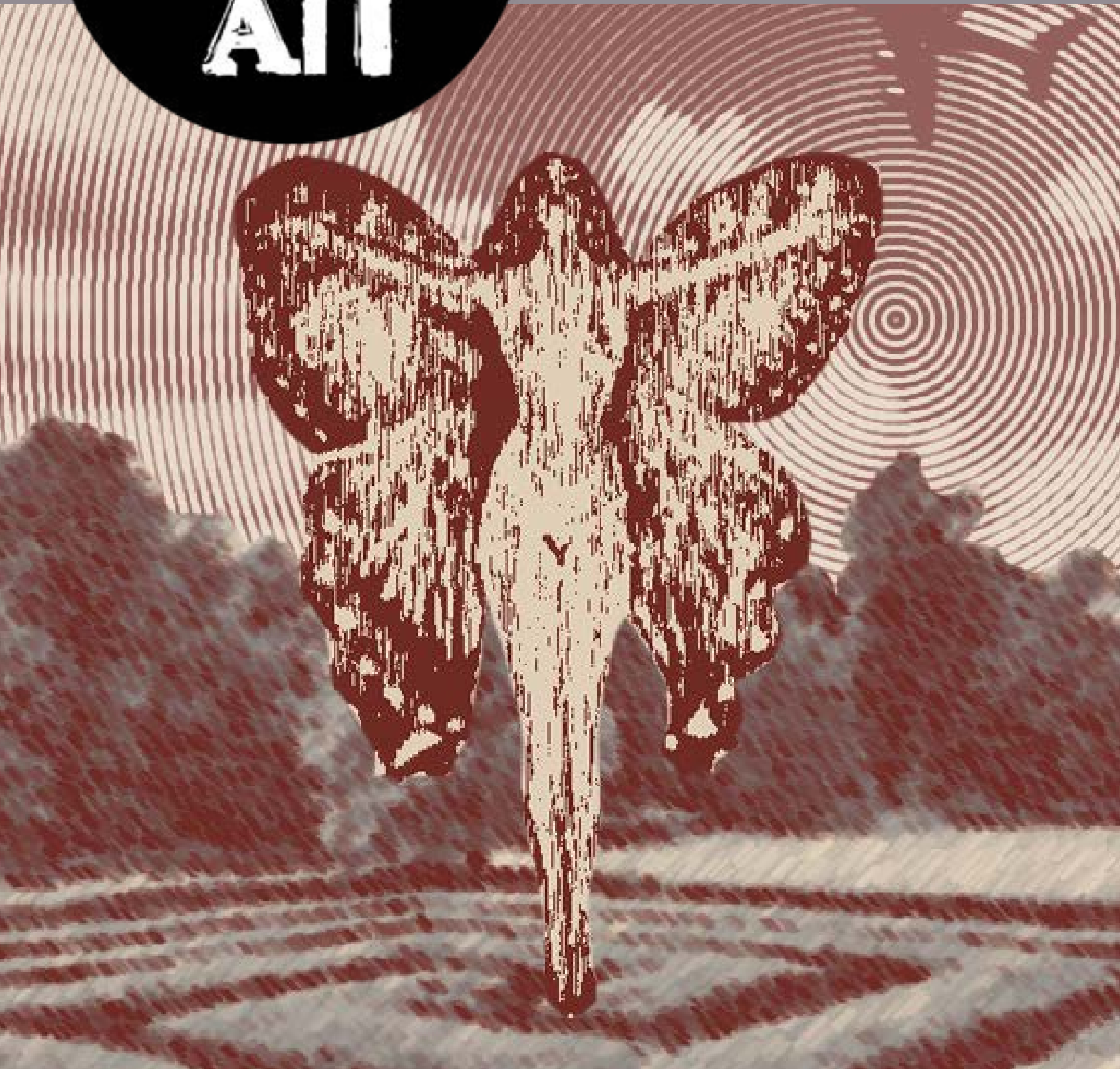


CENTRAL TECHNICAL SCHOOL  
presents

The **Ill-Literati**

An experimental magazine of Writing, Art  
and Photography by students of Toronto's  
Central Technical School

Vol. 0, No. 1 - Special First Issue - June 2022





## Editor's note

We are excited to present the first issue of what we hope will become a series of experimental literature and art magazines to be published here at Central Tech.

The work in this issue is unique and profound. There's so much talent and brilliance in this school that is yet to be discovered, and it is an immense privilege for us to have the opportunity to help our students shine. We hope that the Ill•Literati will become a regular platform to showcase our students' talent and creativity.

The Ill•Literati is designed, created & produced entirely in-house, using the industry-standard technology our students learn on.

Thank you to David Nelson for the layout of the magazine and Mark Lambert for helping us with the printing and production.

Our title - The Ill-literati - is a play on the pandemic, literacy, student slang (siiiiiiick!) and the Illuminati. Students have been writing and creating through illness - viruses, climate change, and hate - just a few of the illnesses of our time. They are writing through all of this, and (as you will see in this issue) their creativity is inspiring and hopeful. We hope you enjoy our students' work as much as we do.

NAOMI SAVAGE



## The Ill-Literati

An experimental magazine of writing, art and photography by the students of Toronto's Central Technical School

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# Breaking the Cycle

by Stephen Danso

- 1 in 4 children live in poverty in Toronto.
- In 2019, 18.6% of children under the age of 18 experienced the effects of poverty.
- 13 city wards in Toronto have areas with child poverty rates over 50%.
- Torontonians have the lowest levels of access to Employment Insurance in Canada.
- Children in racialized families are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than children in non-racialized families.
- The racial pay gap in Canada is large: racialized Canadians earn 71-79 cents for every dollar paid to non-racialized Canadians in 2019 \*

Countless times we see young Black youth in impoverished neighborhoods fall victim to many difficult obstacles that the average youth do not have to face. We see these youth end up in jail, dead, or struggling to make a living but in rare cases become successful young men and women. Why is this happening? Is it because of their lack of mentors or resources, or because of their

traumatic experiences in these impoverished neighborhoods? Is it because of their life choices? The youth need help and the system is doing the least to truly support them.

As a young kid, I saw things that a kid shouldn't see, and after a while, these abnormal sightings became normal to me. Dead bodies, blood on the floor, overdosing. I didn't realize that these things made me numb to life and its

PHOTO BY STEPHEN DANSO

\* SOURCE: [HTTPS://YOUTHREX.COM/INFOGRAPHIC/SCHOOL-TO-PRISON-PIPELINE-BLACK-STUDENTS](https://youthrex.com/infographic/school-to-prison-pipeline-black-students). ACCESSED MARCH 24TH, 2022

casualties. On top of that, at school I started to get in trouble for things that other kids wouldn't get in trouble for; I felt targeted, like I didn't fit in or belong. This made me feel like nobody cared about what I was going through, they only cared when I misbehaved but never spoke about what's causing me to behave that way. They just suspended me consistently like it was going to teach me how to control my actions and emotions. I think before kids are punished they need a chance to be properly taught the right thing and the adults need to give them an ear because you never know what kids are bottling in. I believe there are kids who have seen much more than me, and have nobody who will listen to them.

There is something called the "school-to-prison pipeline", which is a disturbing trend where children are suspended and expelled out of schools, and end up in the criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect. They need wrap around support for their mental health and education gaps. Instead, they are often punished, labeled and pushed out of school.

The government needs to put more money into free youth programs like sports, tutoring, mentoring, and anything to keep kids from being exposed to the negativity in these neighborhoods. The government is big on funding task forces for 'guns and gangs', but they need to focus on the problem before it forms. I believe everything has a beginning and if we can stop it at the roots then the issue would change

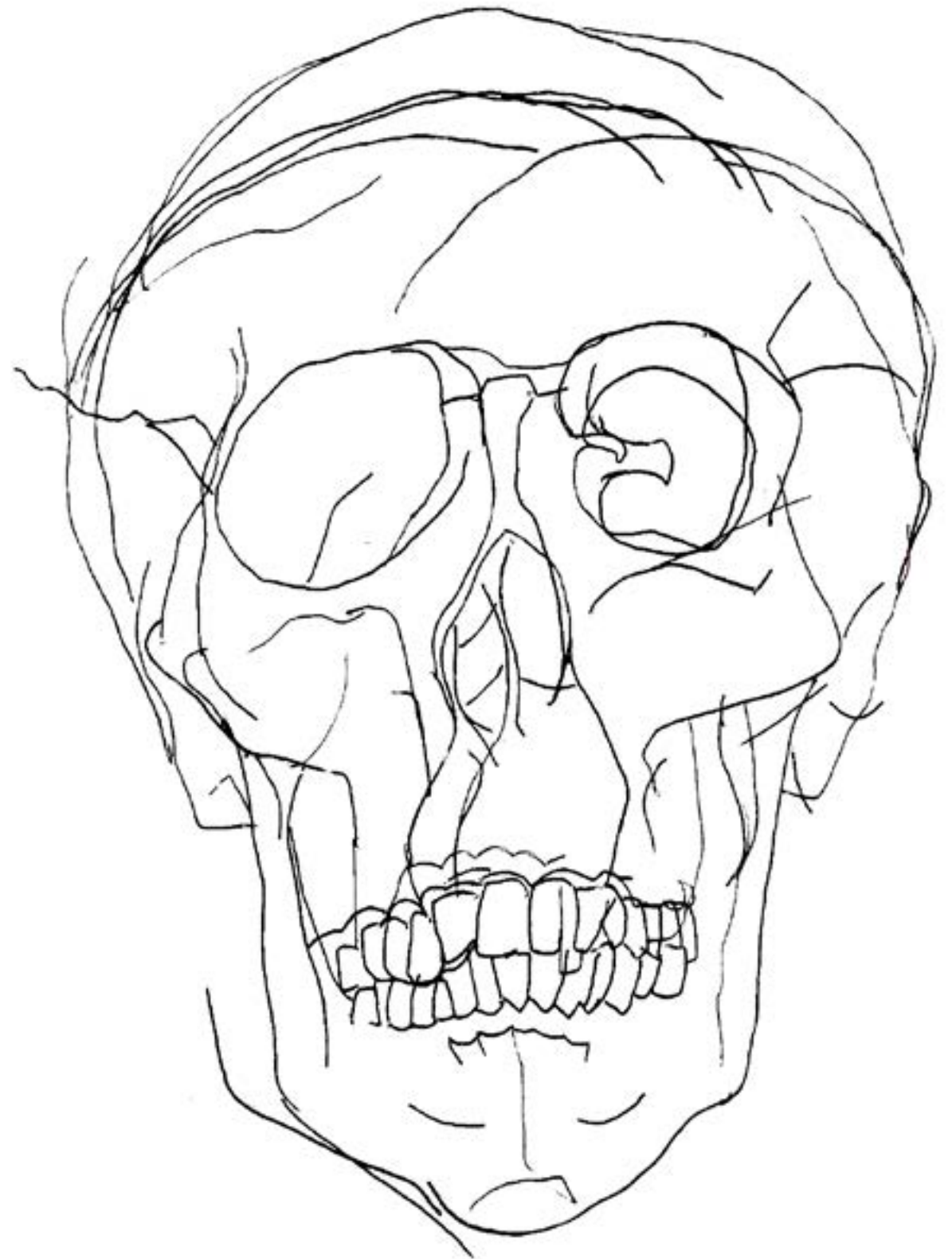
drastically for the better. The police are focused on putting criminals away but they need to focus on how criminals are made.

Through basketball, I've been able to meet many positive people and be in positive environments. I probably wouldn't finish school if not for basketball. All kids may not be into sports but I can guarantee every kid has something that interests them like art, sports, books, or animals. Nowadays people are making businesses and jobs out of anything. If youth are given the right resources, they are giving a head start that can help change the course of their future.

If the government invested in services, programs, and school, there's no doubt that we would see a drastic change as youth grow into adults. If we give youth spaces to feel safe and talk, it will help with all the built-in emotions youth tend to keep in which can cause outbursts and misbehavior. Nine times out of ten, youth just need to be heard, feel comfortable to be safe, and have fun. There's no doubt that if we as a community speak up to make a change in our communities the results could be bigger than we ever would have thought.

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# Scratching

by Annie Nguyen

People say anxiety is a disease that humans suffer from; in a way, it's also a perspective. We all live different lives in different environments that shape our idea of self. According to the World Health Organization, 1 in 13 people globally suffer from anxiety. Although I am categorized as one with attention-deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), anxiety has made its way to occupy my life as well. Those that have ADHD, or also known as neurodivergence, have often been shown to have comorbidities with depression and anxiety: ADHD, depression, and anxiety tend to co-exist together in one person.

My perception of myself was dictated by how others saw me and how others wanted me to be. In turn, societal pressures shaped me into myself. I am no longer Annie but the cumulation of everyone's expectations. I believe that these pressures manifested into the anxiety and depression I would feel in my daily life, as well as this essay I present here.

Since I can remember, I felt the weight of my family expectations of what a perfect stereotypical Asian daughter should be, and knew that failure was not an option. I was nothing but a puppet in my parents' eyes, a trophy that they can show off, a reflection of the dreams they couldn't achieve.

Subconsciously, I knew once I made a mistake and showed any resemblance of vulnerability, my worth would be diminished and that thought alone crushed me.

I started to scratch my hands as a coping mechanism for my anxiety when I was 13. Whenever I had any important deadlines and tests, I felt overwhelmed. I was especially overwhelmed whenever I felt like I could not live up to someone's expectations of me as a good friend, daughter, or sister. I felt like if I tried, it would not be good enough to even achieve that title of the perfect role in everyone's life and in my own. I used to believe I could not achieve the perfect mark on my test or my assignments. I felt like everyone around me perceived me as annoying and that my presence was irritating. Scratching calmed whatever problem I had. Every time my fingers gouged the surface of my skin and my nails scraped against it, it felt like a high I never experienced before. Suddenly, the thoughts of fulfilling that perfect role dissipated. My thoughts went to the darkest places and I have the scars to prove it.

The scratching was always kept at bay and never resulted in more harm than just scratch marks. There came a point in time where I was no longer in control of my scratching and my anxiety dictated the harm I did that day. That day was when my parents scolded me for failing an entrance exam to the "University of Toronto Schools". The test result was a failure, and therefore so was I. At the time, my parents had embedded in me that attending this school would be the harbinger of the success that has yet to come. It was the milestone that would set the tone for the rest of my life: going to Harvard, attending medical school, being the trophy daughter they have manifested before my own existence. It was as though my entire life was planned as soon as I attended that school. I just

wanted to be a kid, I did not want to be responsible for my parents unachieved goals.

I constantly felt conflicted on who they wanted me to be, who I actually am as a person, and what I wanted for myself. It felt like I was losing a part of myself when I thought about leaving my friends and the comfortable relationships that I had formed with my classmates and teachers. However, if I could not achieve their desired future, my parents would not be angry but the emotions they would feel and the way they would treat me is far worse than anger. Their disappointment and pity would overshadow every bit of encouragement I would receive from my friends. Every synonym one can think of, "it's okay, they don't understand" and "you're so smart, it was just test anxiety" would circulate around me but it would all be muted by knowing I failed my parents. I could not forgive myself for a long time. I would forever be considered stupid in my own eyes, unable to achieve anything else in my life: a constant reminder that I am a failure.

Taking the exam was no easy task. These exams had to be booked two months prior and included 2 study guides that weighed a kilogram each. Opening their books felt like I was reading another language. It felt like all the Math I learned in grade eight was not going to do me justice and the English skills accumulated over the years can only be compared to the size of a pea. I watched videos after videos on how to solve problems on factoring perfect squares, and read the Oxford Dictionary to try to teach myself words that just did not make sense to me, like "discombobulate" or "vernacular". My thoughts would engulf me, telling me that if I failed the exam I would have physical evidence that I could not understand the material. I could never fulfill the role of being a "good daughter".

This commenced the chronic scratching; I

would scratch for days and for hours at a time. The audible sound of nails scraping against my skin to form red scars is now embedded in my brain. I associate the sound with trying to distract myself from the overwhelming feelings of anxiety rushing through my body.

This system of studying had gone on for two months. I had scabs on my hands and eye bags that made me resemble a panda. It felt like I was training to fight in the trenches for the day when an actual war would start.

On the morning of the entrance exam, I could not eat anything. I wanted to stab my eyes open to make sure I did not fall asleep. I felt like I was going to puke just at the thought of the exam. From the time I stepped out of my Dad's car to the first step I took into that exam room, it felt like I was marching out into war. The classroom was cold and everything was painted in white; it resembled a mental asylum. The monitors took away our phones and anything we had in hand so there wasn't a possibility of cheating. They gave us one pencil and eraser along with the exam. All the monitors positioned themselves in the front of the room and started the timer; that was when everything blacked out. I practically slept through the entire exam, circling all the answers without giving any thought or intent to them.

After that exam, all my senses had heightened. I did not tell anyone what had happened, knowing that if I did tell someone, I would probably want to dig myself a grave and die. I kept myself distracted for the entire week before the results came out, expecting that it would be a disaster. I was on high alert whenever anyone opened their mouth just hoping that abomination would not be mentioned. All of the "Yeah, I think I did good" or "I couldn't have failed" responses were far from the truth. My scratching was not just during studying. Now, it occurred

every second of the day as long as I was breathing. It felt like I was being strangled for each second that had passed. However, this facade could not go on forever.

It was a Monday, and I had just come home from school. It was the week after I had taken the exam and the first day that I finally felt free. I had just spent the afternoon with my friends going to Popeye's and making impressions of my teachers. It was the first time since the exam where my mind was not bombarded with thoughts of failure and disappointment. I smiled the entire time I made my way home, but the sight of what was waiting for me the moment I had stepped into my household ripped that smile away. As I walked upstairs and turned on my computer, a notification popped to announce that the scores were posted. I instantly logged in to check my scores. My heart sank. I wanted to cry. I wanted to yell. My eyes became blurry and I felt like my breath was taken away. I spent the entire evening in my room, completely isolated, sitting against my bedroom door scratching my hand until it felt numb. I was tired and worn down but I didn't have the energy to get up. I just fell asleep against my bedroom door and let my hands feel the air and the pain penetrate into my nerves.

The next morning when I woke up, I was tucked in my bed and my hand was bandaged up. I decided to turn to my sister and tell her about the results of the test. I went to her room and exclaimed to her that it was an emergency. As my sister opened the door, I completely started to break down. I explained to her that I failed the exam and that every bit of self-confidence I had was completely diminished. My sister has always given me words of affirmation and today was the epitome of how much encouragement and unconditional love she could give me. Unlike my friends, when she tells me

that my intelligence is not compromised just because of some measly test score, I believe it. I briefly believed that this was just an obstacle that I had to overcome and that it did not define me. I felt confident in confiding in my mom about this test score.

The feeling of anxiety overflowed my body. As I went to her room my heart started going for a mile a minute. Finding her in her room sitting upright talking to my aunt, I felt my soul leave my body. Bringing the last bit of energy that I had, I told my mom about this score. She reacted oppositely to what I expected. She gave me words of relief and told me that it did not matter that I passed this test but that I simply tried. I was ecstatic, over the moon, that my mom was completely understanding at this moment. For that moment, I felt like I connected with her on a deeper level and that I can confide in her about my insecurities because, like this moment, she would be understanding and compassionate.

However, the period of joy came to a halt around two weeks later. I came home from school and just wanted to go upstairs to put my stuff away. Right then, I overheard my mom talking to my sister about how much of a failure my sister was that day. The woman who I thought gave me words of relief made my fear a reality. She explained how she has to accept the fact that she has, not just one, but two daughters that are always less successful and intelligent than her friends' children. It may not have been for my ears and my name may not have been explicitly mentioned, but I could feel her disappointment in me. It was as if she told me that she would rather have those children as her kids instead of my sister and I and that we were her walking failures that she has to live with for the rest of her life. That was when the feelings of failure truly escalated to its peak. All

the confidence I had gained thinking that our relationship was growing had dissipated. I had evidence that I was a failure, a core memory was embedded on that very day and it can never be forgotten.

Recovering from that moment was very hard. My sister and I had countless discussions and pseudo-therapy sessions to build up our confidence in each other and in ourselves. We would talk about feeling like we could never amount to anything and never truly be the people we wanted to be. She talked about her fear of not being special; she felt like she was going to be an average worker in a small cubicle no matter how hard she tried. I shared my feelings of not being able to follow the exact path our parents put us in and that anything outside of it, even other great career paths, would still be considered bad. My sister and I bonded through verbalizing our insecurities and coming to terms with them. It made me love myself more and scratch myself less, bit by bit everyday. The urge to feel my nails against my skin being engulfed by unconditional love is one of the best feelings I have ever felt.

I write this essay to encapsulate my feelings of my story and share what my experiences with anxiety are. These experiences, without bias, can be seen as mundane with no credible meaning or importance. But, do any experiences with anxious or depressive traits need to be constantly justified and validated? In my opinion, every experience that someone is going through is subjectively important to their development and their understanding of self. These experiences define how I deal with hardships and how I overcome them. When I tell my truth to my peers, they would ask me why this was such a big deal and why I would feel anxiety from an insignificant "bad mark". It is not just an insignificant bad mark: it is the accumulation of the



ILLUSTRATION BY SHAMISO CHIGWENDE

disappointment from my parents, my feelings of worthlessness, and my insecurities translated into the measly forty I saw on that screen. Every "insignificant bad mark" has a significant impact on my self-esteem. My story matters; everyone's story matters. I believe normalizing the act of sharing our experiences will create less of a stigma against what is considered mundane and what is considered significant. The euphoria one feels when they no longer feel trapped by their self-destructive conscience is achieved when we finally show the traumas we experience the love and time they deserve.





PHOTO BY NICOLE FALLAS-OSORIO





# 5 years

by Anonymous

5 years...5 years...5 years...

I always remember that

From 2015 to 2020 the feeling of isolation

The feeling that I can't seem to let go of because of 30 people

The rush of anxiety whenever I hear someone laughing behind me because I remember those people put stuff in my hair

Cotton balls from sweaters, Marks, Pencils

The memory of my classmates telling me they hated me

"Haha, yea a lot of people hated me"

"Oh yea, I hated you"

"Why?"

"I don't know why I just did"

"Do you know why I hate you?"

"No, why?"

"I don't want to tell you It'll make you sad"

"Just tell me"

"It will make you sad"

Then why even mention it

The memory of my classmates pointing out that I am not their friend

"You know \_\_\_\_ you don't really have friends in our class"

"Yea I know"

"I feel bad for you \_\_\_\_ no one will decorate your locker for your birthday"

Why would you tell me, you know that'll hurt my feelings

Whenever I was walking to school with two people they made me feel the most insecure

"You're so ugly \_\_\_\_"

"Yeah, you're really ugly"

Silence

"Yea \_\_\_\_ is so ugly"

Silence

Or how many of them called me dumb

"You're so dumb \_\_\_\_"

"You're a fucking r\*\*\*\*\* \_\_\_\_"

"You're actually stupid \_\_\_\_"

And now after those and many more incidences they admit I was bullied

"Yea I was bullied a lot in middle school"

"Oh yea you were bullied a lot back in middle school"

Sometimes their words echo in my head

Sometimes their words take over

Sometimes I wish I didn't exist because of their words

Sometimes I think I'm not good enough

That they were right

I'm trying to get over it, I really am but it hurts

Every Time I remember

The tears that are streaming down my face right now while writing this from all the hurt I've gone through

And repeating the same process and tell myself

you're doing great right now

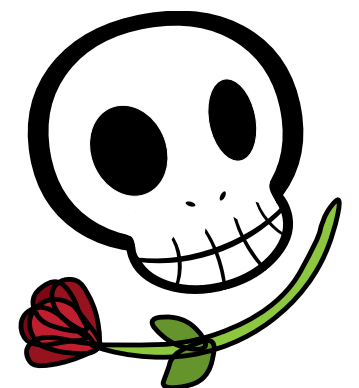
keep it up

And one day I hope to remember the things they did to me

Without getting a raspy voice

Without having tears stream down my face

And to never hear their words in my head again



# On Dreams

Maybe it's a symptom of having incredibly lifelike dreams, but there's an eerie sense of familiarity that occurs the first hour after a dream.

As I walk about my apartment and go to turn on a particular hallway light switch, I feel the presence of some added weight that was not there the night before.

There's a heaviness when I walk by my magazine collection, telling me that it holds some significance just beyond my waking comprehension.

Sometimes these evoke clearer fragments of the dream; someone close to me stole those magazines in a dream I had somewhere in the space of 1-9 hours ago. But most of the time they conjure nothing and I'm left at a loss for what the light switch meant to me so recently but so distantly.

The line between reality and imagined reality that I experience in the first couple hours of consciousness after a heavy dream is interesting

because it's so blurred.

- Leila Trottier-Evans





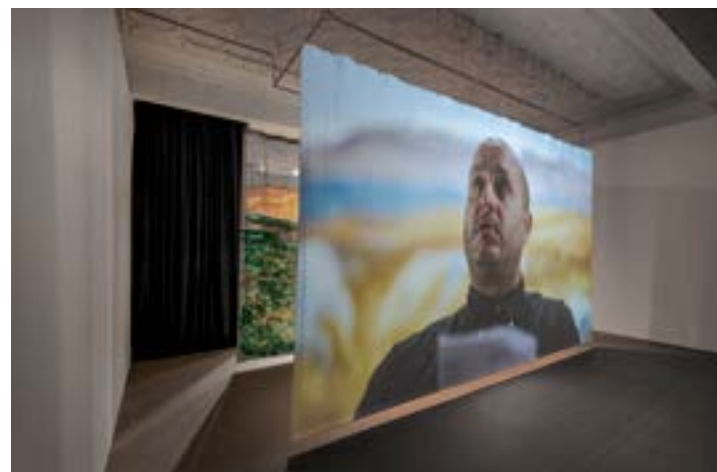
# Art Review

by Leila Trottier-Evans

Lawrence Abu Hamdan: 45th Parallel  
 26 March 2022 - 4 June 2022  
 at MERCER UNION, a centre for contemporary art  
 1286 Bloor Street West

This year I've had the privilege to view and experience a plethora of amazing local and international contemporary art, all thanks to the Toronto Biennial. A 10-week contemporary art festival including exhibits, tours, interactive pieces and much more spread across many locations in the city, the Toronto Biennial is something you should definitely be looking into if you want to get out and see art this year. I've seen so many interesting, weird and confusing pieces these past couple weeks, but one of the ones that really stuck with me was a small exhibit at Mercer Union (located around Lansdowne and Bloor), which included two large paintings and a short film, "The 45th Parallel". As you walk into the small space, you will first pass two large landscapes, before sitting down to watch a film projected onto a large hanging screen. In the film, Mahdi Fleifel guides the viewer around the Has-

kell Free Library and Opera House, discussing the ways in which borders are not as strict and defined as we may think, while standing before the paintings. The Haskell Free Library and Opera House, stands on ground divided between the Canadian and American border. You can enter the library from both countries but you must exit into your own country and there is a border cop sat outside to ensure that you do. Fleifel illustrates multiple real life situations which call the rigidity of borders into question. The piece is not only very interesting, but I appreciated the fact that the language and the way it was presented both audio wise and visually, was all very well done and accessible for viewers. The 45th parallel, created by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, stuck with me after I left the Mercer Union exhibit, and is one of my favourite pieces from the Toronto Biennial, which I highly recommend you check out!



# The Clock

By Sabrina McElheran Alluz

Have I done enough? That is what I thought to myself, my mind racing.

It's 7 am and I'm running to catch the next train for work. I'm going to be late, I'm never late. Yet all I could think about was: is the life I have worthwhile?

If I died today would it all have been enough?

I just missed the train.

"Damn it!" I say, a bit too loudly.

I glance around at those around me, on their daily commute. I wonder if they are happy with their lives? So many people's stories surround me, all of whom I'd never know. Life stories, hardships, triumphs, all untold. We are all merely passing faces at the train station and nothing more.

So much, yet so little has happened in my life. Yes, I've lived many years, but have I really? Repetitive weeks, one after another. Time seems to move so slow considering the small number of excitements in my life, but at the same time, it seems to move too fast for me to keep up. Sometimes I wish it would all stop, even for just a moment, a chance to catch my breath from this never-end-

ing whirlwind of emotions. One second I was a ten-year-old boy whose biggest worries were if Santa would bring me what I wanted for Christmas or the terrifying monster under my bed. Now 20 years later, bills and work are what's on my mind.

The train station was grand, the ceiling adorned with intricate designs that ran all the way around. Angels carved into it and delicate flowers bloomed in stone. When I was a kid I was fascinated by all the commotion and liveliness of it all. The hustle and bustle of the people coming and going, the buskers playing their instruments with passion as the music filled the air and brought the place to life, as electricity does to a string of Christmas lights.

Now the colours of life have gone grey. I dread being here, the thought of it makes me sick. Waking up at the crack of dawn and dragging myself to the train station, solely running on caffeine and worry. Tired and irritable commuters pushing and shoving past each other with heads down and the glow of cell phone screens turned up.

Was this all life is?

If so, what happened?

Is there not more to it?

It used to all be so exciting.

My eyes wander, as I try to pass the time but stop as they land at the pinnacle of the station, the grand clock in the middle of it all. Its ornate gold details and edges, glistening in the glow of the lights, illuminating all four of its faces.

Through the loudness of what's going on around me, all the sounds diminish and the only thing I can hear is the second hand as it makes its way around the clock. I feel almost hypnotised as I watched it.

Tick

Tock

Tick

Tock

It mocks me

Tick

Tock

Tick

Tock

It gets faster.

Tick, Tock, Tick, Tock,

Tick, Tock

Oh my god.

Is this where it ends?

If only I had more time.

And then suddenly, it stopped. I look

around again at those around me, and it's as if nothing happened. Then I notice the walls turning into a white abyss, the tall pillars start to fade away. Gradually, everything had begun to disappear, even the people that had once been in such a hurry, had vanished. All of the rush, gone.

What just happened? I was mesmerised, it was endless as far as the eye could see. I took a couple of steps forward. It was bizarre, just two-dimensional emptiness. I looked down and though everything had vanished the briefcase in my hand still happened to stay.

"Hello?" I cried.

"Hello? Hello? Hello? Hello? Hello?...." It echoed back at me.

Was I going crazy?

Then suddenly the ground started to shake vigorously, and cracks started to form. I try to keep my balance as the ground shakes. A larger-than-life-itself clock started to emerge below me. I'm in awe as it looms over me ominously, every time I think it's done growing, it keeps getting larger and larger. And then it comes to a stop. I slowly walk around the clock, flustered by the series of events that had just occurred.

The clock was ornate, similar to the one in the station but the face had little stars on it and seemed to swirl like a cosmic whirlpool, luring me in, waiting to eat me up. But of course, this was much, much bigger. The hands were stark black and the roman numerals

were lined with gold. Suddenly, the hands started moving backwards, moving so fast until it was nothing but a blur.

And then it went dark.

The aroma of freshly baked goods lingers in the air as I slowly open my eyes. Where am I? I look around the room I'm in. It looks very familiar, there are balloons scattered everywhere and a banner hung from the wall. I make my way through a hallway and walk past familiar faces, though most of them I can't quite put my finger on who they are. Conversations surround me as I take it all in, I knew where I was.

I located where the sweet scent had come from, in the kitchen where there sat a white and blue cake on the counter. Silver and gold stars lined the cake and in the middle written in royal blue frosting read "Happy 14th Birthday!"

"Okay everyone, time for cake!" Mami? A rush of kids ran past me to gather around the cake. In the back, I see a small boy who looked like he couldn't be more disappointed. He happened to be wearing a "birthday boy" badge, that boy was me.

I used to always look forward to birthdays, especially when I was really little. It makes you feel like the king of the world and I loved the attention. Then at around age 14, I started to hate it, absolutely dreaded birthdays. I hated the idea of getting older, I hated being in high school, I hated that eventually

one day I'd have to leave my childhood home. I didn't want to grow up, endless summers, lazy weekends when the world would drift by. I couldn't stop it from coming and that overwhelmed me.

I looked as if I was about to cry, staring directly at the cake. Waiting to blow out the candles, the warm glow of childhood in my face as people sang at me.

13 year old me blew out the candles, a gust of smoke floated up. He had a smile on his face, but the kind of smile you plaster on when you don't want people to ask what's wrong. Taking it all in, I looked around. There was so much happiness all around me that I'd never noticed before, so many little moments that all together made me feel warm. My grandparents were sitting there, they had flown in from all the way from Argentina. Both so happy to be there, but my grandma especially. Everything I did to her seemed like the absolute best thing in the world and had a laugh that filled the house.

Some time had passed and I walked into the kitchen to see my younger self, in my mom's tight embrace. I forgot about this. I had been so blinded by all the negative things, I had forgotten about everything else. I had tears in my eyes, but this time I looked happy, genuinely happy, not just a facade I had put on.

All of a sudden, again everything started to slowly disappear and unravel

like pulling on the loose yarn of a knitted sweater. And just like before, it went dark.

I open my eyes again and this time I'm back in the train station, but now I was high above everything, able to see it all at one time.

At the far end of the station, I watched as a man got off a train and instantly a little girl ran up to him with a big smile and arms wide. At the other end were two people sitting on a bench eating ice cream together. The more I looked the more little moments of joy I found in every direction. Yes, there are sorrowful moments, but they are balanced out by all the happy ones.

There in the middle of it all was me, standing alone, looking miserable. Why had I let myself get so upset by this? Though at the moment all the things that had made me feel this way seemed like the biggest issue in my life, it's merely a dot in my timeline amongst many others.

Once again Everything faded away and I opened my eyes to see myself back to where I started, the train station. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and listened to everything around me. I heard the ticking of the clock but this time not mocking me, but simply just 7:05 on a beautiful morning. And for the first time in a while, I felt at peace.

I had fallen in love with life again.





# The Death of Innocence

There comes a certain age in which things just aren't what they used to be.

The world becomes less vibrant, less saturated.

What once was mine got lost in translation.

Days seemingly getting shorter as dusk turns to dawn in the blink of an eye.

We reach out and catch what once flew over our heads.

Friends are no longer defined by threads and beads around your wrist,

but by the tangled mess they weave.

- Sabrina McElheran Alluz

# Love

Love is a path we all seek to go down

A path that flaked with falsehoods and broken truths

A path of selfishness and personal gain

A path some of us rush down too quickly

A path that some of us have decided to stay away from

A path that keeps us searching but breaks to the point of depression

A path that promises enlightenment but only delivers to a few

A path that drives us insane

A path that grants us never ending loneliness

A path that keeps us guessing and overthinking

A path that drags us through the mud by the heart

A path that by most can only be described as a foolish pursuit

But Love is the path that's always worth going down,

because some of us will be lucky enough to finally have it.

- Joshua McKenzie



But, eventually, you'll understand  
That, as much as you despise me,  
And wish I didn't exist,  
No one else will ever know you,  
For, only your Inner Devil,  
Knows exactly,  
What hell you've been through.  
- S.S.W.

You can hate me all you want.  
Pass all your sins to me.  
Blame all your faults on me.  
Try to erase me, to have me gone.

PHOTO BY BIANKA PACHECO





# The Silence they Left

by Ada Fuerth

The village was empty. It always was, ever since the shadow god made himself known. Nobody had truly seen him, though, just seen the whispering edges of the god's powers. Ebb was sitting on the roof of the protector's home, now technically his home.

Nobody was left, Ebb was the only one. He had managed to survive the shadows pull up until now. When the first person had disappeared, nobody was worried. Even when the second, third, or even fifth person vanished nobody had cared much. But when the protector's heir, the tenth person, disappeared, the small settlement was sent into panic and misery. There wasn't a moment when Ebb couldn't hear the sounds of flight and panicked shouting from the searchers in the forest. Until he couldn't. Nobody could, the searchers disappeared, more went out to find them but it was if the shadows themselves had swallowed them up.... And they had.

Ebb was terrified that the shadows would swallow him up as well, but

they never did. First, it was the neighbors. Sounds of happy playfulness rang out from within their houses... until it didn't. The sudden silence of those taken were a constant reminder to people that they could be next... It led many, including Ebb, to make a constant ruckus of noise to cover up others silence... That proved to be a mistake, as it only made the silence more deafening. Once the neighbors were gone, then it was the people who Ebb knew personally. Friends, family, even the others who lived in his house slowly got dragged into the shadows and left the silence in their place. Eventually it was only Ebb and the protector left... and then it was just Ebb.

Some people argued that the silence was not even the worst part, though, it was the attacks. When the fellow stars were taken, a new shadow monster joined the ranks that attacked us at the strike of noon. The sun turned dark for the settlement and dreadful monsters with huge gnashing teeth and terrible serrated claws rose out of the growing shadows to weaken

us. They never killed, though, just left dark cuts that oozed a strange shadowy liquid. Those who got cut almost always left their silence behind next.

When there were only a few members of the settlement left, Ebb had begun to see a figure wreathed in black smoke, staring at him with its two malice-filled white eyes from the edge of the town. The cold icy feeling it left him with, one that felt as if the shadow monster's claws were sinking straight into his core, had started to take a toll on Ebb as he sat on the roof.

It was almost noon, the sun was high in the sky and the shadows cast as threatening as ever. The moon was a comforting silver light on the torturous weeks and months the shadows had been leaving in silence.

Ebb had given up. He was alone, scared, and nothing much more to live for. He had decided to go with the figure just outside of the village, he knew it would be coming. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The sun turned dark, just as it always did, leaving the village in a cold twisted darkness with the dim light only just enough to be able to be seen. This time, however, no beasts rose up from the shadows, only the mist cloaked figure. Ebb took a deep, shaky breath, before rising from his seat on the roof and slowly gliding down to the floor. The lonely star took one last look at what had

become of his village, the broken down houses, the polluted water, the packed dirt paths no longer walked on, before turning towards the figure and locking eyes with it for the first time...

The icy cold feeling that gripped his core every time the figure arrived now gripped his entire body. This time it was not filled with fear, but with a grim resignation. The crackly taps of Ebbs feet on the packed

dirt broke the heavy deafening silence the shadows left.

Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap. The cold gripped harder and harder until it was almost unbearable, but at last the star got to the figure.

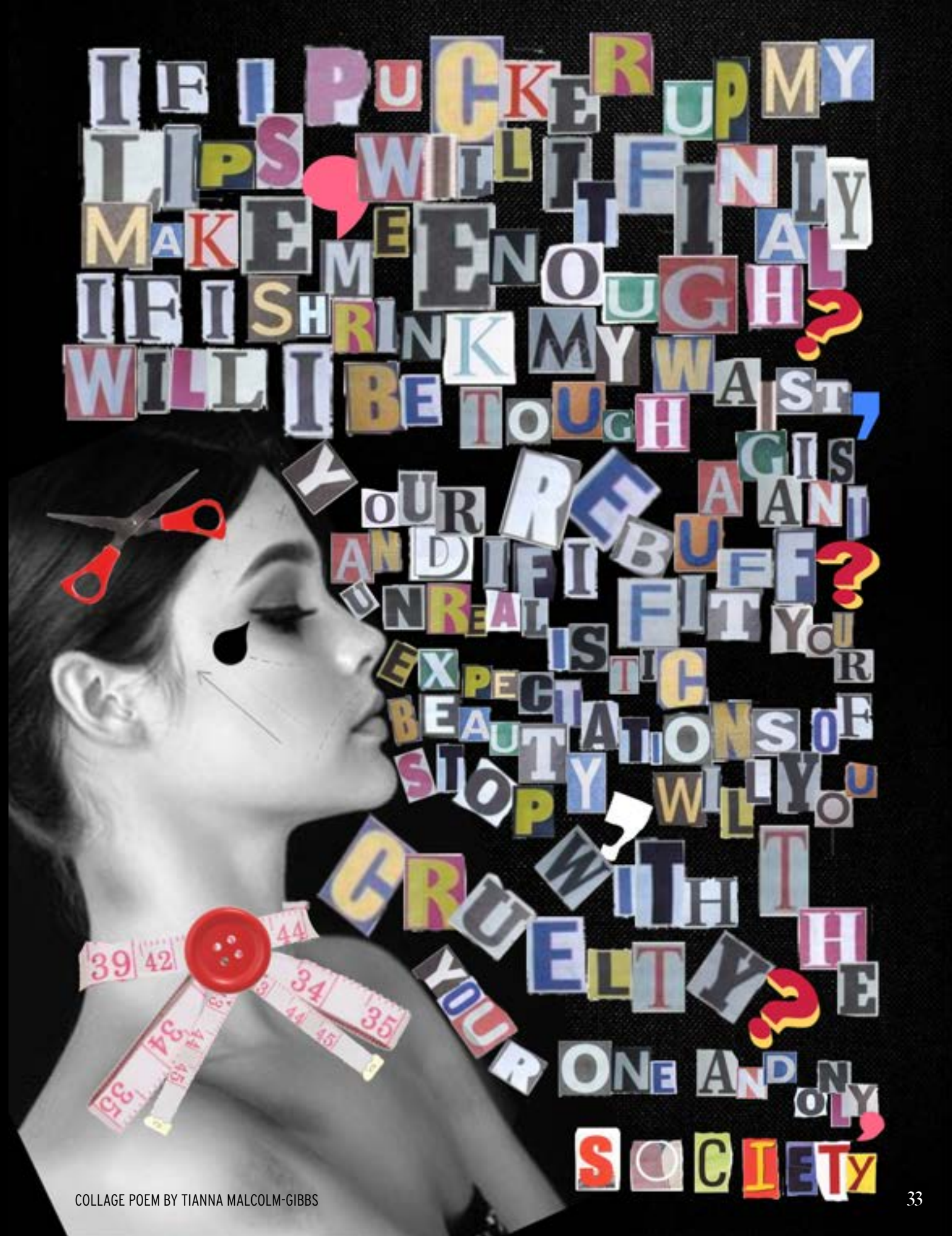
They stared at each other in silence for a

few moments, before a dark whispery voice filled Ebbs head. "You have chosen the shadows then. We will welcome you, your village has been waiting." In a flash, Ebb knew that this was the shadow god, something inside him had opened up when the voice spoke in his head. Instead of shying away, he reached out towards the god and a strange feeling of gratitude washed over Ebb. Then he let the shadows take him.





alldolled up!



# Thief

This invisible presence that stands by you  
Could care less of your penance  
As it's adamant to grasp onto the hour hand  
And turn it in its vast clockwise direction  
The thief, bending and collecting the minutes  
I dropped, where her smile spread so graciously  
As she steals and stocks them into her shoulder bag  
Hunching and tip-toeing oh, so deftly  
I wondered if she housed secrets  
For the only thief was me  
And the victims of this flawless crime  
Were of my time.

-A. Walker-Cain



# Where Lurks the Darkness

by Ada Fuerth

Running, chasing, running, pursuit, running, fear. The usual bright green grass of the grasslands stained a wilted brown, crunching like leaves under my feet. A bright yellow-gold light flickers just ahead of me, the only light source left in this darkness ridden clearing.

“Don’t go!” they said, “Don’t go, there the darkness lurks.” I didn’t listen. Why would I have? I didn’t know about whatever this creature was, a shadow of a being I couldn’t quite make out. It stalks me from the undergrowth, the lone butterfly’s light the only thing it cannot get me.

That is why I chase, I chase to flee the shadowy creature. I’m out of breath, but the fear pounding in my heart keeps me going. The flickering light illuminates the shattered wilted trees, yet more evidence that this place was once full of life and joy. The air holds an almost see-able smog of fear and despair.

As I run, the shadow can sense my fear. Wait, the dried up grass has turned

to... stone? I glance up at the clouded sky, wondering how a part of the grasslands could have been so cursed. I glance behind me, only to get jolted into running yet faster to the butterfly, as the shadow’s eerily silent footsteps bring it closer and closer to me, its two red eyes gleaming from the edge of the fading light.

Suddenly the world seems to close in as two rocky walls and a ceiling appear in my vision. Up ahead, the glow is stronger, the butterfly almost urges me forwards. Is this an exit? Let it be the exit, get me out of this cursed place! The crunches of the dried grass turn to rapid tapping as my footsteps echo around the now widening cave.

I then burst into a room filled with glowing mushrooms that I leap onto, feeling my light return somewhat. Not a moment later, though, the shadow stalking me enters the mushroom-filled cavern with a screech. I wrap shaking wings around myself as it approaches, waiting for the end... But it does not come, instead the creature’s red eyes

seem to stare into my very spirit, filling me with a strange sorrow. A fierce whispering enters my head, filling my thoughts and muddling my spirit. Through the mental haze I can tell it’s not coming from the creature, but something else... something stronger.

The glimmering mushrooms catch my eye and tear my attention away from the shadow, the small butterfly trying its best to free me from the snare I fell into. The whispering listens, but then when the thing in front of me lashes its tail and sinks its claws deep into my ankle, the great power fills my mind more. I feel myself screaming, but my thoughts are focusing on the voice. It tells me of the beauty of shadows, of the darkness within all.

My foot starts to turn into darkness, the cavern mushrooms dimming. The fog of fear is visible, even as the infective whispery voice fills my spirit. The grabbed foot starts to almost sink into the now growing shadows.

Suddenly, I am released. The voice subsides but doesn’t completely leave. The mushrooms shrivel up and the cave becomes pitch black. I grope around to leave the cave, but when I find the exit the clearing seems entirely different. The dark light that was once a deterrent now feels fresh and clear, the black cloud’s form elegant yet filling. The broken, parched trees feel like a crystalline structure that is a way to let the shadows dance.

A bright light that almost hurts my eyes flies from the cave, and I pounce. It is the butterfly... It is the one who kept the chains on me this entire time... The whispering in my head subsides as I open my jaws and swallow the light whole.





# I unstick myself.

I unstick myself. I have been unstuck.

Unstuck like a duck from the sticky icky muck that surrounds the towns and stains your mother's gowns.

Why must I frown? Supremacy is a clown that brainwashes the wearer, corrupts the beholder, changes the believer.

I have been unstuck.

No longer bound by the ways of the system.

I'm the anomaly.

The glitch in the matrix. The needle in the haystack.

The straw that broke the camel's back.

I unstick myself, for this is ongoing.

Happening happened, for Rebecca Sugar said, it happened again and again and again. The process is infinite.

Existing in the dystopia of this world means you conquer the problems you face, no matter what the case, whether or not your offspring see you as an

ace. Do good for you, and for the whole. Not for gain, not inflicting pain.

Break the shackles that have kept you strained.

I've taken the red pill.

I unstick myself.

I'm sure you will.

- Obi Onwubuke



PHOTO BY NICOLE FALLAS-OSORIO





PHOTO BY BIANKA PACHECO



# Struggles of Curly Hair

by Aesha Jemal

Most girls who have curly hair, especially black girls, have to deal with societal pressures and stigmas of natural hair. The struggles of curly hair became intergenerational, and what was deemed as “acceptable” became our definition of beauty.

For me, I grew up clueless about how to maintain my hair and what type of curly hair I have. For most of my childhood, my mom would assume the responsibility of having to do my hair; she would tend to always braid it or put it into different hairstyles that usually involved those staple childhood hair bands with the two coloured balls on the ends. She would do the same routine: brush my curls out and braid it down or put it up every week to make my hair more “manageable” and “aesthetic”.

When big events came around like weddings or holidays, my mom would make my sister straighten my hair. It was when my hair was straightened I would get the most compliments, on how long and pretty my hair was. Especially from

my mom, who adored how my hair looked when it was straightened, but found it less beautiful in its natural form. This was understandable since my mom’s preference was long straight or long curly hair, for her that was beautiful and that was the case for most people in my family. People associate hair and beauty as the same thing which became brutally apparent to me. As a child, my definition of what I found beautiful was blank. So I started to sway with others’ opinions and started to associate straight hair as a dress code for formal events, as beautiful, as mandatory.

It was when I entered the sixth grade that my mom’s arthritis was getting worse and her hands were too weak to do my hair, and as a blindly confident twelve-year-old, I took on that responsibility. I was excited at first but I realized I knew nothing about my hair and how heavy that responsibility is. I mean what do I do with it? I wasn’t skilled enough to braid my hair, and I didn’t know how to do a bun, the only

option was to do a ponytail, or blow dry it. I eventually learned how to do an “okay” bun, and braid a little bit, but I was still lost. My hair was foreign to me yet oddly that emotion felt normal. Subconsciously, I knew to never let my hair out in its natural state unless it was manipulated. It was only in the seventh grade on a field trip that I let my hair down. And to my surprise, I got a lot of compliments and people telling me that I should let my hair down more often. These compliments again challenged everything I had ever been told and thought of, leaving me conflicted.

When I entered my pre-teens I started to put down my hair more; I would slather keratin conditioner and use it as a leave-in. As I started experimenting with my hair and trying new hairstyles that were semi-successful, I got a little more comfortable with it.

During my first year of high school, on my birthday, my cousin gave me my first real set of “curly hair products”. She wrote down instructions and sent a demo on how to use it. She taught me about type 2, 3, & 4 curly hair and what type I was. It was then my definition of “curly hair” expanded and fueled my curiosity to learn more about my hair. Of course, as a beginner to curly hair, I made mistakes but found out what worked and didn’t work for me.

I would still straighten my hair but would receive mixed compliments. “I like your hair straight, it’s pretty” or “I prefer your hair curly rather than straight.” I didn’t know what to

do with some of these comments. I just said thank you and went along with my day. But people always made comments about my hair or curly hair in general. It felt like my hair had some big neon sign on it that attracted attention, but I could never decipher if it was fully positive.

My mom still did not like my hair out. She made her comments about how messy it is, and how it looks better in a bun or ponytail. I would get annoyed by her ignorant comments but I never really held a grudge against her because I knew her relationship with her hair. My mom’s experience growing up is that she heard from her friends, family and loved ones that short afro-style curly hair was unkempt, messy and unprofessional.

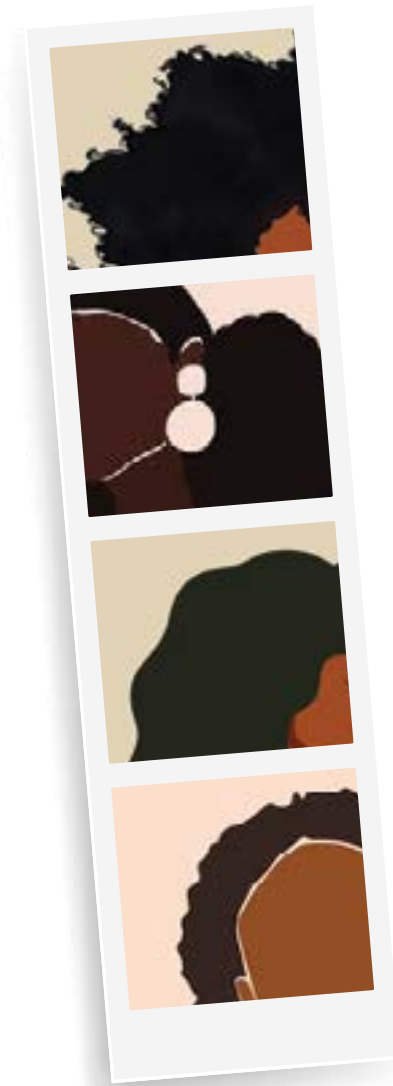
I knew her relationship with her hair was complicated, so how could she love mine? I mean how can you combat generations of internalized pressure to resent your hair type? I might have continued that long line of resentment for my hair if curly hair didn’t become a trend that everybody wanted and embraced. I was in a generation where people looked at curly hair as beautiful to the point where people with straight hair would perm their hair to get curls.

But is this trend something I can be happy about? Again, the current trend deems my hair type (3b/3c) as “acceptable,” yet does not show that same level of appreciation for kinkier or coilier hair types? Am I supposed to feel accepted and relieved by this? Even though by sheer dumb luck I was born into a time where people

were finally accepting a portion of curly hair and coincidentally the hair type I inherited gave me this “privilege” of being accepted? How can I not feel guilty that my sisters suffered and struggled with their hair and had no representation or guidance of how to do and love their natural hair but I was eventually taught how to?

Presently, as a sixteen-year-old, my hair became more than just hair. It became an extension of myself and a representation of my heritage. As I became more aware of myself and the world, I feel like I was fed a false dichotomy; that the only way to fully accept my hair was to be fully natural. Craving to feel some type of self-acceptance of my natural hair, I unknowingly put myself in a box that prevented me from reaching my true potential of acceptance and stripped me of experiencing the diversity of my hair. As great as it is to be 100% natural, I felt confined and restricted by that identity. Can't I be proud of my hair and also do whatever I want with it, even if means using heat?

I tell my story to educate people on the complicated relationships that generations in my family, myself, and generally the black community have faced with hair. And will continue to have because of the stigmas and stereotypes that curly hair carries.



storyboard by Anna Hapon





ILLUSTRATION BY MAEVE BAILEY



STREET ART STENCIL BY KATALINA RODRIGUEZ

# SLEEPING PILLS



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