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Michigan Youth Arts Festival Featured Student Writing: “Dependence”

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FEATURED MICHIGAN YOUTH ARTS FESTIVAL STUDENT WRITING

Dependence

ROBERT JAMES BOND II, SAGINAW ARTS AND SCIENCES ACADEMY (TEACHER: MRS. KAREN HORWATH)

Since we don't have a usable garage, the leftover fireworks from last year sat in the foyer indefinitely. Every once in a while, my younger, pre-teenaged brother, obsessed with things that go boom, would ask my dad if we could light a couple off, even if it wasn't the 4th of July yet. Dad always had the same answer: "Not tonight Shaunce, I have work in the morning," to which my brother would frown and shuffle off to find some other thing to break.

I was usually in the living room when he asked, playing some video game alone or with a friend, sitting on a chair taller than the couches for a better view of the TV. It had been dragged in from the dining room at the beginning of quarantine so I didn't have to drag it back and forth everyday. From where I sat, I had a direct view of the fireworks—sticking their heads out of their cardboard box home, begging to be shot into the night sky. Every time I saw that Shaunce was going to ask my dad about them, I gently slipped off the right side of my gaming headset. "Not tonight, Shaunce," was all I needed to hear. I slipped the headset back in place.

As the year went on and Covid-19 got more serious, social life began shutting itself down, much like the stores and small businesses in my city. Face mask recommendations became "must have face covering to enter" signs; stay-at-home options became stay-at-

home orders.

I remember waking up on March 13th to the news that school would be canceled for a couple weeks, and while that might make someone out there worried, I was nothing less than ecstatic. Two weeks of no school, right into another week of spring break? It was as if someone took all the snow days that we wished we had earlier in the winter and lined them up for us now.

Back then it was still only recommended that we stay home, so of course I spent almost every hour of every day at my girlfriend's house with her and her family instead of my own. But that freedom came to an end pretty soon, as Michigan's stay-at-home order was issued and a few free weeks at home turned into a few boring months.

That much time in the house without being able to go see a movie or hang out with friends forced everyone to get creative in ways to entertain themselves. Friendships and relationships were put to the test, and while some proved how strong they really were, others showed that long distance doesn't work for them. Over time, I traded in my best IRL (in real life) friends for my good online friends, my girlfriend and her family for my family and our next door neighbors.

I grew more acquainted with the fireworks and their cardboard box from my seat in the living room. The big green mortar always hid itself behind the

MCTE partners with Michigan Youth Arts Festival (MYAF) annually to highlight outstanding creative writing in high schools across the state. MCTE member teachers may submit student writing for adjudication in late winter. MCTE Executive Committee members read the submitted student writing in the genres of poetry, short story, play or script writing, creative nonfiction, and graphic novels and score the submissions to choose the strongest examples of creative writing at the 9-12 grade level across Michigan. The selected writers are chosen to participate in the Michigan Youth Arts Festival, which is held annually in May (usually on the campus of Western Michigan University, but the 2021 festival was virtual). At the festival, students attend two days of a creative writing workshop with an accomplished Michigan writer. In addition, students are selected to perform their writing pieces at the creative writing showcase. MCTE also published the Creative Writing Book available online and in print for teachers and students. More information about the festival and how to submit student writing can be found at: <https://mymcte.org/myaf-creative-writing/>

smaller boxes of multi-colored sparklers; the flashing strobe lights mixed in with the little smoke bombs, whose long fuses coiled themselves around the edges of the main box; the ripped open packs of firecrackers littered the floor of the container.

Days of the week blurred together into long, seemingly endless streaks of boredom, until the only thing keeping me sane was my dining room chair in the middle of the living room with my PS4 controller in my hand.

After asking so many times and getting the same answer, I think Shaunce just gave up on the fireworks. Eventually he stopped asking, and so they just continued to sit there. Every day, as the 4th got closer, the fuses on each one seemed to grow a little longer and the head of each rocket seemed to get a little taller, insisting we pay attention to them, but they sat there nevertheless, waiting for Independence Day to come.

Even though my family spent more time than ever under one roof, we all still stayed in our own general areas at first, secluded from each other. Shaunce spent his time in the basement with our dog, chasing him around the pool table until they were both sprawled out on the ground out of breath. My slightly younger sister Shayla stayed in her room doing Lord knows what in day-long group calls with her friends. Every once in a while I'd hear a shriek of laughter, which let me know she was still alive. Even my older sister Rainah came home for a while, since her college campus had switched to finishing out the semester online. It was nice for her to be around more, but she was mostly focused on school and her boyfriend, who spent his days on FaceTime with her since he was stuck back in his hometown. Mom's job was one that could still be done from home, so most days she sat in her work space from the time she woke up to the time she went to bed. Dad's job, on the other hand, couldn't be done from home, so instead of being in the loud, stressing, automotive plant all day, he loved to be in his natural habitat: outside on the front porch. With the living room being the center of the house and my chair in the living room being the center of my sanity, I witnessed bits of everything—bangs and barks beneath me, shrieks and laughter behind me, parts of a conversation happening all around me—but somehow still felt so alone.

The 4th of July is meant to be a day of pride for this country, but my family also uses it as an excuse to

meet up with our cousins, aunts, and uncles. Every year we get together with fireworks of our own, eating and laughing before heading out in about nine different cars to see the city-wide lights show. But this year was different. This year there was no get together, no food, no show.

I woke up that morning and went straight to my usual gaming spot, assuming there would be no celebration because there was no one to celebrate with. Mom still had to work, and Dad didn't tell me he had any plans, so I sat there, roaming the virtual world of *God of War* until the daylight ran out.

Just when it got really dark and I was starting to lose interest in playing anymore, I faintly heard a voice call my name from far away. It was Shayla, who I didn't even realize had left her room, calling me from the back door of the house a few rooms away.

"R.J!" she shouted.

I slipped my headset off my ears. "Yeah," I replied, "what's up?"

"Dad said come on outside with me, him and Shaunce."

I didn't really want to join them. Laying down in my room sounded better.

"And bring the fireworks."

While playing the game inside, I hadn't realized how much celebrating the rest of the city was actually doing. People all around the neighborhood had their own mini fireworks shows going on, no different from what normally happens when people would go home after the big show, except now, every house had their own party instead of just a few.

My younger siblings and I took turns lighting the big fireworks, admiring each and every sparkler, every firecracker, and every smoke bomb. Lighting the big green mortar in the street of my front yard made me smile harder than any other thing this year. It shot up from the base with a PFFF and smacked the sky with a POW, much louder than any of us expected. When it exploded, I felt a thump in my chest, followed by the warm sensation of satisfaction.

When we ran out of fireworks and were gathered around the porch, Dad brought out his big speaker and put on some music for us to vibe to. We all knew that if anything could bring the Bond family together, it would be late 90s/early 2000s R&B. As soon as Ice Cube's "Today Was A Good Day" came on, the environment evolved from a listening session to a dancing party.

DEPENDENCE

Mom could feel us moving the house she was trying to work in, and after being stuck in her office for so long, she just said forget it and joined us outside. Rainah told her boyfriend she would call him back later, uniting the household for the first time in months. There was no coordinated movement, no pre-planned style of dance, we just got up and moved, singing “shake ’em up, shake ’em up, shake ’em up, shake ’em up” in unison for the whole block to hear. We recreated moves we saw other people do to Outkast’s “Hey Ya!” and belted out the duo lyrics to Jill Scott’s “So In Love With You” for the audience of our neighbors. We even had a small, six-person conga line jumping to some Hispanic song I had never heard.

After weeks and weeks of sitting down and sitting back, we couldn’t help but feel the need to be active. “I’ll take this as my prom replacement,” I jokingly told them as we tried to finish doing the Biker Shuffle.

With the street light at the end of our driveway being the only source of light around, the pieces of scattered and burned fireworks glimmered along the street while our silhouettes danced away the tragedies of the world around us. Sitting so quietly in our foyer this entire past year, the fireworks had waited until the perfect time to come out, paying off in a way no one could have anticipated. For hours as we danced, it seemed like we were the only people on the planet. No virus, no phones, no thinking—just music.

Just a family, from dusk till dawn.

Robert Bond previously attended Arthur Hill High School and Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy as a dual enrolled student; he recently graduated from Arthur Hill High School. In the fall, he will attend Delta College with an undecided major