

NuÉpoca

Volume One

A R T

O F



A T L A N T A

NuÉpoca

Volume One

ART OF
ATLANTA

NuEpoca Volume 1: NUE Artists of Atlanta
Copyright © 2025 by NuEpoca Journal

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author.

EDITORIAL BOARD

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Jocelyn Osoria

DEPUTY EDITOR

Andrea Magana

ASSOCIATE EDITORS, PROSE

Jack Parker

Nadia Brown

ASSOCIATE EDITORS, POETRY

Aniya Anderson

Celine Cevikel

Kye Hamilton

STAFF WRITERS

Jocelyn Osoria

Kye Hamilton

Nadia Brown

ASSOCIATE GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Celine Cevikel

INTRODUCTION

Letter from the NuEpoca Founder	9
Author Bios	10

POETRY

WW / <i>Bri Campbell</i>	14
Hotel District / <i>Lauren Elmore</i>	16
Urban Life / <i>Atlas Thorne</i>	17
In Community / <i>Brin Wallace</i>	18
Spring Equinox / <i>Adam Roper</i>	28
Somewhere / <i>Aniya Anderson</i>	19
When Life Gives you Lemons / <i>A. Riel Regan</i>	38
Rise and Fall / <i>Brin Wallace</i>	39
Accelerate / <i>A. Riel Regan</i>	57
The Heart of It / <i>Cimone Ortega</i>	62
Fireblind / <i>A. Riel Regan</i>	68
Cathexesis / <i>Brin Wallace</i>	69
Nakedest / <i>Bri Campbell</i>	70
Peace / <i>Lauren Elmore</i>	84

SHORT STORIES

Who's There? / <i>Krystal Harris</i>	20
Magic / <i>Andrea Magana</i>	32
Mercy / <i>Sa'Real Jones</i>	43
It's Beginning to Look a Lot like Christmas / <i>Jocelyn Osoria</i>	52
Siphysus / <i>Andrea Magana</i>	60
Good Morning, Shirley / <i>Krystal Harris</i>	64
Spell for Reconciliation / <i>A. Riel Regan</i>	73

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photos of Atlanta Landmarks / <i>Jocelyn Osoria</i>	16
Hocus Pocus / <i>Cimone Ortega & Will Wreggelsworth</i> <i>captured by Alex Scott at Dream Haus Studios Event</i>	30
Photos of Atlanta / <i>Jocelyn Osoria</i>	
The Light Surrounds Her / <i>Cimone Ortega captured</i> <i>by Timothy Bowser at Dream Haus Studios Event</i>	58

COMMENTARY

Hocus Pocus: We Are Here / <i>Will Wreggeworth</i>	31
It's Ok to Paint like a Child / <i>Billy Stonecipher</i>	37
Light Surrounds Her / <i>Cimone Ortega</i>	59

ART

Christabel / <i>Nadia Coile</i>	15
Colt 45 / <i>Brin Wallace</i>	19
Beached / <i>Claire Button</i>	26
Ducks / <i>Brianna Sapienza</i>	27
Around the Corner / <i>Nadia Coile</i>	34
Please Don't Eat me (Sardines) / <i>Celine Cevikel</i>	35
It's Ok to Paint like a Child / <i>Billy Stonecipher</i>	36
Dream Guy / <i>Claire Button</i>	40
D'Angelo / <i>Tia Monet</i>	41
Whimsical Tree/ <i>Brianna Sapienza</i>	42
Illustration for Short Story Mercy / <i>Jocelyn Osoria</i>	47
Geraldine / <i>Nadia Coile</i>	48
Blue Sky Collage / <i>Brin Wallace</i>	49
Pastel Collage / <i>Brin Wallace</i>	50
Dog Portrait / <i>Brianna Sapienza</i>	51
I Deserve It All / <i>Tia Monet</i>	56
Earthy Field Collage / <i>Brin Wallace</i>	61
Three of Swords / <i>Nadia Coile</i>	63
The Speaker / <i>Nadia Coile</i>	71
Cat Portrait / <i>Brianna Sapienza</i>	82

Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to announce the first ever issue of NuEpoca! I can not thank the team enough for how they've influenced the final outcome and the work they did. I could not have done this alone. I also want to thank the contributors for having faith in an up and coming journal. I am extremely grateful to have sourced and connected with the talented individuals celebrated in this issue.

I began this venture because there is an urgent need to carve out spaces for artists and movements. Today, art must be commercially successful, or it is useless. Long gone are the days of art movements and art/literary journals with decisive influence over the culture as a whole. I believe this is a massive hindrance for today's creatives, and anyone who is passionate about art *made with passion* should be invested in bringing back the influence of movements and journals.

NuEpoca can fill but a corner of this need, but is necessary to create artist safehavens for discovery, collaboration, admiration, and critique. The most meaningful art is the kind of art that aims to engage in a dialogue. That is a daunting, if not impossible, task to do alone. Artists need each other.

Further, with the increased use of AI in creative industries, it is more important than ever to define spaces that are clearly artist centered and strictly intolerant of AI.

With experience and practice, I hope to continually improve the journal. I once again thank all who contributed, and thank you, the reader, for taking interest in supporting artists and authors.

Sincerely,

Jocelyn Osoria

Adam Roper

Spring Equinox / 28 / Poetry

Alex Scott

Hocus Pocus / 30 / Photography

Andrea Magana

Deputy Editor, NuEpoca

Magic / 32 - 33 / Short Story

Syphysus / 60 / Short Story

Aniya Anderson

Associate Editor, NuEpoca. IG: slushie_guyss

Somewhere / 29 / Poetry

A. Riel Regan

A. Riel Regan is a queer, disabled author of poetry and fiction with an intense appreciation for “the human heart in conflict with itself,”(Faulkner.) Their writing often deals with themes of internal conflict, chronic illness, knowing oneself through nature, and spiritual connections. When not writing or reading, they find themselves killing half their houseplants and boldly defending the other half from their cat. Find them at

@riwritesatnight_on Instagram and Bluesky!

When Life Gives You Lemons / 38 / Poetry

Fireblind / 68 / Poetry

Accelerate / 57 / Poetry

A Spell for Reconciliation / 73 - 82 / Short Story

Atlas Thorne

Urban Life / 17 / Poetry

Billy Stonecipher

It's Ok to Paint like a Child / 36 - 37 / Art

Bri Campbell

Bri is an Atlanta-based poet and collage artist from Orlando, FL.

Instagram: @a.bri.dged *Nakedest / 70 / Poetry*

WW / 14 / Poetry

Brianna Sapienza

I'm a 24-year-old artist from Boston who's been passionate about painting for as long as I can remember. I love bringing landscapes, sceneries, and pet portraits to life—especially with bold colors and expressive details. For me, art has always been therapy, and I believe painting is something everyone can do if they let themselves explore it. Instagram: bri.sap.art

Ducks / 27 / Art

Whimsical Tree / 42 / Art

Dog Portrait / 51 / Art

Cat Portrait / 83 / Art

Brin Wallace

My collages deal with magic, myth and mysticism; quotidian American reality, art, spirituality, creepy vibes and what's lurking just beneath the surface. They are all cut paper collages, scanned into digital format; entirely analog except for basic photo editing and formatting. My poems deal with spirituality, art, impending doom, mental health, addiction and human connection. There are references to mental illness, addiction and occult magic.

IG: @nameinlites_ / SUBSTACK: mxbw.substack.com

WWW: mxbw.my.canva.site

Colt 45 / 19 / Art

In Community / 18 / Poetry

Pastel Collage / 72 / Art

Rise and Fall / 39 / Poetry

Blue Sky Collage / 49 / Art

Cathexesis / 69 / Poetry

Earthy Field Collage / 51 / Art

Celine Cevekil

Associate Editor and Graphic Design, NuEpoca

Please Don't Eat Me(Sardines) / 35 / Art

Cimone Ortega

Hocus Pocus / 30 / Photography

Light Surrounds Her / 58 - 59 / Photography

Claire Button

Claire is an interdisciplinary artist and freelance filmmaker, born in Atlanta, GA. Claire cites her love of animals and desire for climate change action as her driving force to create. She believes in fostering a curiosity for unique ways of life and challenging one's existing perception of reality. Ideas for works often materialize in dreams, and in taking a page from one of her biggest inspirations, Dali. Life exists in the details, the fray of what we see versus the meaning we superimpose. A wrinkled trash bag on a patch of sand could be just that, or it could be an amalgamation of eerie, human-like forms, a face peering straight at the viewer, encouraging them to come closer. Claire's dreams are often unthreatening, but unsettling, inviting a deeper probe into the forces we take for granted, the powers that guide our subconscious choices. She hopes to make more art depicting her dreams.

<https://cbutton5462ea.myportfolio.com>

Beached / 26 / Art / Painting

Dream Guy / 40 / Art / Painting

Jocelyn Osoria

Editor in Chief, NuEpoca. IG: osoriawrites

16, 17, 28, 29, 38, 39, 47 / Accompanying Photography / Art

It's Beginning to Look a Lot like Christmas / 52 - 55 / Short Story

Krystal Harris

Who's There? / 20 - 25 / Short Story

Good Morning, Shirley / 64 - 67 / Short Story

Jeanne "J" Elmore

I am a writer of poetry and short fiction from Atlanta. I am trilingual, I play guitar and sing in a band, and I love exploring the city and advocating to make it a better place.

Hotel District / 16 / Poetry

Peace / 84 / Poetry

Nadia Coile

Christabel / 15 / Art

Around The Corner / 34 / Art

Geraldine / 48 / Art

Three of Swords / 63 / Art

The Speaker / 71 / Art

Sa'Real Jones

Mercy / 43 - 47 / Short Story

Tia Monet

Artist & Designer - From South Carolina, Based in Atlanta. Music serves as a form of inspiration for me when I create. I believe music connects us.

D'Angelo / 41 / Art

I Deserve It All / 56 / Art

Timothy Bowser

The Light Surrounds Her / 58 - 59 / Photography

Will Wreggelworth

Hocus Pocus / 30 - 31 / Photography

W W

Bri Campbell

IG:a.bri.dged

I drink from soggy cups, wilting with melting ice,
the crunchy kind that crumbles between my worn
molars. I lounge in screwed-down chairs, rusted nails
tethering me to Georgia clay the color of 4 oz
cups of orange juice. I admire the make-do
of the azalea arrangement in a hand sanitizer bottle
at the nurse's station. It is beautiful against
the boxes of rubber gloves, touch of outside inside,
a footprint of sunlight. Maybe I will make a long-distance
phone call home about it, tell them of the blooms
that are so purple they're pink.

CHRISTABEL

Nadia Coile



Tonight I feel so lonely.
 But it's a good night to be lonely,
 it's a good night to feel empty.
 Has anybody told you
 you're a beautiful city?
 No one walks around here,
 it's all quiet on the streets here.
 It's just me and you,
 my city-
 and you're a wonderful city.
 Does it ever haunt you
 when your buildings fall down so soon?
 When your people up and leave you?
 Give them five years and they'll leave you?
 But I'm staying in this city,
 in this broken little city.
 I will gaze out of my window
 in the early hours of morning.
 It's just me and you and that red sign,
 and bridges I cannot walk on.
 I see people I won't talk to,
 and I see buildings I won't go in.
 There are people who don't live here,
 and I pray they like my city.
 And if everything was tainted
 by certain shattered rosy lenses,
 I would still say I belong here.
 I would still demand to stay here.
 I could be a cockroach at the Hilton,
 but you still would be my city.

HOTEL DISTRICT

Jeanne "J" Elmore

IG: jelmoresbooks



U R B A N L I F E

Atlas Thorne

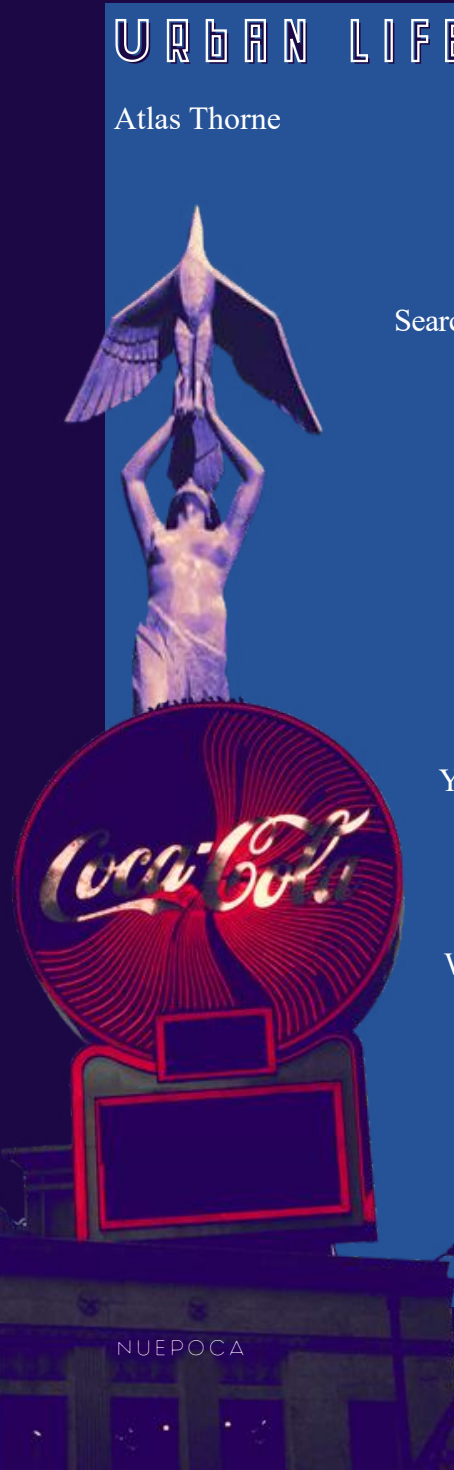
And so I watch
A galaxy of souls drifting before me
The lovers form a constellation
Do they breathe in truth?
Or does deception corrupt them?

Searching for regards in this endless wander
When the Earth coos a breeze
Our flesh, we all shiver
Palms, some never met
The trees, they murmur
A dying hum
Will their gaze ever meet mine?

A planet of steel
Weeping as I lie
Yet there he sat, in hush, hungry for love
Sweet as honey
It taunts his glass heart
Reminiscing
When he lived tales of Solomon's songs

Yet, there's beauty in the city

Where souls meet
And days are long
No matter how faint or asunder,
We are one



IN COMMUNITY

Brin Wallace

Nobody's coming to visit me; in a cohort
of loose ghosts. Fluent but sloppy drowning
in theory and trash data.

peace just comes, in no need of sympathy
from someone I only used to trust

like gone in the feels

So, what of this kind of joy, unusual
like a movement that no one's heard about.

As yet not called to account still potent.

Thinking about a restraining order against

the driftwood of the unconscious,

with its smart and shady tension arranges
terms and phrases to fit the first shape we found
on our body and pluck some wilted grass, alone
with watchful docility.

In a warm pool dissolving

telling fortunes

casting stones

toward the daily work of breathing right here

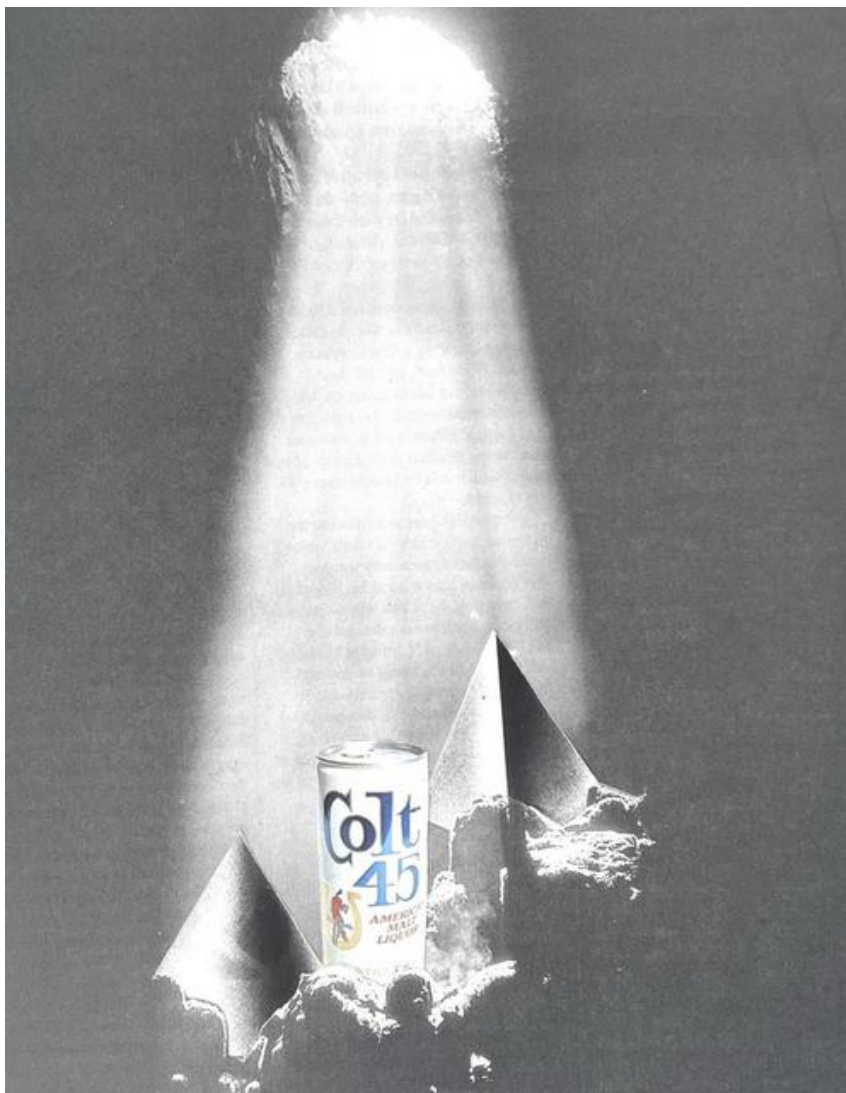
where the line is born

I find myself locked by rhetoric — bound in devices
of my own prerogative rebellion.

Passage haunted by the hum of the here and now
like codeine from a new plug who complains loudly
about rhythm and myth; pointing to tone sometimes
I feel like a motherless child.

Brin Wallace

IG:nameinlites_ /



WHO'S THERE?

KRYSTAL HARRIS

I opened my eyes.

Sleep had overtaken me, and I hadn't realized where the time had gone. The last thing I remember is sending out the article to my editor, complete with a sample layout of photos for the pictorial. She hadn't given any specifics. Just that she liked the idea and it was approved, but it was my first story for the magazine and I wanted it to be good... I wanted so deeply to be accepted by them.

I hadn't always planned to join a sorority. It just fell into my lap. Boule, 2019, I was inducted. They had seen a couple of articles I had written in *The New Yorker*, and reached out to me to see if I belonged to a Divine Nine organization. I quickly had to look up what that meant and learned about a rich history of Black sororities that formed their own organization amidst oppression. I knew sororities were ultimately great for networking, and getting job placements. I had no idea of the deeper underbelly that I would soon face.

I told them that I was a free agent, no sorority could claim me... and that is when their claws came out. To be fair, as I am thinking back on everything... It was actually beautiful. There were no hints at what it meant to belong to an organization like this. To become an honorary Soror, truly meant that I was chosen.

I had never been chosen in my life. I had to fight my way into everything. This moment came as a true surprise because I felt validated. I felt as if someone finally saw me. This is trick number one.

4:15 AM. The clock was staring back at me and I realized that I had fallen asleep at my desk. I looked up to the story I had just sent off. An article entitled, “Sorority Doppelgangers.” I looked at the images I had collected. About three dozen sorority sisters who looked like one another.

It was a hard research project, and was suggested to me by Soror Thompson in the editing department at the magazine. Once I joined, I felt like a fraud because all I had done up to that point was write articles about social injustice that had received little to no traction. I didn’t even know anyone had read them. When Madam Blaise reached out to me to invite me to be an Honorary Soror, I just blurted out “Yes,” because in all honesty, I have a hard time saying no.

But they all accepted me. From the first class flight into Houston for the pinning ceremony- in which I distinctly remember getting pricked one to many times by my nominating member with that damn pin, to the numerous features on social media and Google, then it was the Sorors themselves.

I recall a movie I watched as a child, *The Witches*, and in it, Angelica Houston played a Grand Witch and she hosted a conference for other witches. A child got caught in the cross hairs

and turned into a mouse and the whole story revolved around how he found out how these women who pretended to be regular, were actually witches.

I think that is what I have discovered. But I'm in too deep, I am the mouse... and I am unable to speak or cause any real change here.

It was the calls.

Randomly, I began receiving calls from women claiming to be my sister. I knew this was "lingo," and I went along with it, but they shared so many intimate details of their lives. I heard about abuse, broken marriages, miscarriages... all in a first call.

Looking back, this was trick number two, they had to gain my trust, and they were still recruiting.

Before long, I was spilling my guts. Telling any sister who called me about the fact that my father had left when I was five, and my mother the ever-present but always drunk wino couldn't seem to stop saying how much I looked like him. She couldn't stand how much I reminded her of the man that knocked her up and left her for trash.

I felt that I must have inherited some of his garbage man qualities, because she hated me. The strangest thing happened when I divulged this information to my new sisters. They embraced me further. I felt that I had fallen to rock bottom only to be picked up by these interesting, compassionate, and thoughtful humans.

That was trick number three... they made me feel safe to be vulnerable.

So when Madam Blaise approached me to become a part of the editing team on *The Purple Star*, our sorority's quarterly publication... I couldn't say yes fast enough. This was my own doing... three tricks and a fatal flaw of saying yes.

It happened subtly, as I sent out inquiries and surveys to the various chapters in a light-hearted manner, asking if they'd ever been compared to another Soror. Most of them said absolutely... and before I knew it I was handling hundreds of submissions of sorority sisters who looked like they could be actual sisters. As I started putting all of the image assets together, I noticed something. One Soror of the pair always had a strange look in their eyes, as if their photo was calling out to me to see something beyond the comparison... something deeper... something unique. They were all in their homes, and seemed deeply saddened and unprepared for the kodak moment. But what was more concerning is that this only happened with one doppelganger, the other one could only be described as... vital, full of life.

I started to research every one of those dark-eyed women and quickly found another comparison. All of them had gone missing or had died tragically. I saw the memorials hidden deep inside of the sororities' social platforms, others were articles that I had to sift through to find that forgotten soul. The photos then made sense, their eyes were warning me. I knew it couldn't be a

coincidence, but the incessant cries of “deadline” made me push further to get the fluff piece done. I didn’t add any of my discoveries into the copy of the article because as I kept going, everything became clear.

I look at the clock again, the time reading 4:20 A.M now. I knew it was coming and I wondered why they asked me to do this story when no one was going to read it.

It was cruel. All of their comraderie was a lie.

When I submitted the story to Madam Blaise, my fate was sealed, and on some level, I knew it... but I almost didn’t recognize the photo submission of my own visage. I think because she looked just like me but brighter, more in tune with who she was. I put the caption under the photo from the submission, Lane Thompson. A face that was mine... and a name that was not. I knew then that the other photo was going to come later, so I submitted the article to just Lane on her own.

I had hoped to sleep through whatever was coming, that’s why I drank an entire bottle of chardonnay after I submitted the piece, an homage to my hateful mother. I couldn’t stop myself from pressing send, because one part of me felt that I was crazy but the other part felt like it was easier... to melt away into the nothingness I had always thought I was. They knew that when they recruited me. No one reads my stories, no one actually cares about my past... but the witches... they cared enough to lure me out of my hiding and give me a false sense of hope.

A creak at the door stirs me out of my reverie. I look over my

shoulder to see that I am no longer alone. I always hoped to never be alone, but I never imagined it would look like this. I never imagined that my sorority sister... would become *me*.

I look back once more at the article, and I see the doppelganger version of me, Ms. Lane Thompson. That is who is standing before me, she smiles at me...she almost got my teeth right.

“Just one more edit, Soror.”

She faces me and pulls a camera out of her tote back and instantly, I knew how it happened. The pin prick on the day of my ceremony. My DNA, and whatever God they serve conspired against me to erase who I was.

She takes the photo.

Beached

Claire Button

IG: *bum.husband*



BRIANNA SAPIENZA

IG:bri.sap.art



SPRING EQUINOX

Adam Roper

IG: adam_roper.gif

Winter has stolen much from me,
Forced me to surrender much to flame
Just to keep this shivering body alive.
This heart has frozen and thawed,
Frozen and thawed, frozen and thawed.
Frostbitten as it is, it's a wonder it beats at all.
But, somehow, spring creeps up onto my back,
Sneaking drops of sunlight onto my skin
So slowly that I don't notice it's there.
Today, a stranger I met a month ago
Announced to the world that I am her friend.
The word was soft, like an unfurling daffodil.
"Friend."
What a gentle term.

I've got a hindsight view of someone I used to know,
 She smells sweet:
 Marshmallow cream and sugar,
 shea butter and baby powder.

somewhere

I think I've seen you somewhere recently.

Aniya Anderson

IG: *slushie_guyss*

When my days are filled with laughter
 Afterimages of dimpled cheeks and missing teeth flash by.
 Somehow, I can tell you were dressed by your Dad.
 That's how I knew he took good care of you—
 Your Mom too.

Somewhere.

Somewhere.

Somewhere.

Where do I know you from?
 How can I see you, smell you—
 if I don't know your name?
 I had to have lost you long ago,
 Memories eroded by time and something bitter.
 The sins of others washed you away,
 Carried you out to sea to be swallowed by the horizon.
 If you had an answering machine, would I leave a message?
 To tell you that we made it—
 Well, not quite, but we're a lot farther than we thought.
 Should I tell you that it gets better?
 Somewhere.

Somewhere.

Somewhere.

Whoever you are,
 Wherever you are,
 I hope they're treating you well.
 Better than they did when we were still joined at the hip.
 Skin to Skin; Cheek to cheek.
 I hope we'll find our way back to each other, someday.
 Someday.



SUBMITTED BY CIMONE ORTEGA(RIGHT)

QUOTE FROM WILL WREGGELSWORTH(LEFT)

“Two creatives helping each other hold onto the light when the dark wants nothing more than to snuff it out. Life isn’t easy, nor does it care about fairness. Yet it will still place people into your life when needed, and least expected, to help your journey. Such is the case with Cimone and myself. We met only a few months ago, when we were both still on uneven ground in regards to our respective newly undertaken modeling paths. Almost immediately, we began to prop each other up, encourage each other, and let each other know that we could count on at least one person to understand.

Through a twist of fate, we both found ourselves at the Dreamhaus event, and we made sure to not let the opportunity to create more magic pass us by. To hold a little bit of light up and say,

“We are here.”

Will Wreggelsworth (IG: willwreggs) and Cimone Ortega (IG: [sweetuniquepetite](#)) captured by Alex Scott (IG:alexscottcreative) at DreamHausCreatives event.

Magic

Andrea Magana

An old woman began the day by sweeping the front sidewalk. Her niece gently positioned a folded board of the day's special; a red marinated goat stew with yellow rice. The front door wide was open for the street to hear the radio blaring a mix of violins, guitars, and a deep voice that sang old ballads. Inside, with a snap of the old woman's fingers, the living room became a dining room. Sunlight streamed through the lacy curtains and curved metal bars onto the wooden tables draped in thick plastic coverings. The small, boxed television moved to the kitchen counter.

The first customer was an old man with rigid, aching bones. Hunched over a cane, he clutched a small bag of bread from the bakery down the street. He placed his hat onto the table as the pair greeted him warmly. While the old woman prepared his dish in the kitchen, the special, she told her niece to offer him a plate of fried plantains, coated in a mixture of powdered sugar, cinnamon, and condensed milk.

Grateful, the old man savored the treat as he sipped his coffee.

When his meal arrived, he brought the spoon to his lips. The concentrate warmed his throat. The flavor left a mild hint of a nutty spice in his mouth. The rice, fluffed to perfection, paired well with the meat that had been cooked for hours. It was tender and easy to chew with his frail teeth. Once finished, the old man left coins on the table and strolled through the door. His feet shuffled less; a soothing sensation bloomed along his chest and back. The niece chuckled as she showed the old woman the owl, it had been

cleaned of any scraps.

It was noon when a small family entered the dining room. The niece took their order, going from one parent to the next, to the silent little girl. The parents explained as the old woman listened from the kitchen doorway. Upon learning the ailment, she offered the little girl a home remedy, who, after looking to her parents for approval, nodded. The stove brewed the herbal water, and the old woman poured it into a large clay mug. She served it with a small bowl of honey.

Everyone watched as the girl poured the entire bowl into the tea and gulped it down. Her face twisted, but she continued to drink. The parents laughed while the old woman rushed to the kitchen and returned with bread. In the instant the mug touched the table again, the little girl appeared more animated than before. She wolfed down the loaf with her feet swinging, heaps of its pink sugar coating and breadcrumbs fell onto her shirt and floor as she sang along to the radio. When they finished the meal and paid, the girl took a bunched up plastic bill from her tiny leather purse and placed it onto the table. The family left with a small plastic bag of herbs.

The old woman placed the plastic bills, the wrinkled one included, into a glass jar in the kitchen and turned on the small television as the niece swept breadcrumbs away. A game show host introduced the next segment. The old woman sprinkled salt above the simmering pot; its aroma concealed the lingering scent of herbs. She could hear footsteps and a greeting from the dining room as they walked through the wide, open door.

A R T

Around the corner

Nadia
Coile



SARDINES(PLEASE DON'T EAT ME)

Celine Cevikel



it's Okay to paint like a child

Billy Stonecipher

IG: billystonecipherpaints



“I made this piece while I was teaching at an elementary school. I’ve always been impressed by children’s art, and even more so at how they make it and feel about it. When it’s finished, they seem to have little attachment. They would gift me a lot of their works or simply throw them away.

I titled it “it’s ok to paint like a child” because I felt some embarrassment around people who don’t appreciate abstract art. or who say, ‘A child could make that.’

This is a piece of self empowerment, a piece to say
*I like what I make and that is
enough.”*

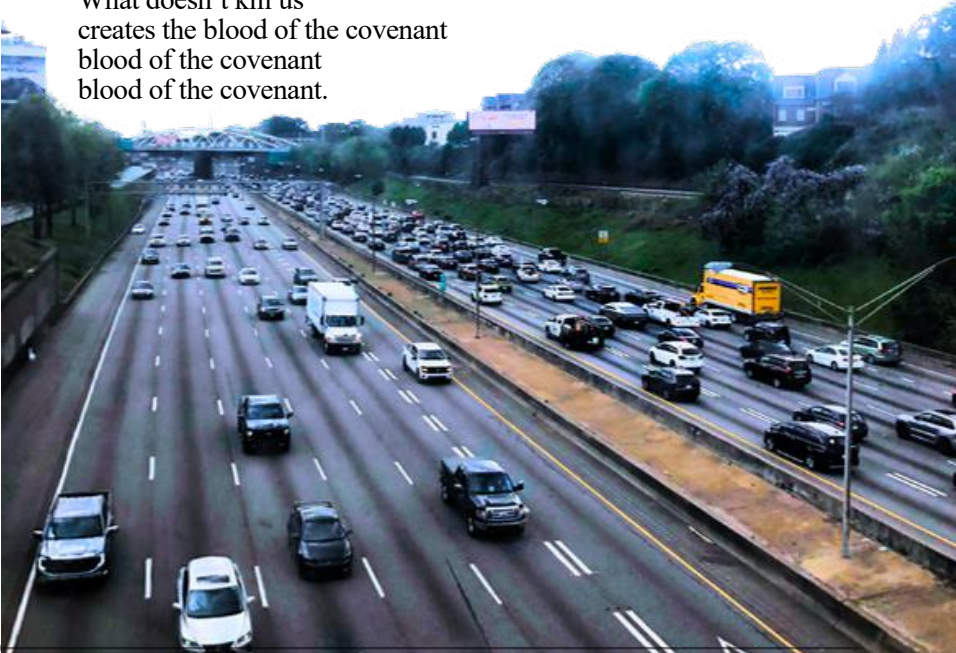
make a mistake. Play your cards
wrong; break a heart.
I cry over spilt anything.
There's more than one way
to judge a holy book by its cover.
Good things come to those
who save two birds
and a stone. A bird
in the hand is
worth a pinch of salt
in the wound.
Better hurt than never.
We all die too young, but
only the young die
good. Curiosity killed me
once; my cat brought me back.
After all, death heals all wounds. Time
under the bridge. Grab the Devil
by the horns. I'm burning the candle
at unholy ends.

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS

IG:

Riel Regan *riwritesatnight*

What doesn't kill us
creates the blood of the covenant
blood of the covenant
blood of the covenant.



The possibilities of breath
make absolute sense
like faith or freedom
Here in a burst of fanatic creation
the very syllables at their minimum
are just touched more or less by habit
laughing in my sleep

RISE

AND

What I got is no good for me
run such a risk of being disappointed
although nothing dies — my joy
filled with ridiculous tenets

FALL

explain them to me

Brin Wallace



Dream Guy

Claire Button



D'Angelo

Tia Monet



Brianna Sapieneza



MERCY

SA'REAL JONES



The day before Josie killed Noah, the sun blazed down from the sky. The air was damp and ragged. Noah ran his sweat slicked hand up her thigh.

"I don' got it in me," Josie whispered as the sweltering air swallowed up her voice. He sighed reluctantly, covered his face from the fiery sun, and squeezed his eyes tight. They had walked for three nights by then, and the night's cover masqueraded their dark skin. That night, like every night, Noah walked ahead, and Josie scattered pepper behind them to ward off the dogs. She prayed to God to ward off the devils.

The devils persisted. Plastering wanted posters all across town: Two escaped negros, \$10 reward. MUST BE ALIVE. Alive: The devils dug children out of the gold mine that was Josie. Alive: Josie and Noah made much more than \$10 with bleeding hands and the weight of a ledger hanging over their heads like a rotten fig.

That fruit would soon fall, and its seeds would perish. See, Noah and Josie were headed to freedom. Noah heard stories about people who made it all the way to Ohio. Niggas with money in ships and factories. Niggas without masters.

Josie heard stories too. Stories about white people who weren't devils. It was the sweetest fairytale she'd ever known.

She prayed that it was true. Her grandma told her it wasn't; even the white people with the candles in their windows were only making up for the horror that lived in their hearts.

Josie's heart still beamed. Hot, grueling days were softened by the light of her dreams of freedom. Free Josie would keep her children and her breast milk for herself.

Free Josie would have a soft bed full of feathers, just like Hannah talked about seeing in the house. See, her heart and mind were some place else when they needed to be, lest she lose them both. These dreams carried her hands forward as she picked so that the pain was hidden until she rested for the night. These dreams carried her feet forward as she marched to where Bamb-bamb told her so many had gone before.

The sky became blood orange and blotched with the pink of raw flesh as the sun reared its head over the hills. They stopped walking, their feet searing with pain as their movement came to a halt. Josie heard the soft flow of water nearby. She untied the cloth from her head and followed its call, submerging the cloth in the cool water. Her feet stung as it washed over her blisters. She took her time walking back to Noah, who had collapsed into a heap of flesh. She carefully dripped the cold water on his face, into his mouth.

"I can't do this no more," his voice quivered. Josie laughed at what she took to be a joke, "Do what? Lay down?"

"Nah, I can't walk no more. I can't go no more. We gotta go back."

She laughed again, "Go back where?"

Noah's tongue felt like it was too big for his mouth.

"What we even gon' do if we did get to Ohio? It ain' nothin up there fo' us but mo' white people, waitin'. We gon' be runnin' our whole lives."

Her eyes darkened as something behind her skin pricked her flesh.

“We gon’ be free,” a deep voice escaped from Josie’s mouth.

“Is we?”

His question wrapped around her throat, squeezed into her lungs until there was no air left. The only thing Master hated more than niggas were niggas who thought they knew what was best for them. That hate alone could fuel an endless search.

“Least if we go back,” Noah interrupted her thoughts, “We can ask ‘im for forgiveness.”

Josie knew Master’s forgiveness would be delivered the same way his lessons were delivered, the same way his warning was delivered, the same way his hatred was delivered: a whip draining the life from her like water evaporating into the beating sun. Josie didn’t have any more life to give.

“You askin’ me tuh walk towar’ my death.”

“I’m askin’ ya tuh haf mercy on yoself.”

Tears bubbled up from her insides. He grabbed her face, the scars of cotton’s bites pressed into her flesh.

“Ain’ no use in arguin’. We turnin’ ‘round.”

She opened her mouth to speak. He was there, staring at her, a man whose hands she wrapped and salved. But behind his eyes, itching to be set free, was a man who had raised his hands against her. She stopped.



Sleep escaped her that day, like it knew what freedom was and where it wasn’t. The sun went down, and they got back on their feet, going opposite of the north star they followed so closely. Josie’s eyes burned from exhaustion. Gnarly tree branches sprawled around them, their wooden grasps barely

missed her. The wind mocked her as air left her lungs faster than she could inhale it. It refused to reach her mind; It refused to reach her heart. No, only the roots of fear took hold there. Sprawled out into her tightened chest, piercing holding her legs at the ankles like an iron bar. Fear sprouted into her eyes until shadows became their own creatures.

Then, the ground betrayed her. She was in the air— no, she was on her stomach. She hit the ground with a thud.

Death visited her for a moment. It felt close to sleep. It felt inviting. She felt it unraveling her mind. Cool and calming, like a river. Where is Noah? She pried her eyes open, and a lumpy rock stared back at her. Josie imagined that she was possessed by a fallen angel. What else could have been controlling her as she reached out?

She gripped the rock. With all her force, she dragged her arm through the air and into the back of Noah's skull.



Before they ran away together, they only dreamed about it. Noah would sneak into her quarters cloaked in the darkness of night.

“Ya know I wanna give ya my child,” he whispered as he twisted her hair between his fingers, “We jus’ got to wait ‘til we free, that's all.”

“When we free, we can be a real family,” she stared into his deep brown eyes. The future stared back at her. “I ah give anything to have that,” she whispered.





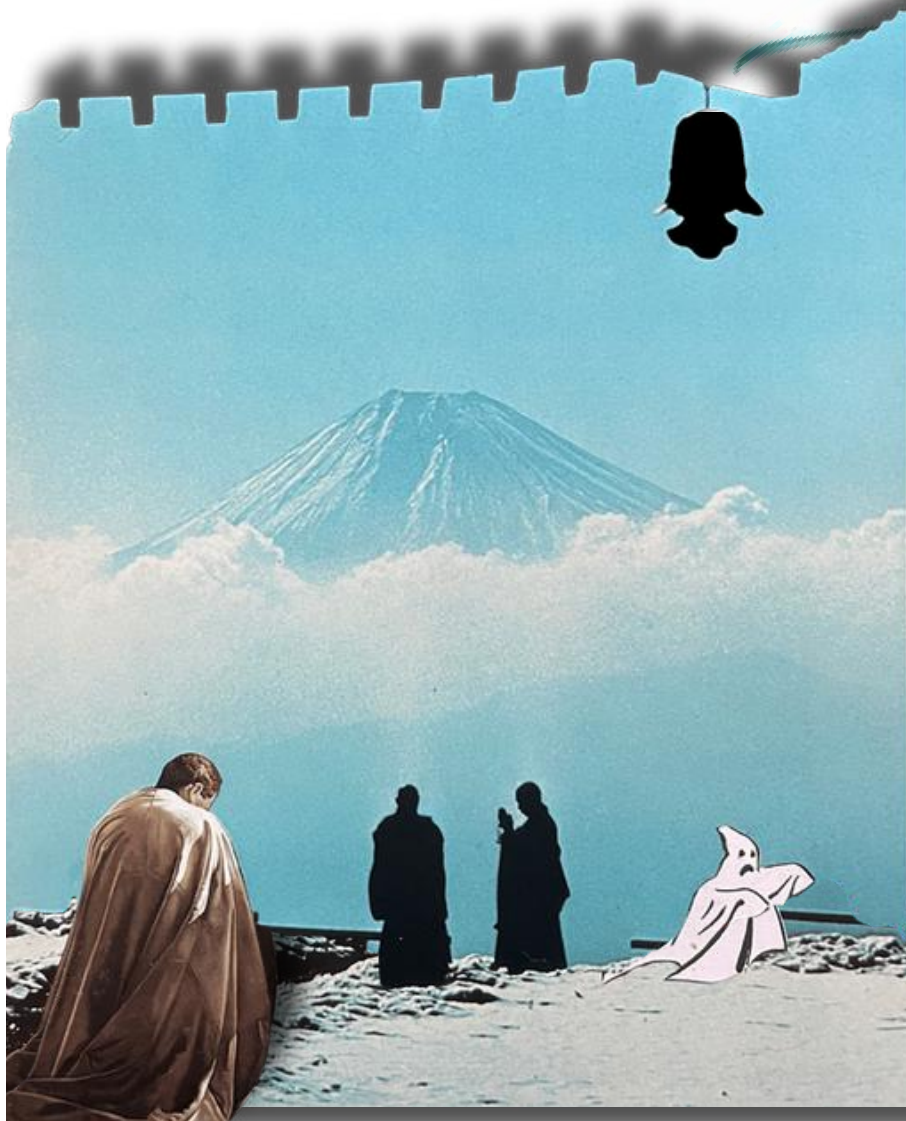
A R T

Nadia Coile

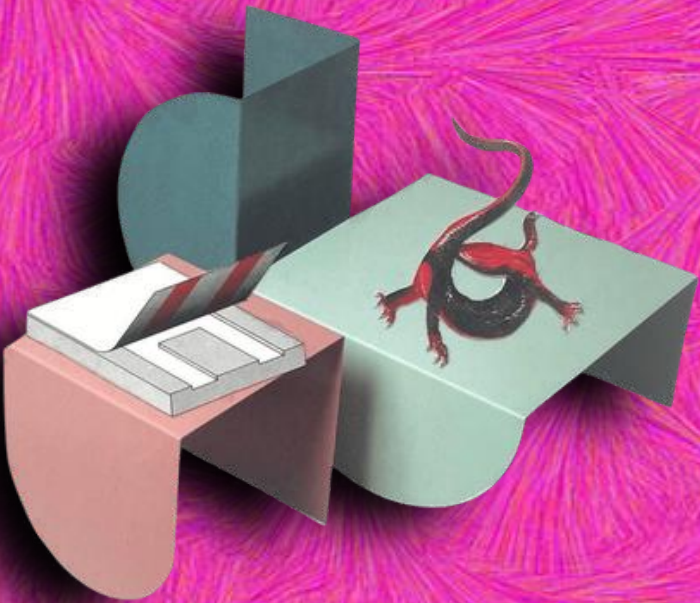


A R T

BRIN WALLACE



Brin Wallace



Brianna Sapienza



It's s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas

Jocelyn Osoria

IG: *osoriawrites*

It was winter time, my first one in preserved memory. My stepfather walked my sister and I to school. My puffer jacket wasn't thick enough to fight the morning winds. I was whipped on the face and hands, and I felt the ache throughout my whole body. That year, I learned firsthand that winter rain was cold and heavy, unlike the soft drizzle of a spring day.

At school, the teacher told us about Christmas and family trees. I learned that Grandmother was a specific woman in your family and not a random, unrelated woman who lived in your building and said you could call her Granny.

"What is a Chrimus present?" One child asked, with the slow, uneven cadence of a child still learning to speak.

"Anything! It depends," The teacher replied with caution.

"Like what?" another kid said.

"Well, only Santa knows!"

We learned about Santa next.

"But what if I don't have a chimy?"

"He uses the front door."

We watched movies like Home Alone, Frosty the Snowman, and Rudolph. We learned about shiny balls, mistletoe, decked halls, and white snow. We colored pointed trees, snowflakes, and cartoon families. Such things fill children's hearts with desperate wonder. The scenes of beaming gold, deep red, and silver specks fed my fascination – I dreamt of big, tight-knit families, and even bigger Christmas trees; tall, neatly packed gifts and even taller, friendly snowmen with pebble-lips.

Stockings with your favorite treats, and mothers pulling out baked chocolate-chip cookies. Gingerbread houses and snow angels. Dinner tables with casseroles. For all the grey and short days, winter did have one good thing to give.

I want Chrismess.

I sat watching the grinch's heart grow three times its size. Was Christmas something you could wear, like a Halloween costume? Was it something you could eat, like Thanksgiving Turkey? Was Christmas something you could take home?

After the learning day was done, I spent afternoons cooped in the neighborhood after school building as soon as it opened at 2 PM. It was a single room with four bulky computers along one wall and empty tables throughout. There were also large windows, and the sun was the sole source of light. I remember being quite fond of the volunteers and the program overall. They let us do as we wanted, and sometimes unsupervised. It got boring quick, though, if you didn't know how to use the computer.

One particular day, I put down the nubby crayons and tried to look up Michael Jackson. I was too young to spell. I kept trying but eventually, I had one of the volunteers to do it.

"Can you put Michel Jicson on the thing?"

They pulled it up on YouTube, and I asked them when winter was ending. In a few months, they said, which I noted as forever. I wanted to keep talking, but he had to help someone with homework. I put on the clunky headphones over my tiny head, having to hold it up if I wanted it to fit correctly. I gave up and let it fall so that the rubbery padding lining the inside of each headphone covered most of my ear. I listened to Thriller while

looking out the window at the barren branches and grey skies, wondering when I could go somewhere without asking. I'd go somewhere with no winter. I stared at cars passing by and I felt lonely for the first time.

That same week we had streaky hot chocolate at school, and the teacher told us we had a super long break. I wondered if my teacher would even remember me when I came back since I'd been gone for weeks. Then I went to afterschool, and they had candy. I watched Billie Jean while eating stale tootsie rolls.

When I got home, I pestered my parents about Christmas again. They said it was in two weeks, an eternity. Without school and afterschool, most days were very boring. I followed my parents around and asked them every question I had. I asked them about grandmas, and if I had any. I did but they weren't coming for Christmas. I asked if Santa was coming, and they said of course. I asked if we could go ice-skating. They said no. I asked if we could go Christmas Caroling. They said people don't do that anymore, besides, my parents reminded me that they only speak Spanish. I asked if they could put on Michael Jackson. They said I'd have to wait for him to come on 98.5 FM.

I got so bored I watched the baby without being asked. He still couldn't talk. The baby was much bigger than he was in April, when he arrived bundled in blue.

Hurry up and grow, I urged him.

He needed to be bigger if he wanted to get toys for Christmas. My mom didn't want him to grow because she'd have to buy him new clothes.

The following week, my mother told me it was time to decorate for Christmas. We started with the presents. My mother sat me down with my toys – a faded unicorn plush, a barbie with a botched haircut, and a life sized baby doll whose eyes blinked.

We wrapped them in red paper with reindeers steering Santa's sled. We decorated our plastic potted ficus tree with matte red, green, and golden ornaments. We stretched the lights and tinsel over the upwards branches that looked like hands reaching for the sky. We set the pretty presents all around the sparse tree; red, green, silver, gold. A color for each family member.

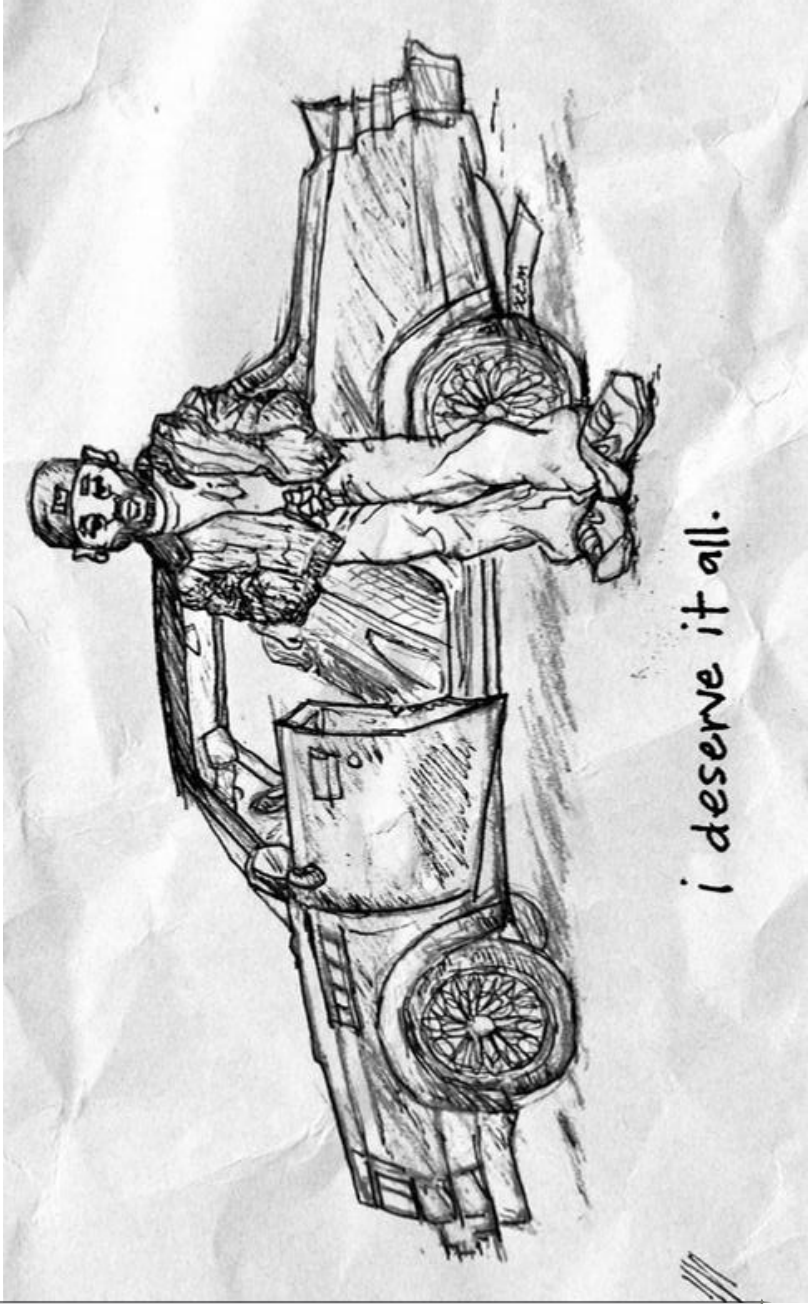
On Christmas, we ordered Dominoes, and it came in less than 15 minutes as the commercials promised. It was piping hot, but it had a weird smell. I wanted to ask them why they weren't home for Christmas but my mom wouldn't let me. I unwrapped presents for the first time(I had already forgotten that I had wrapped them the week before.)We took family photos, and it felt just like the movies, perhaps even better without the task of growing a grinch's heart or being a rejected reindeer.

I knew my little brother wouldn't remember much, but I made sure to remember for the both of us. We had full chocolate bars each instead of sharing one amongst the family, and Abuelita hot chocolate instead of the regular hot chocolate, with milk instead of water. It was all there – family, presents, a decorated tree; red, green, silver, gold; food, drinks, and a happy household.

“Did you enjoy Christmas, Jocelyn?” My teacher asked on the first day back.

With a pocketful of crushed candy cane, I nodded yes.

Tia Monet



ACCELERATE

A. Riel Regan

It's our third fight tonight, and as we reach the on-ramp you press the gas, too much, too fast, reaching ninety before we're even half way to merge, I panic, hyperventilate, you're not steering us onto the road and there's trees, my breathing and heart rate make doubletime, and I'm screaming, Please don't kill us! and I've never meant something so horrible so sincerely in my life, and maybe you are so shocked by what you've done, what you were going to do, that I have to take the wheel because you've shut down, I steer us onto the shoulder and we stop and you've passed out, cold, so I hold you until you get a grip, and we live but now every time I get on that ramp I feel the jump of the car, I see the trees in front of us in the dark and I hear my voice pleading with you and I get the pang of guilt in my heart and my breath bubbles in my chest like it's boiling, I feel the speed in my veins but it can't match the speed at which I jumped from trusting you with every fiber of my being to wondering, even knowing it must be treachery, if you had the capacity to commit to killing us both,

to accelerate.





Cimone Ortega
Pictured by
Timothy Bowser Media
@@timbowser.media

I almost
didn't make it to
dreamhaus, but I totally believe
I end up where I am supposed to be!
The world of creativity that this event held
was beyond amazing!!!! Drawn to the lights I
usually am, I felt at home in this lamp scene and
the light clearly was at home with me! Such a beautiful
experience where I felt free to be me in the fullness of my creative self!



SISYPHUS

Andrea Magana

It was midnight when Marcella grabbed a brush from an old, paint-stained mug that rested on a rickety stool. The smell of watered-down acrylic wafted through the air as she smeared a dark blue streak across the canvas, illuminated warmly by a lamp in the far corner of the room. It was mostly barren, aside from a few stray brushes and paint bottles on the ground. Her back hunched over as she painted over the canvas, slowly adding a new layer of paint as time passed and the sky outside shifted its colors.

The morning began with a cotton candy palette. It changed to a pale blue, then to a deep azure. Then back to a pale blue decorated with a myriad of warm tones like golds, pinks and violets, before it became a blue so dark there was an absence of hue.

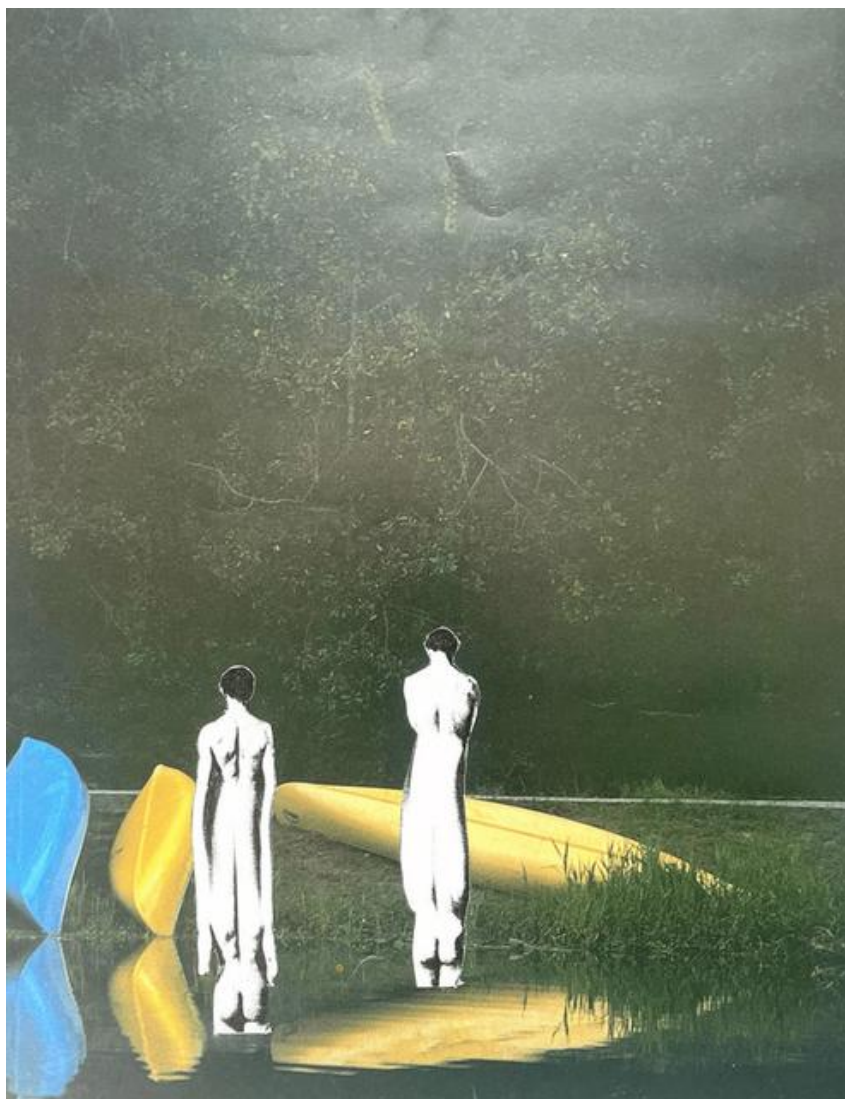
And throughout the changes, Marcella continued to paint every time she saw a slight difference in shade. She took another sip of her coffee that had once been warm, a long time ago. It remained half full while her classical playlist seemed endless. The combination of what was mostly creamer and water offered nothing but hydration as she gulped, unwilling to taste it and only willing to feel something. Fur Elise played softly in the background. Marcella stretched; her arms reached as her back ached and cracked slightly with its change in posture. Her crisp white dress swayed as she stood.

When she returned from the bathroom, she stood beside her seat and spoke to her phone.

“Siri, what song is playing?” There was a note of acknowledgement. “The song that is currently playing is River Flows into You, composed by Yiruma.”

Marcella swiped at the screen and pressed to continue the song. She looked to the glass window to her left that encompassed the entire wall, just as all of them did. There was no door, and there hadn’t been one for thousands of years. The sky was just slightly a lighter shade of that dark blue from before, and the stars had moved slightly. As Marcella sat on her solid, still warm stone bench, she sighed, deeply, and picked up a brush.

BRUN WALLACE



The Heart of It

Cimone Ortega

The heart, it's a good place to start
We all have one
It's an important part of our vessel
Do you use it for good
Or do you walk away and just let it fall apart?
Do you love others
Or do you just keep your heart hidden in the dark?
Do you look for beauty in the heart of your sister or brother
Or do you see their exterior and run for extra cover?
We all carry beauty, pieces of unique art
It's called the heart
It's a great place to start, and a wonderful space from which to flow
It's from the heart that we shall grow
Just like you may stop and smell a flower
Let's us stop and love the heart of another.
The heart, it's a great place to start.

Three of Swords

Nadia Coile



KRYSA

**GOOD MORNING,
SHIRLEY**

HARRIS

“GOOD MORNING SHIRLEY! IT’S TIME TO PREPARE FOR YOUR POWERFUL DAY!”

The voice rang out over Shirley Denver’s alarm clock, causing her to roll over in desperate denial. She looked at the clock, a small black FM radio with the tuner still in place, and a toggle switch to turn the alarm on or off. She started to reach for the switch when the voice rang out again—

“GOOD MORNING SHIRLEY! IT’S TIME TO PREPARE FOR YOUR POWERFUL DAY!” She slammed the switch and buried her head in her pillow and screamed—
“FUCK!”

She groaned once more, before turning to look at the menacing, mechanical, wanna-be-rooster, then she saw the time... 5 A.M.

“Shit, shit, shit!” She didn’t see her, much more modern, cellphone on her bedside table as it silently lit up with calls. She’d stupidly left “Do Not Disturb” on.

“Where is my shoe!?” Shirley quickly dressed and hopped around the room pulling a sock onto her unhoused foot, and with the last hop, landed with a thud and a sharp pain in the ankle as

she doubled over in pain.

“FUCK! This isn’t happening!” Shirley looked down to see what she had tripped on, and as fate would have it... it was her bright pink vibrating dildo.

After a moment, the room was empty, the bed laid unmade, and the dildo was pushed haphazardly under the covers waiting for Shirley’s next powerful night. But there was no Shirley until...*BAM!*

The door to her bedroom slammed open and in walked Shirley, with a pissed off screwed up face, and a mean stomp in her feet, though one was rhythmically off beat. Shirley headed straight for the bedside table and grabbed her phone. She looked down to see 28 missed calls.

“I am so fired.”

Shirley arrived at the Paramount lot, five minutes after 6 A.M. Phone to her ear, and a Starbucks in her hand. She waived down Phil, the transpo worker who came rolling over in his decked out studio golf cart.

“They’ve been looking for you,” Phil said as Shirley plopped down on the back of the cart, ending her call, then going over show notes on her tablet.

“Yeah, yeah, well I’m here now,” she said.

“Doug’s not going to like it, the Network is here.”

Shirley’s face steeled.

“That was supposed to be next week, the draft is not where it needs to be, the third act is atrocious and honestly, I think we promoted Toni to Story Editor too quickly.”

Shirley looks out of the golf cart and watches as they pass

large soundstages and office buildings and busy workers hurrying around the lot. The weather looks like it's going to be another sunny day.

"But, of course no one is going to blame Toni because she's sleeping with Doug and so it's all going to come down on me! I mean we let the actors just roll in here, fresh off a binge of coke, molly, and all of the other activities that make them not only dead inside, but they literally look dead on the outside and then makeup takes over a half hour longer than it should..."

She takes a swig of her drink and huffs. Shirley looks back at Phil as they turn a corner.

"But they still get PA'd up the wazoo with niceties and bowls full of gummy bears with the unattractive colors taken out! But God forbid I'm thirty minutes late to a meeting and I'm up for the chopping block."

Phil pulls up to Soundstage 31 and lets Shirley off. "Don't blame me, I just drive here. But what did you expect? You're the showrunner." Shirley offers a face that could only be described as the middle finger.

"Showrunner my ass."

She opens the steel door to the stage, walks in, and is confronted with a roundtable of pissed off angry executives. She takes note when a PA drops a glass bowl of green gummy bears in front of their lead actress, Calista Jones, whose hair looks like it went through a weedwhacker before it was thrown into that hideous ponytail.

Calista's eyes are darkened from what looks like no sleep, and she looks at Shirley with callous disapproval as she reaches into the bowl and takes a clean bite of a gummy bear's head.

Doug, the Studio head, chimes in, "Good Morning Shirley, please take a seat."

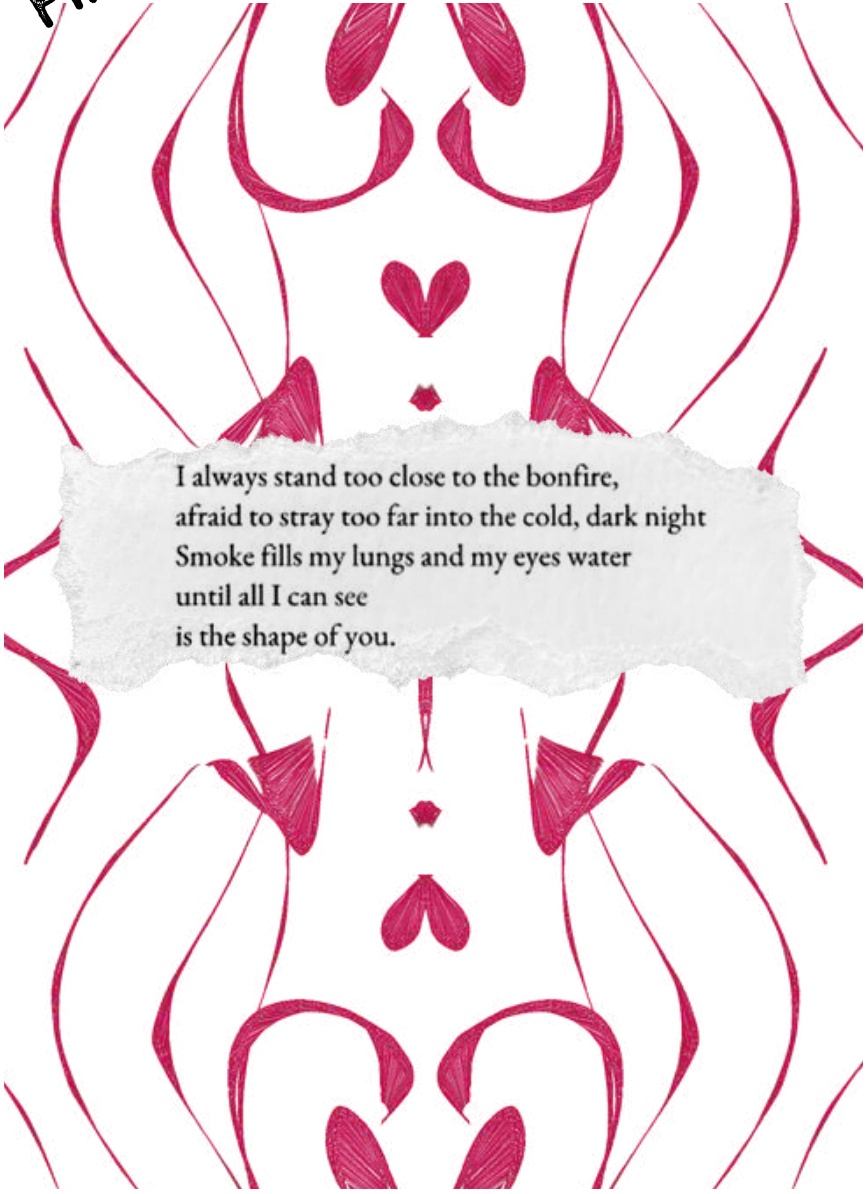
He gestured towards the only vacant chair. Shirley takes her seat next to her name card, smiles wide, and clears her throat.

“Doug, thank you so much for giving me extra time this morning to go over fixes for Act 3,” she turned to the others. “I apologize to you all about the delay, but I’ve figured out something that will work. Shall we get into it?”

Implicating the boss in her tardiness... nice move Shirley.

FIREBLIND

A. Riel Regan



I always stand too close to the bonfire,
afraid to stray too far into the cold, dark night
Smoke fills my lungs and my eyes water
until all I can see
is the shape of you.

Historically threatened.
looking for something
only low
risk this time.
Offers an incentive
to study more about,
(more about) non fiction;
the characters though,
say something about serious
writing and say it to my face.
Any talk on the very basic
remains of everyday life
will be seen as weak and
irrational, only that we keep
believing will work will
accept a new peak sensitivity;
claim this loveless form
that sticks here like a lump
in the throat, still defiant.
still choosing you.

A series of red ink splatters and smudges, resembling blood or paint, are scattered across the bottom right of the page, partially overlapping the word 'CATHEXIS'.

CATHEXIS

Nakedest

Bri Campbell



No plastic

wristband reading Briana

Bri Campbell

F

yet.

To be earringless, bare-necked,

like a collar-less dog

Lift

up your bra, too.

& I do,

in front of the nurse,

nipples

erect in the most embarrassing of ways.

Pull down

your panties.

& I do,

turning around to show my


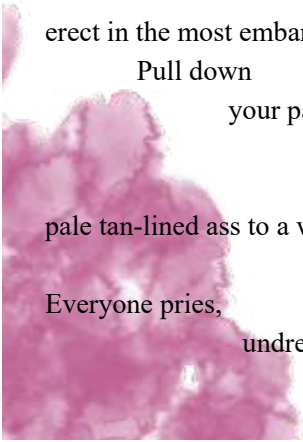
pale tan-lined ass to a woman I do not know.

Everyone pries,

undress me down

to the DSM and

my most disappointing.



The Speaker


Nadia coile



A Spell For

A. Riel Regan

RECONCILLATION



I reached deep into my velvet pouch, feeling the magic roll across my fingers. Small, rounded stones of various colors hailed down upon the underbrush as I dipped and dodged, ducking into the concealment of an exceptionally large lilac bush. The spellstone I selected warmed in my palm as I waited, biding my time while my little sister unleashed great fireballs upon the opposing forces, screaming of the ‘Fires of Yamay.’

For just a moment, there was a pause as my sister caught her breath behind an adolescent maple and the enemy readied her own spells.

I’d been ready.

“Bramblereach!” I cried as I leapt from the brush and the stone left my palm. Heavy, thorny bramble grew forth, pursuing my mark. The necromancer ran fast, but the stone flew faster and firmly hit the shoulder blade of my target—a young girl, only seven or so.

She crumpled, screeching in agony. Under her breath, she whispered something I could only barely hear — “Hell’s Vengeance!”

Oh no.

I shouted for my underlings to flee; the forest nymphs, the elves, their immense cervine mounts, I begged them to run, to save their strength, and I fell to my knees. I curled into myself on the ground, shielding my vitals the best that I could bracing for

bracing for the soul-sucking undead that would soon burst from the ground and reach for my lifeforce, for all our lifeforces, as the spellstones fell around me.

No one moved. Nothing happened.

I fell over and died.

The dark-haired girl giggled, pelting me with black stones.

“Ha! I won!”

My sister, Anabelle, charged up to our little cousin and ripped the bag of stones from her hand. “Not fair, Mara! No A.O.E! We agreed!”

“The Warriors of Black follow no rules.”

“You’re just cheating! You’re not a warrior of anything!”

“Neither are you!” Mara pouted, crossing her arms pointedly.

“No, but I’m older!” Anabelle shouted.

Mara turned away, marching toward the firepit to collect all the flat glass gems she had thrown.

“Mara, I mean it! No A.O.E. or I’ll tell my mom!”

At this point I pushed myself onto my knees, wincing as I realized how scraped they’d become over the course of the day. I went inside the house.

“Gwen, I still don’t get this. Can you tell me again?” I glanced up to see Anabelle looking at me with a pleading look on her face.

Mara groaned, stabbing what remained of her ketchup and mac n’ cheese mixture with her fork. They couldn’t disappear into Anabelle’s room to play on the computer until Anabelle finished her homework. I sighed and leaned over Anabelle’s shoulder. The assignment she was struggling with was a grammar sheet on the difference between verbs and verbals, similar to one I’d seen when I was in eighth grade.

“Maybe you wouldn’t be so stupid if your dad wasn’t a junkie.” Mara stabbed at the bottom of her bowl again, the sharp sound puncturing the air.

“Mara!” I gasped.

I glanced down to gauge Anabelle’s reaction, and when I saw her expression I reached out, hoping to hold her back, but my fingers only brushed her broad shoulders. My sister stood abruptly, red hair falling forward from her shoulder as she leaned far over the round kitchen table, shouting now.

“Take that back! That’s not true, you know it! Take it back!”

“My mom says that your dad’s a good-for-nothing drug addict. A thief too. And that’s why he’s gone so often.”

I winced. I could hear the words ringing in Aunt Dixie’s voice. They stung, and I could feel tears creep into my eyes at the reminder of my father’s trial.

“We shouldn’t be talking about this—”

Anabelle’s amber eyes shot daggers into the slight girl before her. She didn’t seem to hear me.

“Well my dad’s a braver man than yours! Braver than any man! And I’m gonna be just like him!”

I sat back down and pushed a pencil into Anabelle’s hands, and after a few seconds she sat too. Mara pulled out her phone and slid the keyboard out, texting rapidly. I wiped a tear off my cheek with my sweater sleeve.

As soon as we got to Nana’s for Christmas, Anabelle— Abel now, I corrected myself— ran straight through the house to the backyard to pick a snowball fight with Mara. Despite their incessant fighting and mutual hard-headedness, they were still closer to one another than I was to either of them. I didn’t mind too much. At family events like these, I mostly read in the

guestroom or talked politics with my libertarian uncle.

This year, I really didn't want to talk to my family. Dad had just been denied his second appeal—he'd serve the remainder of his sixteen-year sentence for three counts of first degree possession of heroin and one count of misdemeanor theft in a state prison up north. I really didn't want to talk to my family.

Abel was seventeen now, and she was sure of her decision to join the Reserves. This time last year she had showed off her ROTC uniform, talking rapidly about how once Dad got out he'd help her train, how he'd tell her all she'd need to know about really serving her country. She wore her hair in regulation braids, though she noted that she'd likely buzz it when she got there anyway. She wanted to have hair like Dad used to, at least for a while. We teased her then; we knew the moment she shaved her ginger head the sun would burn her scalp. She may have gotten Dad's height and build, but I got his olive complexion. None of this deterred her; she'd been itching to get a boyish cut anyway.

The Reserves was just her excuse.

This year she didn't mention it.

Mama was still prone to breaking down occasionally, so I tried to keep an eye on her, but overall Christmas dinner went well. I was too old to get presents now, but Mara and Abel were relishing their last few years of carefully sliding off the meticulously crafted, elegant bows Nana fashioned onto each present before tearing viciously into the wrapping paper.

Meanwhile, I managed to just narrowly escape a conversation with my uncle about ableism in the Highlands. After shoving that off on Uncle Mike, Mara's dad, I prepared the kitchen table for a game of Uno Attack. I placed two decks of cards, cardholders for Nana and Pa, an automatic deck shuffler (possessed by a demon,) and the *Uno Attack* card-spitter (also possessed.) It was going to

be a good game.

Or at least, it *would* have been a good game had Mama not accused Mara's half-sister Lilibeth, eight years my senior, of cheating by not declaring "*Uno!*" when she was down to her last card. It would have been a great game even, had Uncle Mike not responded as he did; shouting, defending his daughter, accusing Mama of being a sore loser that was just out to get Lili, and reminding all in the house that her husband was behind bars.

"Really, Michael?! You fought too! You of all people know how he got wrapped up in— in— that stuff!" Mama glanced anxiously toward Abel and I as she hesitated. As if we didn't know. As if we had no damn clue why Dad had been gone the last four years.

"Yeah, but not all of us who got an Oxy prescription ended up in jail, Darlene! Did you think about that!?"

I watched my mom bite back tears and take a staggered breath. She clenched her fists, bracing herself for her own onslaught.

"You've got a lot of nerve!" The screeching voice wasn't Mama's, but Abel's. "My dad saved lives out there! My dad sacrificed his back, gave his leg for this country! It's not even his fault he got hooked! Blame those damn doctors..." She was muttering now, momentarily losing her fire. "You don't get it. You won't get it! You're too busy playing high-and-mighty, shouting at Mama when Dad is in jail, you bastard, too full of it to show an ounce of goddamn empathy!" Abel was crying now, her cheeks flushed red. Through her blurred vision she stared daggers through Uncle Mike.

I looked to Mama. She had lost her momentum, stopped in her tracks, and was quickly regressing into a blubbering mess. I took a step in her direction, arms out to begin soothing, but she stood

abruptly. She roughly wiped her eyes with her sleeves and finished the last of the wine— straight from the bottle. Then she pushed her keys into Abel’s shaking hands, grabbed their coats, and guided her out the front door.

For at least a minute, I just stood there. Mama had never turned down comfort from me before. Then again, I’d never seen a fight like this in the family before either. Outside, I heard car doors slam and an engine start, followed by the distinct crackle of tires on gravel. After a few more seconds, I looked around the kitchen. Everyone was staring at me. So I breathed in deep, then out, then in, and asked if anyone could give me a ride.

As Uncle Mike’s car pulled into my driveway, I felt my chest tighten. My car was in the shop. Abel had switched to active duty immediately after finishing her training, and Mom had taken up drinking again. She was back on the program, of course, and boasted three months completely clean, but I kept telling myself I felt better having someone else pick me up. In truth, car rides with Uncle Mike and Mara were miserable.

As soon as I opened the car door, Mara was complaining. “I can’t believe her.”

I paused halfway through putting on my seatbelt. She really couldn’t wait any longer?

“What’re you on about now?”

Mara twisted around to face me from the front seat, lips pursed under dark lipstick.

“Anabelle. Missing my graduation. Remember, she promised that no matter where in the world they put her she’d come. I should have known better, one stupid fight with your mom—” Uncle Mike coughed uncomfortably. He’d apologized months ago. “—and she signs her life away. She’s always been stupid,

always will be.”

I didn’t feel like responding, not again. It would be a good day when Mara learned to give it all a rest. Not getting the response she wanted from me, Mara settled in the front seat, and I set to absentmindedly picking the cat hair off my dress.

With several pieces of tape sticking to my fingers, I carefully secured the photo to the rest of the collage, followed by the cute, colorful border I had cut out of patterned cardstock. The picture itself wasn’t very good, but it was one of my favorites— a shot Mama had snuck of the three of us lying flat in the yard, stargazing. We were in somewhat of a circle, feet gathered in the middle and arms spread wide between us. The photo was dark and a little blurry, but I could tell what it was.

“Gwen! Gwen, c’mon, the stars are so bright!”

I looked up from my book and swatted away a mosquito. It seemed as though Mara and Anabelle had finished their sparklers, and now they were standing in the yard, staring straight up. I pushed myself off the smooth wood of the porch swing and made my way to the steps. When finally my feet found grass, I looked up. They were right, oh how they were right.

These stars weren’t new to me— these were my stars, or my view of them at least. But tonight, something was different. The sky was perfectly clear for once, and all the stars were visible. Without me looking for them, the dippers and other constellations jumped out at me. The sky was lighter at the horizon and grew to be a deeper and deeper blue toward the area directly above us, giving the effect of the night sky being rounded, as if it was a globe itself, or a sheet wrapped around our own.

Anabelle grabbed my hand, then Mara’s, and we began to spin. Just three girls, spinning under the night sky, silenced and

in awe. When I fell, it was under a mighty maple, and the view into the leafy canopy was just as good. I reached out, and it felt for a second like I could touch it all.

I held the collage up to inspect my work. So far, so good, and I only had a few more photos to go— plus some doodling to do around the edges. Abel was coming back from her second term of active deployment soon; this one had lasted eleven months. I couldn't wait to have her back. During her off-periods from the military she lived with me and my fiancé, and those were some of the best weeks of my life. We treated the whole thing like a sleepover, drinking wine and staying up 'til early morning. Just two weeks now. And next time she left, she'd have the collage to remind her of where her heart was. I thought about what I would draw— perhaps the old symbols we had aligned ourselves with in our youth? A red flame for Abel, a green tree for me, and maybe, maybe I'd include a black skull for Mara.

At once, I decided it must be so, and began scrawling all three symbols onto the paper with markers. A spell for reconciliation. At one point, we were planning to get the symbols as tattoos. I was the only one old enough, though, and by the time we all could... Well, we weren't exactly close anymore.

"I don't understand..." Our games always used to bring us together. We used to be able to solve our problems with games, but now no one wants to play. "Guys? Why don't we decide this with a— a magic war, or something?"

Mara rolled her eyes, and I realized then how much makeup she'd begun wearing lately. "We're not kids anymore, Gwen. This is real."

Sure it was, but games were fair— Was Abel... crying? The two girls were glaring at each other from across the room, and I was uncomfortably in the middle. Mara looked bratty as

ever, but Anabelle's cheeks were red and slick with tears.

"Yeah, but it's not that big a deal, really, surely it would all be better if we just—"

"Grow up, Gwen!" This time it was Abel's outburst. "You're always so obsessed with your damn games and books! Your games aren't going to bring Dad home, and they're not going to solve any of this! This is the real world! Grow! Up!"

I felt my eyes begin to sting as they blinked back tears. "Don't you miss it, though? Don't you miss—"

From somewhere under the covers of my bed I felt my phone buzz three times consecutively. I blinked, shaking the memory from my head. After a second, my phone rang three times more, and I began the hurried search for the pine green case amongst my hunter green sheets. I'd almost missed the call by the time I found it, but before holding it to my ear I managed to catch the name of the caller— it was Mara.

"Hey."

"Gwenevere?" Mara sniffled, and her voice was shaky. I didn't respond. "I... I miss her."

I sighed, knowing that I'd have to be the one to be mature and compassionate about all this. I'd be the one to have to welcome Mara back into our little group, and my resentments didn't matter, not in the long run. "She's coming home soon, you know. They can't keep her forever."

"...Yeah."

"You'll come to her welcome home party on the twenty-third, won't you?"

"Yeah. I'll be there."

"She'll appreciate it."

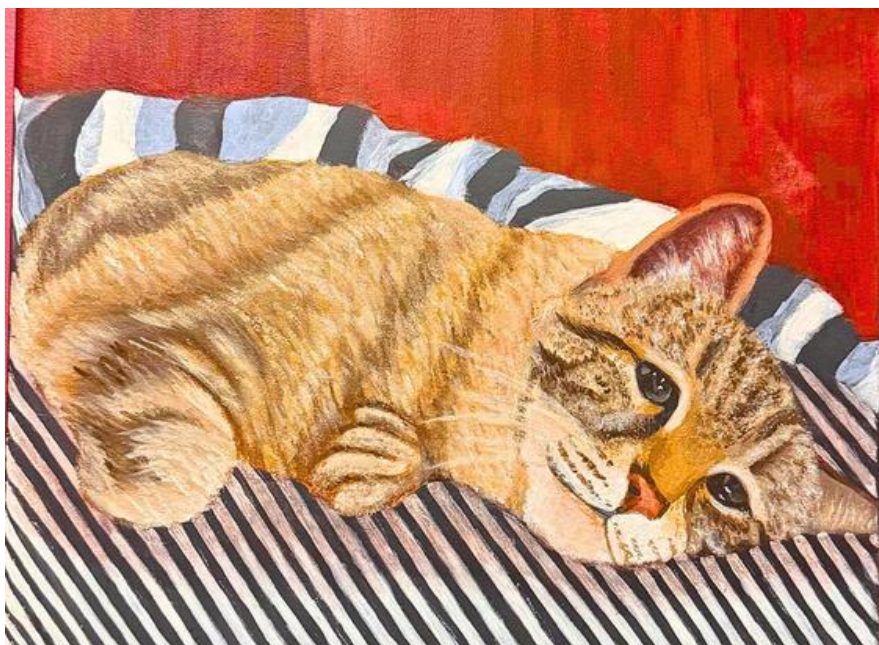
"I know."

I shifted a little, wrapping one arm around my ribcage in a self-hug to steady myself. “I miss you too.”

“Yeah, I... I’ve missed both of you. A lot. Can I... can I actually help you set up? Next Thursday, maybe. I can decorate, or run errands, or cook...”

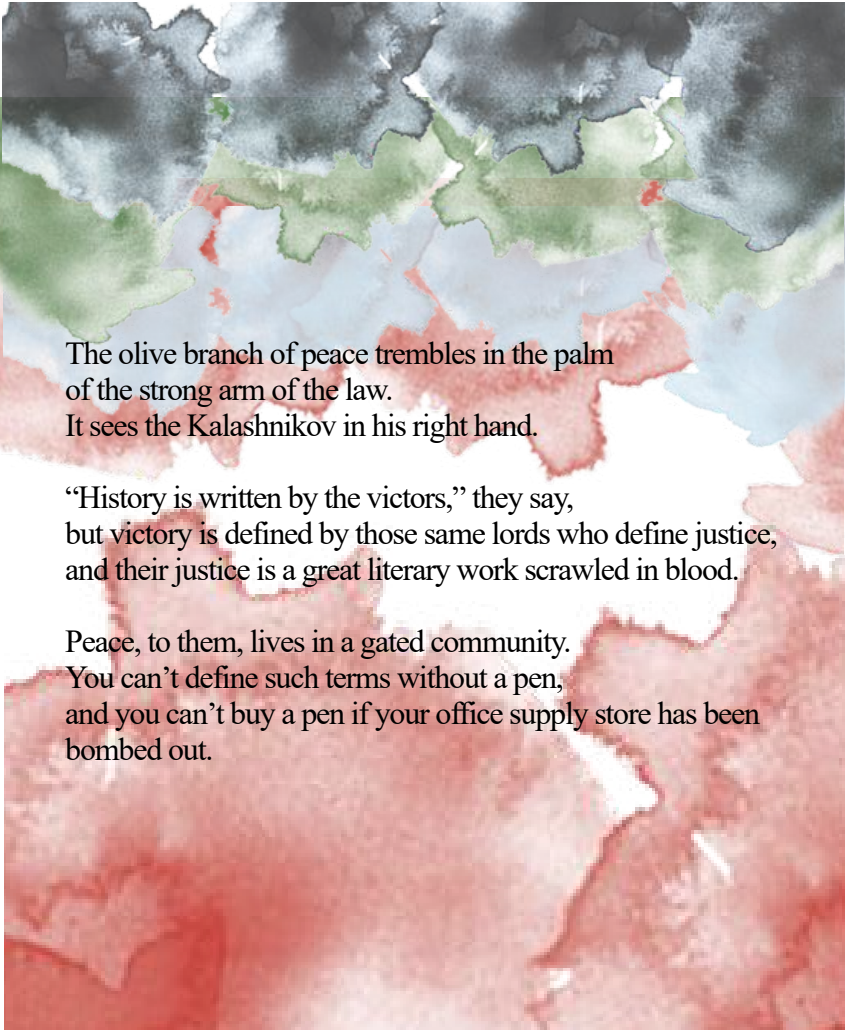
A smile tugged at the edge of my lips. “Yeah. That would be nice.”

BRIANNA SAPIENZA



PEACE

Jeanne “J” Elmore



The olive branch of peace trembles in the palm
of the strong arm of the law.
It sees the Kalashnikov in his right hand.

“History is written by the victors,” they say,
but victory is defined by those same lords who define justice,
and their justice is a great literary work scrawled in blood.

Peace, to them, lives in a gated community.
You can’t define such terms without a pen,
and you can’t buy a pen if your office supply store has been
bombed out.

NuÉpoca

Now more than ever, it's important that we document the art and literature of the people. The commodification of art has reached an all time high with the increasing use of AI, threatening human creativity and expression. Art desperately needs to return to genuine movements – we need to inspire one another, uplift one another, and critique one another. Only through collaboration can artists take back their power from corporations and AI.

NuÉpoca was created to spread this sentiment and platform artists born or based in the Atlanta wide area. Nu being “new”, and Época being “era” in Spanish.

This volume features short stories, poems, art, and photography from Artists based or from Atlanta.

ART FURTHEST

FROM

COMMODITY



✉ nuepoca@gmail.com

🌐 www.nuepoca.com

📷 [nuepoca_journal](#)