops ain't never done nothing to help me out, so I been handicapped from the jump. I thought about getting a regular job and shit, but it'll take months before I even come close to *this* kind of money. You said I could make that in a day?" he asks Mr. Q.

"That's light cheese lil' man" says Mr. Q, "The longer you work, the more you make. The customer base is there, and they ain't goin' no where. They know we got the best shit, and for the best prices. You don't even gotta move much. They gonna come to you like moths to a light. Like I said man, light cheese. You really wanna join *The Apostles?*" asks Mr. Q, looking intently at Justice.

He felt Gabe's glare burning a hole in the side of his face. The pressure was rising, and his window to reply was quickly closing shut.

"Y-yeah, I'm deadass" announces Justice, who was happy to see his words please Mr. Q.

"See pop's, I told you he'd come around," says Gabe.

"He is a smart kid, just like his old man," says Mr. Q after shooting Gabe. a stone-faced look.

"Please don't bring him up, especially at a time like this" Justice blurts out.

"Aye man, my fault. This ain't got nothing to do with your old man. Once you join us, you'll become your own man. You can be whatever kind of man *you* choose." says Mr. Q. "How does that sound?"

"That fucking fire" replied Justice, "thanks for everything you've done for me and my moms, it's a pleasure doing business with you."

"It's always a pleasure to start working with someone who wants to eat. We got enough to feed everyone too," said Mr. Q while shaking Justice's hand.

After paying the dinner bill, Mr. Q invited Justice and Gabe. to follow him outside. Instead of walking to the parking lot where they had left the car, Mr. Q led them to an alleyway behind the store, where a white van with tinted-out windows and four flat tires sat.

"Get in the back," said Mr. Q. "We got some business to take care of."

Without knowing what to expect, Justice entered into the back of the van where he found it all but empty, except for the beat-up duffle bag which sat in the middle.

"Open the bag," directed Mr. Q.

Gabe. walked over to the bag, almost hitting his head on the roof of the van. He slid it toward Justice, who found the thing he feared the most.

A gun. Actually, two guns. "Why the hell are there two guns in this bag? What the hell is going on?" he thought to himself.

'Confused' must've been tattooed across his forehead, because Mr. Q began to explain everything.

"It's simple, really," began Mr. Q, "to join the company, you gotta prove that you're ready to do anything for that bottom-line. So, to show that, you gotta go lay somebody down. Don't worry tho', you might like this assignment. The person who you gotta kill is Shotgun B."

"Kill?" asks Justice, "Nah. I'm not doing that. I'm sorry Mr. Q, I don't wanna disappoint you again, but I'm not cut out for that, is there anyth--"

"What?" interrupts Mr. Q, "when two men shake hands, they enter a contract, ain't no take backs nigga. I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. Man up, cause in a few hours, you gonna be an *Apostle*."

"Now take that bag and this key. Can you drive?--actually, it doesn't matter. Gabe, drive to the corner of Smith and 8th Place and post up facing the deli. You gonna see it, its bright as shit. Then the two of yah," says Mr. Q while pointing at Justice and then Gabe, "are gonna wait for that greedy motherfucker to hit the store. He's gotta restock for the weekend (laughing). He's definitely gonna come out, and you," now pointing at Justice, "you're gonna be the one to lay him down."

"You hear me?" he asks Justice.

Justice is in shock. Mr. Q steps closer to Justice which shakes the entire van.

"Y-yeah, yeah, I hear you" he replies.

Q eased his posture, pleased by those words.

Justice froze.

"Alright, we been here long enough, time for yah to head out," ordered Q, "and when yah finish, meet me at the house. We'll be waiting for yah, so make it quick."

Justice, a shell of his former self, follows Gabe out of the van and down the street. Justice was horrified, and wore it on his sleeve. He was lost in thought, trying to process how quickly things had escalated. He felt trapped. Stuck. Despite his every wish, he followed Gabe as the sense of terror made its way to his very core.

"Damn, why he had to park the car so far? That man don't be thinking sometimes. That's why we gotta get in bro. Things're gonna be different once I join *The Apostles*. Watch."

Surprised, and enraged, Justice asked "how you not shaken up at the idea of this shit? Like we boutta kill someone bro?"

"Listen man, I feel you, but at the same time, I don't. I learned a long time ago that feelings wasn't gonna do me any good in this line of work," says Gabe, "leave them shits somewhere and never look back. Them shits get us killed bro, and it's the only way you won't lose your mind. Bro we done already seen so much shit, it's easier to just embrace it."

"I can't do this Gabe" says Justice.

"Cut that shit out man," shoots Gabe "You seen the look on my pop's face the last time you *pussied* out? You don't wanna know what comes with those looks man. Trust me, we get this shit over with real quick, and then we start making money, and you know what comes with the cheese nigga. Come on man, I got your back, here go the car right here, let's get to it."

Justice fell back into a silence. Gabe took to this new life and its new rules just like he did to everything else. He lives for a challenge and this was an opportunity for him to show his worth on the biggest stage. He'd known that joining *The Apostles* was in his future, and accepted that long ago, and if he was gonna do it, he wanted to be calling the shots.

"I see you over there bro, quiet as shit" says Gabe, "Bro listen, my Pops didn't want to tell you this, but we not just going to commit some "heinous act of violence." Shotgun B is the nigga that killed your father 16 years ago, he's the reason that you and Ms. Walker been struggling.

"What? Nah, you lying bro. You just tryna trick me into doing the shit bro. Haha. You real funny"

"--I'm not joking Justice. It's known information. The cops don't ever look deep enough, but that don't mean the streets nor looking. The streets is always watching," says Gabe.

"Yo what? To be honest, I don't even care bro. That's supposed to make me mad? My Pops ain't never did nothing for me, and killing someone ain't changing shit about it," responds Justice.

"Yeah, but killing him changes a lot for you right now"

"Oh yeah? How so?"

"Well, for starters, you gonna make a name for yourself on these streets. Everyone's gonna hear about what you did, and they gonna respect it, who wouldn't? AND, with that we get *paid. The Apostles* make serious money bro, and we get a share of that. By popping Shotgun B, you can free yourself of the weights your Pops left for you to carry. I personally think its worth it, better than getting jumped by 20 niggas," says Gabe.

"You just always know what to say, don't you?" says Justice.

"What can I say, I'm a true wordsmith," says Gabe as Justice shakes his head with a grin.

"Alright, no more chattin'. I'm trapped regardless, so I might as well just get this over with," says Justice. "Hopefully it will be quick."

Gabe playfully shoves Justice. "There we go man, that's what I been waiting for," says Gabe, "and I ain't sitting in this car without my music, I don't care what Pops said, I need my tunes."

"Whatever man, even your music beats silence," says Justice. He was still horrified at the very idea of what they had to do, but it seemed as though everything was in his favor. "This could open a lot of doors for me," he thought to himself, "and if that nigga really killed my father, then I guess it's not the worst thing I could be doing."

After an hour of waiting, Justice began to sink into the darkest parts of his mind. He tried to ignore his feelings like Gabe had suggested, but it was impossible. He couldn't help but think of his father. He'd never even met him, but this man has affected everythings he's done, and hadn't done for that matter. He made a vow a long time ago, that he'd be nothing like his father. Is this where it's brought him?

"Well," said Gabe, pulling Justice out of the depths of his mind. "I'm pretty sure that that's the man we're looking for," said Gabe, pointing to a man leaving the deli with at least a dozen bags. "Let's get this shit over with, like Pops said, imma sneak up behind him, while you walk up on him. You're probably better off waiting around that corner right there, its where he came from," said Gabe, "make sure you say something cool before you blow his head off."

Gabe slid out of the car and worked his way behind Shotgun B, using the cars parked along the street as a shield. While he did this, Justice willed himself into position. He waited there, leaned against the wall, tightly gripping the gun in his left hand. That night, it was cold, and the sharp winds only made it worse. Justice had been standing there for no more than 20 seconds, but his anxiety coupled with this cold made it feel like an eternity.

Crunch...ruffle...ruffle...crunch...ruffle...crunch...

"Shotgun B" says Justice as he steps out from behind the corner, in the shakiest voice imaginable. "I'm gonna kill you for what you did to my father 16 years ago."

Shotgun B turned around, and his expression surprised Justice. He wasn't scared, like he'd expected, he was confused....

He knew who Justice was, everyone did, so why did his words confuse him?

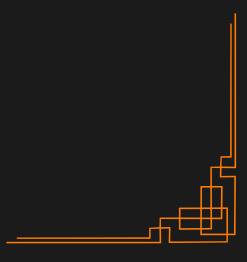
He *knows* what he did...right?

Justice aimed his gun at Shotgun B. He didn't know why, but this man's response angered him. Justice didn't even want to be here. He didn't want to be doing this. This guy was supposed to make it easier on him, but instead, he's standing there, just as lost as he was.

Shotgun B began to speak, "Me? I ain't kill no motherfucking Joy. Fuck would I gain from that? You got the wrong one homie, the p---"

BLOW!!

...to be continued...



A Home in the Devil's Lair By: Malachi Davidson

Dante and Derrick have known each other since the 6th grade. Back then they fought pretty often, trivial things. Fighting was regular for the children where they're from. The children were a stark reflection of the world around them. Death sits at its core and is celebrated on every screen for everybody to see. In this country, everyone lives in a constant state of fear, and is in a perpetual state of agony due to the susceptibility of everyone around them. In this country, regardless of the state, feuds carried weight, and fights lead to death; a burden neither of them cared to shoulder into their futures. Through time and chance, these two grew to become friends, and as their bond was that of two brothers. With the help of the other, they managed to withstand the most trying of circumstances. By either serving as a voice of reason, an ear to vent to, or somewhere in between; these two challenged one another to work for their dreams.

These dreams led them here to New York City, this being the first time either of them had ever been. Columbia University was the school they both chose to attend. One can only have "choices" when they've earned that. 4am study session for AP's, SAT's, or any other exam; practicing until it was too dark to know if the ball had gone through the thick metal rims; grinding until your eyes force themselves shut or until your sneakers fall apart. They had to work for everything they have. And they never had much. Their families did their best to support them, and what they couldn't provide with money, they made up for with knowledge. Their families made them aware of the dangers that surrounded them, all in hopes of leaving for a place where it may no longer exist. New York City, the big apple, the place where real hustlers thrive could be that place, and they were sure that it couldn't be worse than what they were leaving behind—right?

It was understood, from the day Derrick received his full academic scholarship, and Dante his full athletics scholarship, that whatever challenges they would face, they could do it together. Life here should be *different*, but hopefully a good kind of different. Of course, they did not fit in. They lived very different lives from everyone around them, and as expected, they were of a certain minority on campus.

They were eager to find some place of belonging in this city, whose size can be deceiving to the mind. You would think that with so many people, finding peers would be easy, but the NYC they had imagined was far less segregated than this. They had tried to give the school clubs a chance, but their inability to truly relate with anyone left them dissatisfied. They were sure that there was a club that was right for them, but the process of finding out was not something that excited them. They figured they'd have better chances if they went to the place closest to home. What would scare the common visitor was fairly familiar to these two. The "ghettos" in this country are assigned many stereotypes—mostly negative—but one thing they knew they would find was people who could, at the very least, understand. So one afternoon, on a day where they were both finished with their classes and Dante didn't have practice, the two set out for Harlem, and found themselves roaming Malcolm X Boulevard. That was until Dante, true to the athlete that he was, was eager to test his skills on the neighborhood hoopers. Derrick didn't mind, as long as he had a book to read, he was comfortable watching from the sidelines.

In between watching Dante score with ease, and working his way through the intricate plot of Song of Solomon, Derrick saw a young woman, at most 2 or 3 years older than he, who wore a bright orange hoodie. She looked regal in her attire. It was a simple hoodie. The words ``Righteous Fighters" were printed across the front in bold white letters and on its back was a sword with a pen for its handle. This woman was positioned at the further entrance of the park with a clipboard and a stack of flyers in her hands. She approached just about everyone that walked by, collecting information from those who chose to sign up, or passing flyers to those who didn't. Derrick admired how effortlessly she approached stranger after stranger and envied the confidence that she had displayed.

Derrick was intrigued. He could tell that something about her was special. It was as though she was glowing, radiating attractive energy. Even her appearance, skin whose darkness outshined the gleams of light which reflected off the glass of the skyscrapers, or her intricate box braids with wooden beads which swung above the sword like a curtain, was alluring. Her being there must have meant something, but Derrick lacked the courage to approach her and find out, even if to ask for a flyer. Eventually she had left the park, either she had reached her goal or moved to a better location, but regardless, she had left and Derrick couldn't help but feel a bit ashamed. If it was a community that they were looking for, they wouldn't just stumble into one, they had to find one, he had to find it.

Two games and 40 pages later, the sun began to set. Neither had ample lighting for reading or hooping, and instinctively, they understood what that meant—it was time to go home. Some lessons stick with you, and staying out late, especially in unfamiliar neighborhoods was like asking for trouble. So they got their things and began to head back for the dorms. It should have been a simple trip, but their eagerness to explore Harlem led to a bit of carelessness, and with two dead phones, they were lost.

They have absolutely no idea which way is the right way. They've only been in New York for a few weeks now, and they hadn't done much exploration prior. At this point, their only hope was stumbling upon a train station. They roamed the massive city blocks, taking in the beauty of this archaic neighborhood, trying to will their way home. Dante usually kept his cool in every situation, while Derrick, on the other hand, was very anxious. He, like Dante, knew of the potential dangers that they faced. Even though New York wasn't like their home city, he refused to believe that danger couldn't lurk here too.

This rationale meant they wouldn't ask others for help, they would rather figure it out the hard way, and while they walked, they talked. It was one of those conversations where the topic couldn't be tracked down. Their conversations usually carried out this way. They really were great friends, and could talk to each other about anything. They spoke about their difficulties managing their coursework; how Derrick's English professor expected an entire novel to be read in a week, how Dante's coach was particularly hard on him since the last game, and not to mention: money. They both realized that money was quickly becoming an issue. They knew that this new place would have to be home now, and in order to live here, to survive here, they had to support themselves entirely. The idea of this scared the hell out of them. Up until this point, they had been determined to leave their home for hopes of a better life elsewhere, but neither had fully realized the work that would entail.

They worked hard and remained focused, but without the support of their families, who took care of all the "minor things", which weren't so minor, they felt lost. What they really wanted, more than anything else at the moment, was a place where the tension was gone and they could truly be themselves. They wanted to be home, but at this point, they're doubting if such a feeling could ever exist.

The thought was a chilling one, and in a desperate search for warmth, Derrick's mind went to the woman from the park. At the same time, his eyes veered to the left, just vaguely noticing a "Righteous Fighters" flyer that was taped to the wall. As he looked around, he noticed that their flyers were taped to every mailbox, park bench and traffic pole in sight, all bearing the large print letters and the sword. Immediately, he ran toward the closest flyer, hoping that it would offer him some solace in this moment. The paper read:

"JOIN THE RIGHTEOUS FIGHTERS: ORIENTATION: 9/22 @ 7PM ADDRESS :209 W 144 STREET. FIGHT FOR YOUR CIVIL RIGHTS. FOOD WILL BE SERVED."

Dante, surprised by Derrick's sudden elation, walked over to his friend to examine what could've caught his eye. Though surprised, it was pretty ordinary for Derrick's excitement to take over. In fact, it had already done so many times, he'd google search the names on the avenues and boulevards, or stop for pictures of other landmarks along their way. Derrick was a "nerd", he embraced it, and Dante always liked that about his friend. Regardless of their differing perspectives, they were always on the same page, and as he began to read the flyer, he began to feel a warmth from deep within his chest. Those words "FIGHT FOR YOUR CIVIL RIGHTS" invigorated his very being, and ignited a flame which laid dormant in his chest, a flame associated with his mother. Dante's mother passed away when he was young, and he holds onto his memories of her and does everything he can to make her proud. The number he wears on his jersey, nine, is the age he was when she died and symbolized the promise that he had made to her before she passed. His mother was a member of the Black Panther Party and taught Dante about the real history of this country, one rooted in violence and challenged by activist and social justice warriors. She was passionate about her work and made Dante promise her that he would become a leader within his own life.

All of this rushed to Dante's mind as he looked upon the flyer, he felt like this was a sign, and this being the night of the meeting was no coincidence. Dante tells Derrick that they have to find this place. He hadn't even told Dante about him seeing the woman in the park, or that he was thinking of the same exact thing, he just happily nodded in agreement. They figured since there were so many flyers in this area, they had to be in the general vicinity of the office. They continued to wander around the blocks, but with a renewed vigor, until they found the woman who had been posting them around the street, the same woman from earlier.

They ran down the street to catch up with her, with Derrick calling out to catch her attention. With his blood rushing, his ears drumming, and his heart pounding, he struggled to catch his breath.

Despite his discomfort, and his soaked forehead, he was happy that he had caught up to her, and even happier that he managed to call out to her. He was serious about this, the seriousness surprised him. Dante, who was in much better physical shape than his friend, introduced the two of them, and she did the same. She's named Cherise, and she is a part of the "Righteous Fighters." After a few moments, Derrick had caught his breath, and they had a really good conversation. They told Cherise about their situation. She was as enthusiastic as they were, it wasn't often that people would approach her seeking to join the organization.

Standing on the corner of Frederick Douglass Blvd, they had heard what sounded like music to their ears, it was as though this moment was meant to happen, as if everything they've been through was meant to bring them here. They learned how promising this organization was, and every question only further increased their curiosity. Apparently, this organization had a rather impressive reputation and was of great value to the community, and were responsible for improvements that were to come to the local public schools, and was a wrecking force whenever and wherever instances of injustice took place. Derrick was amazed by the words she shared with them, he immediately noticed how passionate she was, and wished that he could one day experience such a thing. Dante saw in her an experienced organizer, sensing her passion and dedication to the fight, qualities which he admired in his mother, and longed for himself. After talking for five or so minutes, she offered to lead them to the office—it was almost 7pm.

When they arrived, there were already eight others in the room. These people, like them, walked in from the street, and were waiting for the meeting to begin. The meeting space was quite small, but the mural which decorated the office walls, and the plants which sat in every corner of the room breathed life into the cramped space. The feeling in here was freeing, calming them from the anxieties of the day.

As time passed, more people had filtered into the office. They learned through conversation that most people in the room were around their age range. They had a lot in common, some were from the city and others were new, like them. Yet they all desired a place where they could learn how to make a difference in this world, a place where they could belong. They were all Black. They had never been in a place like this. Spaces full of Black people weren't spectacular, but space meant for Black people, spaces that weren't fraught with police, where they could feel safe, was refreshing. The people who sat around them were incredibly intriguing. Everyone was different, some were enrolled in college, some in high school, some never attained their GED. Some clearly never fit in, and others clearly stood out, but somehow, in this space, everyone was equal. This wasn't a school, nor some program, this was a space that fostered learning, community, and understanding and your participation was of your own desire. They all started at the same level, and this was something that made everyone comfortable once they settled in.

After everyone settled in and got familiar with one another, Cherise began to facilitate the orientation. Her voice was commanding of respect and demanded the attention of the two friends. Her words were inspiring, her grace was warming, and her passion flowed into the hearts of everyone in the room.

She taught with an atypical pedagogy. Her lesson was more of a conversation than a lecture; she gave everyone the opportunity to introduce themselves, and encouraged each of them to speak on their ideas, and challenged everyone to analyze the world around them for what it was. By the end of the first hour, the two young men were exuberant, this organization had turned out to be everything that they'd hoped it was.

There was a small intermission between this lesson and the next, an opportunity for people to use the restroom or make a phone call. Derrick and Dante were looking forward to this second lesson, curious of what it could be about when a short haired, sullen older man entered the room through the door Cherise exited. Something about his energy was off, slightly menacing. He wore the face of someone who had seen a lot, and most certainly done a lot, and as he scanned the faces of everyone in the room, his search began.

What was no longer than 10 seconds felt like an eternity as he slowly carried his frightening gaze across the faces of everyone in the room. Derrick nor Dante had ever seen this man, and the confused faces around the room suggested that no one else did either, yet they could tell that he was looking down at them. After finally opening his mouth to speak, if his words served as a statement or question was unclear, and the silence which followed only infuriated him. His face knotted up, he looked pissed. Whoever his words were directed at was unclear, and everyone avoided direct eye contact with him–everyone except Dante. Dante was familiar with this kind of person, he often matched up against these types on the court. This man is the type of person who sought to make others uncomfortable; who needed to be the strongest, smartest, most powerful person, and needed everyone to accept it. Dante wasn't scared of Michael like everyone else was, and Michael sensed that and turned his attention toward him.

"WHY ARE YOU HERE!"

A rather simple statement, or so it would seem. These were the only words he muttered since stepping into the room, and he was determined to repeat them until he got what he was looking for. He refused to ask, he preferred to communicate via demands and Dante responded the same way he would on the basketball court; silence. He completely ignored the man, while staring him directly in the eyes. Michael, who would typically be amped in moments like these, was caught off-guard by Dante. He was thinking of a way to break this kid, carefully calculating his next move when another participant, a young woman seated in the corner of the room, had had enough of this man. She, like Derrick, Dante and seemingly everyone else in the room, was not only shocked by his rudeness, but unsettled by his very presence. She spoke up, she challenged this man, and in that moment, Michael's attention turned from Dante and onto this woman; he had finally found what he was looking for: an opportunity to introduce himself. He directed his command at her, shouting once more, completely ignoring the questions that she had asked him. Her stubbornness excited him, and her refusal to answer his questions was what he hoped for. He promptly kicked her out of his office, attributing it to her poor attitude. He made an example out of her. Prior to that moment, this space, where these young people were looking to claim as a new home, now belonged completely to someone else, someone who couldn't care any less if they liked him.

The discomfort quickly spread through the room, similar to that of a thick fog, so much so that Cherise had taken notice and peered out from the back office, slowly shaking her head. She was clearly upset by the actions of Michael and every participant knew it. She decided to return to the meeting after the woman had left, and though her presence eased some of the tension, it only did so much. Michael was well aware of what he was doing. No, he was not some army-esce instructor intent on whipping these young people in shape, nor was he very interested in leading a revolution. Michael had long since accepted that no amount of work could truly improve their society, and was instead invested in using the money that they received through grants to fund his own expenses. Michael was an opportunist, his passion for this was expunged, and his only motivation, day after day, was to use this organization for his benefit. To that end, Michael was prepared, and capable of employing every manipulation technique imaginable to get these young people to do his bidding.

Michael is also very intelligent.

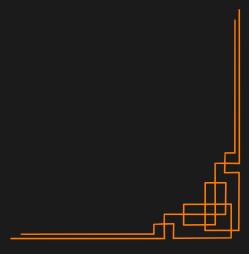
He is well aware of his off-putting personality and prefered to remain that way. He is also passionate about many things, and informed on even more, but his inability to "fit in" had much more to do with him than anyone else. So, in order to operate as seamlessly as possible, he employs the brightest of the bright, and the poorest of the poor to be the face of his organization. He understood what this organization meant to the community, and to the young people who sat before him, the very people who would be joining the organization, and he took full advantage of that. He wasn't there for any of the inspiring conversations, breath-taking realizations, or the community building that had taken place in the last hour, but he made it clear that no one could join the organization unless he said so.

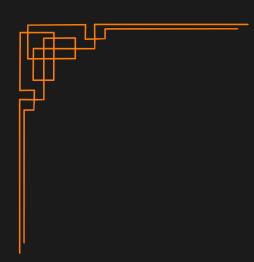
Derrick and Dante, were put off by his energy and the way in which he carried himself. He was sinister, yet oddly cunning. It would be difficult to explain, but since he is the head of this organization, an organization that does so much good in the community, then thing's couldn't have been that bad. If so many other people were already a part of the organization, it had to be worth it. Maybe with time, they'd see Michael for who he really is, or maybe they already have. Either way, they would at least stay for this remaining lesson. Michael spent the last hour telling them more about the organization. This, more than anything, was what they truly wanted to know, how to become a member. They learned that this meeting was the first of eight, before they could become a "Righteous Fighter", they had to complete boot-camp, where they would be trained to be organizers. Through this program they would learn of all the skills needed to do this work, and that by the end, whoever had proven themselves could potentially become a member. This work was strictly volunteer-based, but those who worked the hardest could expect to be fed and be presented with opportunities to make money.

Still unsettled, and thrown off by the confusing events of this second hour, the two reflected on everything that happened throughout their day.

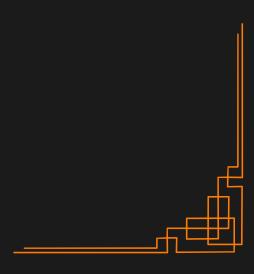
Derrick was surprised, for the first time, he stepped outside of his shell and actually confronted someone on the street, and Dante had finally found a chance to fulfill his promise to his mother; and this organization, though led by an asshole, was the community that they knew they needed, and they could even eat for free and make money if they worked hard enough. The potential faults of this place were very apparent, but they weren't willing to let these seemingly minor flaws cause them to walk away from the treasure they believed they found.

Freed from the traps of the past, they've now fallen headfirst into the snares of the present.





GLIMPSES OF HELL



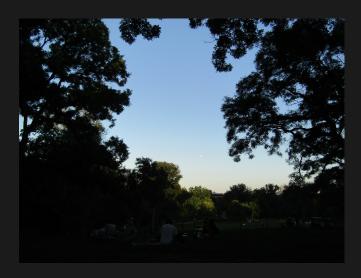
Hell's Water



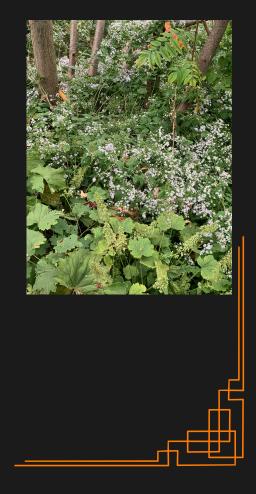




Dying Green







Seasoned sides



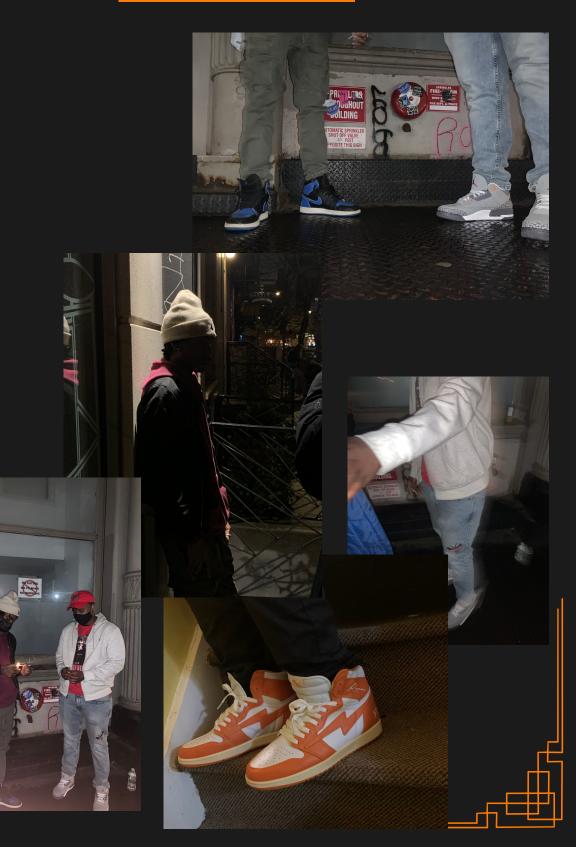








New Renaissance



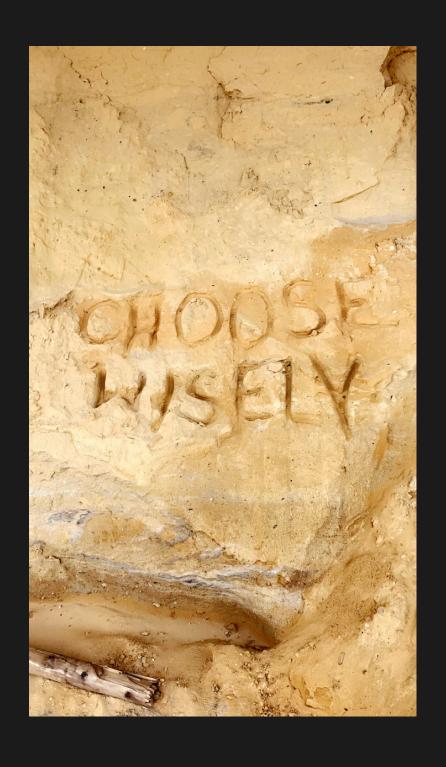
City Blocks

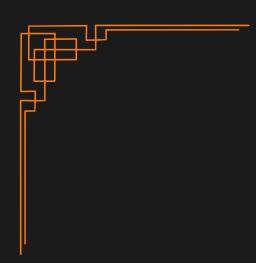




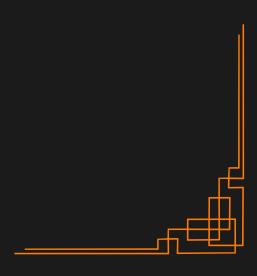


Remember...





SMOKE 'N' SHADOWS





In this life, I am making an effort not to act as though, in my short amount of time spent on this earth, I have come to know it all. In fact, if there is one thing that I know with unmatched certainty, it is that there is so much that I *don't* know. In no way am I suggesting that I'm clueless—though that's the case more often than I'd like to admit—or that my experiences thus far haven't taught me much. The things that I actually know, however, are minuscule compared to the things that I wish I could know, and intend to, one day. One of the things that I wish to know more about is love.

When you think of the word, maybe you are overcome by vibrant imagery, pleasant thoughts and strong sensations which flood the mind; or maybe, you're like me, in that you have little understanding of what it could be. I'm aware, however, of what it's *supposed* to be. From what I hear, it's a "special feeling" that means I have a strong attachment to some "thing". If anything, love is made out to be a looming feeling, always slightly out-of-reach; constantly pursued but never caught. I have, I believe, experienced the after-effects of love. You know, the heartbreak, those inexplicably dark emotions which weigh upon the mind and body like an anchor, implying that love was there, but is no longer.

It is possible that your experience with the four letters: l-o-v-e, whom, when together, represent this enigma, are different; perhaps somewhat similar, or nothing alike at all—and that's okay. My idea on what it means is based on what I have both heard and experienced, and are mine and mine alone. I find joy in deciphering the meaning of such obscure concepts, and I recommend that you do the same, if you don't already; and use others' ideas only as a basis for formulating your own, nothing more nothing less [there are, already far too many who let others think on their behalf]. And, of course, I urge you to do the same with me and my beliefs. This essay is meant to serve, not as an argument, but a conversation, between you and I, but more importantly, between you and yourself. Let's talk about love. What is love? What is not love? What is made possible through love? And how does one go about achieving love? As you read through this paper, I want you to question the things that you read, internalize the concepts that I portray, and reflect on how they apply to you and your life; and hopefully, in doing so, we can begin to build an understanding of the term, and of ourselves.

My desire to have this conversation was inspired by the conversation that I had with the ideas laid on paper by the late-great James Baldwin, in his essay The Fire Next Time. This fascinating text, which was released at a crucial point in American history, just 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation and just before Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic March on Washington, provides invigorating insight to the American—specifically the Black Americans—experience in twentieth century America. Baldwin offers discourse on concepts such as Blackness, racial identity, and religious manipulation amongst many others; in a way that is both stunning and awe-inspiring. One of the major themes throughout is love, not the romanticized, head-over-heels love like in movies, but a love which "takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within" (Baldwin 341).

The last emotion that comes to mind when I think about the state of America in the 1960's, or just throughout history in general, is love. Hate almost always, fear, yes, but love? Where was love? Was love in Rialto with Rodney King, or in Greensboro as students were dragged from the restaurant counters? Was it in New Orleans with Ruby Bridges or in Chicago with the rioters after we lost, yet another, true American hero? Throughout the history of genocide, murder, hatred, and oppression committed on this continent, and every other, where was love? Just the thought of such incidents, such atrocities, is enough to muster any and every emotion other than love; but, maybe love, in its anonymity makes the case for its value. Maybe we can't pinpoint its location because we're still unsure of its meaning? But still, I seriously doubt it was there—but if it was, did it look on with disgust, with shame, did it look at all? But, as Baldwin suggests, it is easy to internalize hatred and thus be fueled by it, and to reciprocate that negative energy with added interest. To live like that is to live like them [those fueled by hate]; is to live a life absent of love; to be ruled by fear, fear of change, fear of losing, fear of oneself—that hardly seems like living at all.

Fear is something that I am all too familiar with. I do not have to question fear, whether I know what it is or not, or what it can be, because it is something that I have experienced, and will continue to. Fear, like love, is something that we all encounter at some point, as it molds itself to fit perfectly in all of our lives. The fear that I experience can be similar to the fear that you have, but there's a limit to the experienced. Since I was a child, I have been operating out of fear. I was scared of so many things: spiders, anything slimy and alive, upsetting my parents [beatings were in fashion during my upbringing], and making others uncomfortable. In fact, I feared unsettling others so much that I often sacrificed my own happiness for theirs; and I don't mean that in any virtuous way, but in a dangerous one. In sacrificing myself, I lost a sense of who I really was, and it took 21 years for me to realize that that fear actually had nothing to do with anyone else. This fear was actually a fear of not being accepted, not being "loved", not being liked; and that's on me. I feared it so much that I did everything in my power to keep that from being the case. I forced myself to like what others liked, to do what others did, and to be, what I knew in my heart, I was not. This fear was learned, taught by my surroundings and our society. To be a child, Black, in a seemingly White country, meant that I didn't that my father had which required me to come straight home after school, the fear that my grandparents had as I attended a predominantly white school, the fear I felt watching other children, as Black and as young as I, die on the news shaped me into who I am today. I didn't understand the fear that was all around me, but I knew that there was something about me, something so apparent to others yet invisible to me, that was the cause of this dislike, this hatred; so, I made it my mission, for my own survival, to be liked by everyone.

Fear is an interesting thing, because the actual crux of our fears may be very specific, very small, but the way in which it can influence everything else is anything but small. It courses through the mind, the heart and the body like the winds of a hurricane, shaking reality and flooding our very being. Fear is dangerous, because it is too similar to what I had imagined love to be.

Fear, alone, can be the driving force behind everything we do, affecting others, and ourselves, in strange ways. My father's strictness-derived from his fear of losing my brothers and I to this cruel cruel world--was something I despised, and like all children eventually do, led to my rebellious attitude [ignorance truly is bliss]. The fear that drove my grandparents, which they accrued from a life spent in the very time that James Baldwin writes about, was my endowment, ingraining a sense of distrust so historic, I couldn't not acknowledge it. The empty void, which filled my heart as I saw, in Treyvon Martin, myself, or any of my friends, reinforced that looming fear of the world that I had as a child, and have yet to shake. My understanding of fear, my experiences with it, are what have allowed me to see eye-to-eye with James Baldwin when he says: "it demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot [or knee] is on your neck". Through my dealings with fear, both in my life and within those around me, I have come to see how hatred can be an outcome of fear; a fear of oneself, of one's supposed identity-or lack-there-of, of losing the things that make you, you. To hate, or live in fear, as a result of my own fear, seems contradictory and a complete waste of time and effort. Fear is capable of everything that love is not, and when coupled with power, fear can-and has-bred destruction, manipulation and death. But, maybe fear can carry with it, love. Maybe love is like a something beautiful to come; but only attainable by those who pull through, injured but strengthened, having survived the worst of the worst.

Baldwin depicts love as something tough, graceful, daring, and growing (Baldwin 341); love is faith, to commit to something that cannot be rationalized, to have the courage to achieve the impossible. Love is, to throw caution to the wind, and dedicate oneself, completely, to the improvement, advancement, and enhancement of yourself and the larger society, for the sake of our survival. This love is not conditional, only extending to those who desire it, this love is not selective, only given to those deemed worthy, this love is not selfish, only surrendering some, this love is not—easy. It is difficult to go against the status—quo, or the fears which drive us, but nothing easy is ever worth having, or keeping for that matter. How exactly does one go about "achieving" this kind of love? As I read The Fire Next Time, I posed this question to the text, and it responded, saying "power is real, and many things, including, very often, love, cannot be achieved without it" (Baldwin 328). If love is the weapon that will slay our fears, then we should wield it with pride, but it cannot be thrusted without power. Power, as I have seen and grown to understand it, isn't money, fame, or anything of the sort; power is the ability to influence change.

How exactly, does one achieve this power? It is easier said than done, for sure. Change is only truly had by changing everything, by grabbing the "now" by its branches, upheaving its roots, sweeping up the leaves, leaving space for the seeds of the "new" to flourish unbothered. To do this on a personal level, within your own life, may be your hardest challenge yet, as it would require the removal of those metaphorical masks that we "fear we cannot live without", rendering us exposed. To make change on the larger stage, the societal stage, requires the deforestation and reforestation of everything. In the process, the have-nots would find no issues in letting go of a system which was never meant for them; but those who do have, those who cling the sense of safety, of money, of power "by which one can only be betrayed" (Baldwin 339), will be hesitant, and will be fearful of these changes.

But the only way to achieve love, within ourselves, and with and for everyone else, is to take everything that we know now, and place it behind us, building instead toward what lies ahead.

So I ask again, both to you and myself, what is love? It seems, to me, that the answer can really only be found within myself. Not because I already have it, but because the process by which one—you and I, separate and together—achieve love, begins inside us. Love, as I understand it, is achieved through the process of confronting the fears that live within each of us, with the intent to no longer hide from or be controlled by them, but to accept them. To accept, and in that moment, be courageous enough to commit to changing them—eradicating them, completely. When I look at love in this light, I think that it was indeed present in Rialto, in Greensboro, in New Orleans, Chicago, and anywhere else that fear rears its ugly face; because these instances of fear, have inspired a movement of love within the survivors. A love that has dedicated itself to changing the world for the better.



Think For Yourself By: Malachi Davidson

We tend to take for granted just how amazing we--as humans, as individuals, as lived-experiences are. Think about all the things that you've accomplished thus far.

For starters, you're alive amidst a global pandemic. Not only has life as we've known changed forever (get used to that), you have changed as well. Slowly but surely, you've adapted to life inside, and that's been harder than you may realize.

Secondly, and possibly most importantly, if it weren't for your ability to think rationally, you wouldn't be where you are today.

I know that if it weren't for all of my experiences thus far, including all the times I've screwed up, disappointed someone I care for, and let myself down; I wouldn't have grown. Most of what I've learned about the world and about myself has come as a result of me being wrong (and strong).

Without faith, faith in myself, faith in the future, and faith in my ability to control both, I would've never figured out how to *survive*.

I'm reminding you of this because something I think many of us are struggling with is thinking for ourselves.

Social media has taken the world by storm. These spaces allow for anyone, and I mean anyone, who has access to the internet to create, upload and share content. The internet has a lot to offer, funny memes, other users' art, and access to information—regardless of whether or not it is true.

We receive information fast, like *fast* fast, and it's easy, maybe a little too easy.

Without carefully choosing where I recieved my information, there was a huge chance that wherever or whoever I was "learning" from: "investigations", the comment sections under posts, tweets, blog posts, or wherever any clickbait-title brought me, it would be biased as fuck, and harldy based in any fact.

In fact, I've had to learn to treat the facts like money, the internet like the bank, and myself as the robber. I want to get in, grab as much as I can, and get out without being bothered by anyone else and whatever they might think is right or wrong.

Before implementing this philosophy, I would often find myself holding strong opinions on things I knew very little about, but have always *known* about. And when I would be asked to elaborate, or attempt to defend my beliefs, I'd feel anxious. The truth is, I was shook. My thoughts weren't making any sense. The ground which I stood on was shaken, not as firm as I thought it was.

Once I found myself twisting the truth in order to save face, I knew that I had made yest another huge mistake.

Take my advice, don't be like this, like me. I was naive and didn't bother questioning the validity of the "facts" I was taking in, or *how* I was receiving my information. Eventually my confidence withered, and I would often hesitate to speak my mind, in fear that those around me would notice that I was a phony; I didn't know shit.

I couldn't even trust my own thoughts. I couldn't tell which ideas were mine, or just the fabrication of some stranger's imagination. This is a rather frightening situation to find oneself in, as it forces one to reflect upon how they view themselves and really question who they are.

Why couldn't I defend "my" beliefs without the same arguments regurgitated by the source from where I received this information? How deep was my understanding of what I was learning?

I felt lost.
Something had to give.
If I didn't force a change.
I would have gone insane.
My sanity is very important.

I'm not sure if its God, the Simulation or whatever you may believe has the power to test us, but believe me, they were testing me. I was uprooted from the soil where I'd grown comfortable, and the shift, ripped pride, self and understanding to shreds.

Life was changing, as it always does. "I'm in college now, this isn't high school, my old bullsh*t might not work here," I told myself. I was exhausted, school and work were kicking my ass and my search for a place of rest was relentless.

It wasn't until I had caught my footing that I realized that I'd been failing at my most important job: to *learn*. It hasn't changed from the moment we each took our first breaths, since we've started this thing called life.

I had gotten lazy. I was tired, and allowed that to be an excuse. I stopped learning. I stopped thinking critically, I stopped using the very thing which had brought me this far in the first place. I lived life on autopilot, ignorant of anything I didn't care enough to educate myself about.

In order to change the nature of my relationship with "facts," I had to first learn how to find the facts. The REAL facts. A simple google search was never enough.

{I know right, this is already pretty demanding, but it's worth it.}

Next, I had to evaluate how I was internalizing the information that I came across.

NEVER GIVE WHAT YOU READ, HEAR OR LEARN THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT.

ALWAYS CHECK THE FACTS.

BACTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES, AND PEOPLE SPEAK FOR THEIR OPINIONIS.

I learned to be more critical of what I was reading, to hesitate before I could believe whatever information I was receiving.

Now, don't think that I'm arguing against seeking information from others altogether. Is there anything wrong with doing some research, say, before making an investment, like on a car or a pair of sneakers? Or learning some more about the experiences of a group you once thought critically of?

Hell no.

I encourage you to learn as much as you can. I also want to remind you that when we're learning, we're training our critical thinking, and if we're not careful, we could wind up developing a habit of letting others think for us.

Now, let's do an exercise real quick:

What is 55+76? How long did it take you to compute the answer?

I don't doubt that you're capable of doing the mental work for the answer in our heads, yet I know that those who've fallen into the habit of computing even the simplest math problems on the calculator app will take longer than others to answer it {the answer is 131}.

Like mental math, when we take the time to be critical and formulate our own opinions, take the time to trust ourselves and our ability to think things through on our own, we're strengthening a skill that we've had from the very beginning, and it would be a shame to let such a useful skill go to waste.

As tedious and annoying as the process may be, do not avoid the work. Once we begin to avoid the process of discerning fact from fiction, from choosing what we agree or disagree with, we have begun to trust others more than we trust ourselves, and in that moment, we've lost what makes each of us so special.

The ability to dictate someone else's thoughts, let alone your own, takes an immense amount of work. You'd best believe that there are people, entities, and organizations who are more than happy to go through that trouble on your behalf. In return, they receive a certain kind of power--of control--over those who so eagerly sacrifice their own agency by allowing others to think for them.

So before anything else, remember to think for yourself.

It's Always Closer Than It Seems

James Mercer Langston Hughes is known as one of the most influential Black voices coming from Harlem in the 20th century. Born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, Hughes, like many Black artists at the time, migrated into the northern cities of America, seeking to escape the pain in the "Blues-originating-land" (Hughes Jazz as Communication). In Harlem, these artists made a sheer discovery: they wouldn't be accepted there either. Talented and hungry, they reached deep within themselves and unleashed an off-beat that shook the world, marking the literary turning point of the century. Hughes is one of the most popular members of this artistic explosion, which began in 1920 until the mid 1930s, who's known for his work as a leader and pioneer.

His art is the definition of unapologetically Black. Just one generation removed from the real end of American enslavement, Black artists like Hughes, who birthed the Harlem Renaissance, were the children of this countries' most used and abused souls: the bluest souls. Now "free," these young people ventured out into a world no one could plan for. All they knew for certain was that this white world was dangerous. This being the same world which murdered, raped and defiled the generations before them. Trapped in a world which refused to listen, these artists learned to speak through their souls, and thus jazz was born. Jazz is much more than a genre of music; jazz is your "eternal tom-tom," your soul!—and each of us moves to a different beat. Hughes' beat created what's known as "jazz-poetry," a form of poetry influenced by the musical artform. This definition makes sense...but where's the jazz in that? That's far too bland to have come from the Harlem Renaissance. No, jazz-poetry is a fusion of the two, it was Hughes, a Black artist, communicating with the world, just on the page and not the mic.

The Black artist *is* jazz, and everything they create is just the beat of their inner tom-tom. Their inability to communicate in this white world has left the Black artist sprawling for a way—anyway to free themselves of their endless-burden: the strain of survival. Through jazz, artists like Hughes, and yourself, are able to achieve true freedom: "freedom" being the ability to find joy in spite of your troubles, to become impervious to this world, even if only momentarily.

This essay was formed after closely studying three fragments of Hughes' soul: two essays, The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountian and Jazz as Communication, and a poem, The Weary Blues. I've studied Hughes first poetry book, The Weary Blues, published in 1926, and the ideas expressed in these poems will appear throughout this essay as well. Anyone who studies these works can understand how "jazz seeps into words—spelled out words" (Hughes Jazz as Communication). As Hughes explores the nuances of being a Black artist in a white world, we can feel the beats of his drum expressed through words on the page. Black artists from this time expressed their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." They learned that survival in this world meant living within themselves. "If white people are pleased we are glad," says Hughes, "if they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too" (Hughes The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain).

"Caged" in what Hughes calls "a circus of civilization," these artists were trapped in an abusive relationship with this oppressive world. They were barred from communicating by the oppressors' refusal to listen, forging between the two, a thick wall.

This wall has made it nearly impossible for one to truly understand the other, and with that, themselves. This wall, or, as Hughes refers to it, this "racial mountain" is "in the way of any true Negro art in America." The pressure of conforming to this white world creates within the Black artist the urge to assimilate toward whiteness; "to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible." The desire to communicate—to be understood, coupled with the self-hatred forced upon them by this white world, every Black artist is forced to face this wall, just as Hughes had a century ago.

"All of the tom-toms of the jungles beat in my blood,
And all the wild hot moons of the jungles shine in my soul.

I am afraid of this civilization—
So hard,
so strong,
so cold"

[Poem, For the portrait of an African boy after the manner of Gauguin by Langston Hughes]

To be Black, in a white world, is to watch your dream, "bright like a sun," be separated from you by this wall, leaving you to "lie down in the shadow"; "in quiet darkness,/...bowed by/ weariness and pain." Artists respond to these pressures in different ways, and one of the more dangerous and likely routes is the internalization of this world's hatred by rejecting their Blackness. For these artists, Hughes says, "the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues." These artists, beautiful in their own right, were "never taught to see that beauty," instead, they learned to ignore it, and if, by chance, they were to catch a glimpse of said beauty, they were conditioned "to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns." This artist is afraid of themself, and "the strange unwhiteness" of their features. Though they are not to blame for their state, they still have much wall to remove before they could ever "discover [themselves] and [their] people" (Hughes The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain).

It is in this state when communication becomes essential for the Black artist's survival. The inability to express their woes through the usual modes of communication in this white world [media, politics] leaves them in search of an outlet. For some, that's a microphone, for others it's a sport, for me it's writing, what could it be for you? Jazz manifests wherever you are, in whatever you make. Those moments when you're in your zone, when you're flowing, when you feel as though you're on top of the world—that's jazz!

Hughes argues that "it is the duty of the younger Negro artist...to change through the force of [their] art that old whispering "I want to be white,"...to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful"?" Revolutionary!! For a Black man in Harlem to declare that his duty, and the duty of his peers, was to deny the demand of this white world was to call for *real* freedom. If they wouldn't be free of the chains of this oppressive world, they could, at the very least, free their souls.

As to be expected, these ideals were met with heavy criticism. White critics ignored him [typical] and some Black intellectuals did not approve.

The Pittsburgh Courier dubbed his poetry book "trash," and the New York Amsterdam News called Hughes a "sewer dweller" (The Poetry Foundation Langston Hughes). Hughes belonged to what he called the "common people...the low-down folks" who "live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else." These people were free of the "white is best" subconsciousness, a subconsciousness which ails many. Their art was Black to its core, and because of that, they could approach this wall without any fear.

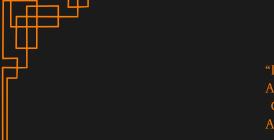
These "common people...furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations," these are the artists that will shatter expectations and force a widespread reimagining; as the artists of the Harlem Renaissance did. Whether an artist feared the wall or not, the only way they'd find freedom was by using their "dark hands," soaked in the shadow of this wall, "to shatter this darkness/...to break this shadow/ into a thousand lights of sun."

Jazz is "a circle, and you yourself are the dot in the middle" ((Hughes Jazz as Communication)).

When you, an artist, accept the challenge of survival in this white world, a world of "weariness," "subway trains" and "work, work, work"; in exchange for a shot at joy: you're working away at the wall. Value your differences, they're complex, just like you. Just like everyone else. Discover yourself, listen to your drum, and master your beat. Every pound at that drum sends a pulse through the wall. That inner drum is the "the tom-tom of revolt against weariness...the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed into a smile." This drum beats with every passing breath, and no two beats are the same. That drum is our soul, and we control its pace. Turn to jazz when you have nothing else to give. Jazz says to the Black artist, "bring me all your dreams/...bring me all your/ heart melodies/ that I may wrap them/ in a blue cloud-cloth/ away from the too rough fingers/ of this world," protecting the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, as we share the beat of our inner-selves, with the world.

The Black artist needs jazz. Plain and simple. In their search for freedom in this world, they've become what Hughes calls the "Black Jester." These artists put themselves on the physical and/or theoretical stage, trading their pain for joy. "Laugh with me" they say "weep with me/...tears are my laughter/laughter is my pain/...laugh at my sorrow's reign.".

In his poem, titled <u>The Weary Blues</u>, Hughes explores one of the many branches of jazz in the blues. This poem transports us to Lenox Ave, inside a "pale dull parlor" where we watch a Black artist jazz under an "old gas light" (Hughes *The Weary Blues*). This artist has the blues: he's in a state of despair, pain—longing for something that just can't be had. [Sound familiar?] The blues are the cries of the soul that just can't take anymore. Soaked in the shadow of this wall, in the pain of this world, the blues lulls all that it touches, dulling even the most vibrant of souls. This poem shares with us a few verses of this artist. For his second verse, Hughes wrote the following:



"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
The Weary Blues, lines

From this excerpt of the poem, we are made aware of depths of his depression. He is tired, from over exertion, lack of sleep, or most likely a healthy mix of the two. This world has forced him to accept that he may never be satisfied in life. With this sad realization, he confesses that he "ain't happy no mo" and wishes that he had died. Hughes' diction argues for this artist's need for jazz; it's how he's been able to survive. On those "ivory keys," his "ebony hands" discovered joy. Music is his outlet, the medium by which he is able to express the soul, a soul strong enough to make "that poor piano moan with melody" [line 10]. What terrifying beautiful art "coming from a black man's soul" [line 15] (Hughes The Weary Blues).

This artist went against the grain in every facet, because, unlike the grain, he is Black. He shares his pain in the only way he knows how, just as his ancestors had done on the cotton fields. He, like the souls who came before him, is beating the tune of his soul, a very blue soul. Its pulses are low and precise. They target that looming wall with a ferocity that couldn't be imitated. This is survival we're talking about. Without their tom-toms, they'd have lost the will to live a long time ago. His words may be depressive, but at their core, and at the core of the blues, rests jazz. He's jazzin', which means he's dismantling that wall.

In dismantling that wall, lies true freedom. Freedom for the Black artist, during the Harlem Renaissance, and even today, is the most essential thing. Jazz allows the Black artist to envision a land unlike the one they're restrained by, a land of "love and joy and wine and song,/ and not this land where joy is wrong." Jazz grants the Black artist the freedom to speak candidly. In admitting to their vulnerability, the Black artist becomes invincible. They are aware of their weakness, of the chains which restrict them, the weights which pin them down, and survive in spite of it. Their souls could never be conquered. Its beats are a strong, vibrant tune—whether it's liked by others or not. They're "afraid of this civilization," this fear leads them toward a different lifestyle, one where they can abide by their own rules, their own values, and not those of the white world. With their newfound agency, they conjure the joy that they so desperately need.

We'll never be free from the "weariness" of this world as long as it's white.

Hughes argued, in 1926, that it was the job of the Black artist to change, through their art, the "white is right" mentality, a job that was completed beautifully. Now, a century later, this wall still stands. Though brittle in some sections, and reinforced in others, the challenge of dismantling such a wall still sits before us.

All of us. This white world affects everyone. Even the most privileged of persons is, in the end, oppressed by this wall which sits between us all. It blocks the world from coming together, from appreciating and understanding one another through art. Jazz may have been discovered by the Black artist, but it belongs to everyone. Every person who danced in the cabarets and parlors in the 1920, and everyone who does so now in their homes, regardless of their race or class, has found joy. They dance with "swift feet," as if they knew the "sun's going down this very night" and "might never rise no more." They revel in, and live for that moment.

Hughes argues, in Jazz as Communication, that "jazz is a great big sea," and encompasses "all kinds of water" and regardless of the medium, or who creates it; "it's all water. Throw it all in the sea, and the sea'll keep on rolling along toward shore and crashing and booming back into itself again (Hughes Jazz as Communication)." Jazz lives inside each and every one of us. This wall casts a shadow on both sides, and every person who is touched by its shadow has everything they need to cook up some jazz and break this wall. Together, our jazz could destroy this wall, but only if we beat it from both sides.

Hughes became a huge source of inspiration at a time where this wall was on the forefront of everyone's mind. While some chanted for justice in the streets, others chanted for the building of this wall. Those invested in upholding this white world put their everything into its survival. I struggled to maintain; to find hope. Surviving was hard enough, but joy just seemed too far out of reach. I abandoned joy and the shadow of the wall grew even thicker. It was in that moment, that I truly understood the challenge that Hughes, and all other Black artists confront in this world. How the hell are we supposed to have fun in this world?

As Hughes said in 1926, and as I learned in 2021: with jazz! Turn inward and learn to use those feelings that you could neither name nor understand, the same feelings which make "joy" seem like a privilege not afforded to people like us. It'll help you find exactly what you need. I found the strength to be honest with myself and confront my feelings. I learned that I need to understand my weaknesses before I could gain any power over them. I found the strength to search for understanding, despite my doubt that it could ever be had; and with that, I found that joy was not as far as I had thought.

