

**up**END

**DREAM  
CREATE  
LIBERATE**

**A  
FUTURE  
WITHOUT  
FAMILY  
POLICING**

POETRY  
SHORT FICTION  
VISUAL ART

**20  
24**



# DREAM, CREATE, LIBERATE

## A FUTURE WITHOUT FAMILY POLICING

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Dream, Create, Liberate: A Future Without Family Policing*, the inaugural creative publication brought to you by the upEND Movement. As we embark on this journey of imagination and liberation, we invited artists to join us in envisioning a world free from family policing.

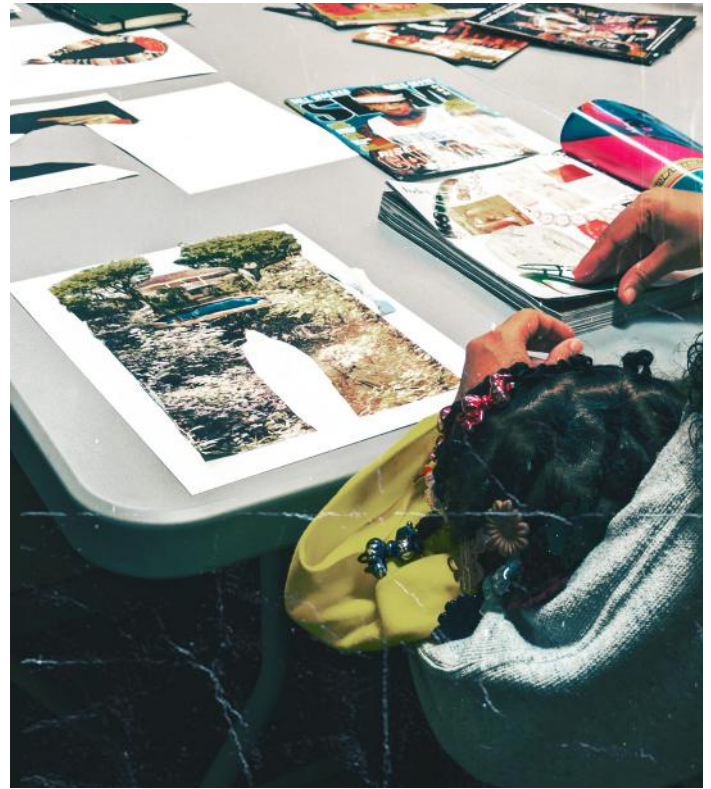
In a society where punitive systems disproportionately harm Black and brown communities, the need to reimagine our future is paramount. The upEND Movement recognizes that part of the abolitionist vision is to dream of alternative realities, where oppressive structures such as family policing no longer sway our lives.

Through Afrofuturist-inspired poetry, short works of fiction, and visual art, we seek to weave together a tapestry of visions that transcend the limitations of our present reality. By tapping into the boundless creativity of artists, we hope to spark dialogue, inspire action, and pave the way for transformative change.

Why turn to artists in the quest for abolitionist futures? Artists possess a unique ability to challenge the status quo, disrupt norms, and illuminate possibilities that lie beyond the confines of conventional thinking. Their creations have the power to provoke thought, evoke emotion, and ignite the collective imagination.

By bringing artists and activists together in community, we aim to harness the creative energy necessary to manifest a world where family policing is obsolete. Through collaboration, solidarity, and collective visioning, we can lay the groundwork for a future rooted in justice, equity, and liberation for all.

So let us dream boldly and create fearlessly. Together, we can build a future where every family is free to flourish, unburdened by the specter of family policing.



## WHAT IS THE FAMILY POLICING SYSTEM?

Commonly misidentified as the “child welfare system,” the family policing system surveils, regulates, and punishes families to maintain the control and oppression of Black, Indigenous, and Latine families.



# POETRY



## DEBORAH D.E.E.P. MOUTON

POETRY JUDGE

Deborah D.E.E.P Mouton is an internationally-known writer, director, performer, critic, and Poet Laureate Emeritus of Houston, TX. She is author of *Newsworthy* (Bloomsday Literary, 2019), its German counterpart *Berichtenswert* (Elif Verlag, 2021), and the recently released memoir *Black Chameleon* (Henry Holt & Co, 2023). She has been a contributing writer for *Glamour*, *Texas Monthly*, and ESPN's *The Undefeated*. Her most notable productions include *Marian's Song* (Houston Grand Opera, 2020) & *Plumshuga: The Rise of Lauren Anderson* (Stages, 2022). She is a Resident Artist with American Lyric Theater, Rice University, and the Houston Museum of African American Culture.

GRAND PRIZE WINNER

## RYAN JAFAR ARTES

*Selections from "Family As Ellipsis"*

Ryan Jafar Artes (he/she/they) is an activist, memoirist, and poet. Ryan's work calls for a re-imagining of our entire culture via a cultural renaissance from the perspective of lived experience as a transracial, transnational South Asian Indian American adoptee. Ryan is the host of The Adoptee Open Mic and leads letter writing classes to support their activism and creative work.

Last year, Ryan invoked the nostalgia of typing on a desktop for their chapbook project called *Family As Ellipsis*. "When we first got a PC, I loved to type. I would just type stories forever. I would weave my parents into my stories by imagining them as not the punctuation but the spaces between the sentences." In the selected poems from *Family As Ellipsis*, you can hear the rhythmic clicking that writes an alternate universe into being.

"I flew from India to the United States at one month old. My paperwork, the mechanics for my arrival, were in place before I was even conceived. I so desperately wanted to understand my parents, my family, myself as who I was to be. I would use anything. Punctuation is just a great way to do that. Numbers work, words work, everything works, even flowers and trees."

Afrofuturism calls the future into the present and speculates on what could be. "My work is deeply inspired by Afrofuturism, and exists in my realm of Indo-futurism, in which I exist with my family, I speak my language, and I am immersed in a cultural context in which I make sense, in which I am in India."

Ryan has dedicated their life to liberating stories of Black and Brown adoptees, starting with their own. "Those of us who have survived adoption have really experienced the commodification of our lived experiences from before we were born. And so my own work has been realized through the power of storytelling."

At upEND, we are trusting artists to lead resistance to family policing by cultivating the innate creativity in all of us. Ryan suggests that we already have all of the materials we need to begin using art as a tool for liberation.

"With poetry, we're just using the words that we already know how to use. Collage is just using whatever we have laying around. We're reusing it creatively, ripping it apart to change its meaning. I guarantee you, everyone has the supplies for something they've been saving to put together, whether or not they recognize it as creative, whether or not it is institutionally recognized as creative."

Abolition is, afterall, about abundance—rejecting frameworks of scarcity, punishment, and control and recognizing that we have the collective power to care for each other. That's why nurturing our imagination is so essential. "I use my work to imagine things into existence, and in doing so, I find more things I want to create, not less. Our imaginations are not finite. Our imaginations are expansive"





**"OUR IMAGINATIONS  
ARE NOT FINITE.  
OUR IMAGINATIONS  
ARE EXPANSIVE."**

## *Creating Nostalgia for a Life I Never Lived*

**Ryan Jafar Artes**

When I learned to type the conventions were  
One space after a comma and two spaces after a period  
And so I typed stories about my life  
With one set of parents on a then-new PC  
Imagining in my other set of parents

Who I included in narratives of which they were never a part  
By imagining them as the two blanks spaces  
After each period I typed  
And I imagined myself as the space  
After each comma

In this way we spend time together  
Period space space mother father  
Comma space me  
Period space space mother father  
Comma space me

After each period a space each for my mother and father  
After each comma a space for me  
And so in this way I told them stories  
Including them in timelines along which they were never included  
Which I was only able to enjoy because of them

Imagining them into holidays  
And vacations  
And family outings and gatherings  
After each period mother father  
After each comma me

Weaving them into along as a part of my life  
In ways they never were are will be  
As only a child might  
Spending time with the parents of my imagination  
The mother and father who are and were never mine

Period space space mother father  
Comma space me  
Period space space mother father  
Comma space me  
Period space space mother father

Until one day the convention changed  
Comma space  
Period space  
Comma space  
Period space

And just like that my parents disappeared  
From the stories I typed  
Relegated to a place I could no longer find them  
An incomplete story  
Always ending with someone who is missing

Who was never there to begin with

*I Place Us Together at the End of a Sentence  
That Might Never Be*  
**Ryan Jafar Artes**

We are a family...  
We know each other...  
We meet in real life and know our names...

We hug and our embrace feels natural...  
After so much time apart we still know each other...  
We fall easily into conversation...

We love each other..  
The complications fade away..  
We do not have each other...

Though we are becoming each other...  
Or at least I am becoming them...  
Holding onto who we are...

Though we do not exist as a family..  
We do...  
As I watch how families behave and act and are...

I know that and how families do...  
Becoming each other...  
Though we have not been given the chance to do so in this life...

I become and am becoming my family...  
As they become and are becoming me...  
Whether or not we are together...

That we are apart or together...  
Does not matter and is not important...  
To understand who I am becoming...

...who is my family.  
Who is my family...  
Who is my family?

And so I place us together before, amidst, at the end of each sentence...  
Three dots who represent three people who are...  
Mother father me.

*(Parent) Thesis*  
**Ryan Jafar Artes**

I have never seen my parents  
though I imagine how they have seen me,

(however briefly,  
for a moment I might have belonged to you,)

and how they held me. (Oh,  
how I wish I might remember your warmth.

Do you remember mine?)  
I ponder how I might remember them,

(and who you are, as) I imagine how it felt to be inside  
of (you,) my mother, in the safety of her womb,

listening to my father's voice from within, (oh,  
how I wish I might remember such parts

of an impossibility, though I know you exist,  
you have to, because I am here,)

preparing myself for a familiarity,  
one that never came into being,

and so I look for them, (you as my parents,)  
though I have never seen them, (might I call you

mom, dad, mother, father, amma, appa, ma, pa,  
if I meet you, and) when I do, they appear in my dreams,

(an afterthought, a fantasy, a vision, a potentiality,  
a possibility that you might never be,) appearing as faceless beings,


though I know they are real,  
I am unsure of how to prove their existence.

(And so, I add you in wherever I can find space  
for you to belong.)

I know they are real because of my life,  
though losing them has been the hardest thing

I have ever done, (it was not my choice,  
for) I would not have chosen such a life

(without you).



**“THAT IS WHAT MY  
POEMS ARE ABOUT—  
THE IN-BETWEEN,  
THE STRIVING  
FOR ABOLITION  
WHILE STILL  
ACKNOWLEDGING  
THE INCREDIBLE  
HARMS AND  
VIOLENCE OF TODAY”**



PRIZE WINNER

## JOLIE VENETTINE BROWNELL VIRGILE

### *Abolition from the space in between*

Jolie Venettine Brownell Virgile (she/her) is a research analyst with a background in Women and Gender Studies and a passion for Critical Race Theory. However, as an artist, poet, and researcher, Jolie's work lies within the overlapping worlds of creativity and critique.

Her collection begins with *My Name is Devonte Hart*, memorializing the adopted Black boy who was murdered alongside his other 5 adopted siblings by their adoptive white parents. Jolie herself is one of 6 adopted Black children, and the poem steps into his story while acknowledging her pain and fears of the ways Black children are unprotected from white saviorism.

"As we build futures where systems and institutions are in place to honor diverse kinships and resource models to support families instead of destabilize them, we also need to acknowledge the harm done. That is what my poems are about—the in-between, the striving for abolition while still acknowledging the incredible harms and violence of today."

In the next poem, *Dear Mother*, Jolie pens a love letter to her birth mother. "For many years I grew up angry at her. Angry for her having me in the first place when she knew she did not have the resources to take care of me. However, as I grew up and learned more about the violent history of the ways the U.S. had

worked to destabilize Haiti (my home county) and its economy through imperialism, I began to understand the impossible predicament my birth mother was placed in."

How can we break free of reforms to the system and open our minds to a radically different future? Jolie says we should start by reframing our understanding of the cis-hetero-patriarchal family. "We've come to understand a family as this individualized unit that stands alone. If we think of the nuclear family with two children, this has been our constructed understanding of what a family is. And so I want to start to challenge that with the phrase 'it takes a village to raise a child.'"

What if we acknowledge that family includes grandmothers, aunts and uncles, neighbors, and your parents' friends? How can we support that village in sustainable and restorative ways?

For Jolie, the dream of liberation and healing is to be continued. She says that her final poem, *Stay There*, is a work in progress that imagines an alternate universe where she would have stayed with her birth parents but in a society that would have made that a healthy and viable option. She writes a bridge to a world that does not exist, yet. "I consider that latest piece a little unfinished and want to continue thinking about and processing as I learn more about family policing systems and abolition."

*My name is Devonte Hart*  
**Jolie Venettine Brownell Virgile**

Today I live in the archives of headline news,  
I mean, I am stuck, locked up in old news articles,  
in a four wall prison,  
I mean photograph with a cop.

The famous hug felt across the nation,  
Around the world,  
The sign I hold asks for a free hug,  
but these tears are calling to be seen.

What does it mean to be the son of a nation,  
for a day, a week, a month,  
When I never had the chance to be the son of my birth mother?

To be a foster kid is to know the violence,  
The violence of belonging to everyone and no one at the same time...  
To be Black is to know the violence,  
The violence of becoming a symbol of a dream come true,  
except it's MLK's nightmare.  
I still have nightmares,  
Of pleading for help while my supposed protectors  
use my body to save themselves.

They used my body for a miracle,  
Turned a pig, I mean a cop into a human,  
While robbing me of my breath.  
Forced me into a magic trick,  
Watch me disappear.  
They made me disappear.

...And I fell, when I fell there was no one,  
No arms to catch me,  
Unless you count the way the waves make room for the rocks,  
Count the way the waves made room for my body.

Now more than a year later,  
My bodiless soul flows in the waves of your nameless ancestors,  
Except my soul has learned each of their names.  
But do you know mine?

My name is Devonte Hart and I was 15 years old when on March 26th, 2018 my white adopted parents Jennifer and Sarah Hart drove me and my siblings off a cliff. My sisters Ciera (aged 12), Abigail (14), and Hannah (16) and my brothers Jeremiah (14), and Markis (19) were killed and their bodies recovered. My body, presumed dead, however was never found...

....unless of course, you look back at the news archives.

## *Dear mother.*

**Jolie Venettine Brownell Virgile**

Dear mother,  
I was barely three  
when you turned your back on me.  
You left me cradled in prayers of a better life,  
I could not yet see.

Dear mother,  
I can not remember the first last time  
you hugged and kissed me.

Dear mother,  
how did you not see,  
that I'd rather starve to death in your arms,  
than to be fed and left forever feeling empty?  
Now I am left with the haunting question  
of did you ever want me?

Dear mother,  
I am angry.  
Angry at whatever forced your hands  
to let go of me.

Dear mother,  
did you truly fail me?  
Or was it the world  
who failed you?  
Because you see,  
my mother is just like many other mothers  
we see.

Crossing foreign borders,  
we see them hold their children's hands so tightly.  
They are fleeing violence,  
institutionalized oppression,  
and poverty.

While my mother had to release me into the universe  
praying that I fall into hands that are loving  
and more wealthy.  
These mothers cross borders and battlefields,  
just to bring their children to safety.

Both mothers making do with the  
unending list of injustices stacked up against them,  
both mothers trying to do what is best for their families  
and yet both mothers still deemed  
unfit and undeserving.

Dear mother,  
they say that it was your choice to  
place me for adoption.  
But was it really your choice?  
Or were you forced?

Dear mother,  
I too, was taken away from you.  
But I was taken by much larger hands  
of the forces of colonization,  
imperialism, and neoliberalism.

Because the reason why you couldn't take care of me,  
the state of your current poverty,  
is the result of generations of white greed,  
white supremacy.

The first world intervenes  
and fills your government with corruption,  
with the lie, saying they're trying to build a democracy,  
force your economy into agreements  
that lock your country into debt,  
all while devaluing your currency.  
now your country so unstable,  
you can not raise your own family.

Dear mother,  
I too,  
was taken away from you.

This is the hidden violence  
of transnational adoption.

You see,  
trauma of separation.  
Whether through deportation or adoption,  
is the same violence.

Separating families is  
a psychological genocide,  
on black and brown bodies,  
on black and brown children.  
all rooted in racism  
that is strategically  
kept hidden.

hidden through narratives  
of how these children are somehow better off  
without their unfit mothers,  
and placed into new white loving hands.  
This is the root of white saviorism,  
this is the hidden root of adoption.

Dear mother,  
I love you.

Thank you.

## *Stay there.*

**Jolie Venettine Brownell Virgile**

To dream for a world you'll never touch,  
Because you cannot remember your mother's touch.  
To search for a world beyond this one,  
Because of the family you could never find.  
To birth a new form of kinship building,  
Because you were separated from your kin at birth.

Abolition is a promise to hold institutions accountable to never repeat their harm,  
It is to search for the beyond while still tethered to the before.  
It is to dream a new dream as a dreamer born from a nightmare.

I dream for my skin to know my mother's touch,  
I dream of never having to search for my older sister in the first place.

I dream to be born into my family again and stay there.

PRIZE WINNER

## RIVER 莹莹 DANDELION

### *Spells for Trans Liberation & Abolition*

River 莹莹 Dandelion (he, him, keoi 佢) is a practitioner of ancestral medicine through writing poetry, teaching, energy healing, and creating ceremony. As a poet, he writes to connect with the unseen and unspoken so we can feel and heal. As a healing practitioner, he supports clients moving through transition and transformation. River also facilitates creative writing workshops, where participants connect with their own inner and collective power.

River cites the Ferguson Uprisings as the time in which he came into his own understanding of abolition. "Sometimes people see a call for abolition as something that is unattainable or too radical. But when I think about prisons closing and police being abolished, it feels like something that is very common sense and something that doesn't need to be debated. I also firmly believe and see it as something that is inevitable, as something that will happen in this lifetime based on how strongly I see all of the grassroots organizing efforts happening and everything that's been building up across these decades."

His poetry collection begins with an incantation. "As a trans person living in a heavily policed city, I wrote *Spell for Trans Liberation* to speak to a world in which trans liberation and abolition

are intertwined. The policing of gender is tied to the policing of a populace, and in this poem, I imagine what else to be true when the last prison walls are closed."

The following poems, *On the Day the Last Prison Closed* and *The Great March Home (I)* and *(II)*, are bittersweet, describing scenes of the joy and uncertainty that may come to pass on the day that abolition is realized. "I thought a lot about how even on the day that the last prison closed that wouldn't mean that there's immediate peace. I wanted to create a poem where those tensions were present. My poems live as snapshots of that imagined future, which I tangibly feel, and hope can be a lived reality."

For those considering putting their abolitionist dreams on paper, River reminds us, "Visions for freedom don't only have to live inside of essays, academic pieces, or news articles. I would love them to live inside all mediums and forms of art, including poems. And for people who are more stuck in reforms or being with the current system as is, I would say, it's totally fine to find it difficult to imagine. But imagination is a muscle that we really need to exercise, especially during these times."



**“IMAGINATION IS  
A MUSCLE THAT  
WE REALLY NEED  
TO EXERCISE,  
ESPECIALLY  
DURING THESE  
TIMES.”**



## Spell for Trans Liberation (I)

River 莹莹 Dandelion

you walk down the street  
& you are not afraid you  
use the public bathroom & you  
don't need to put your hood up

there is no NYPD patrolling  
subway stations the mocking silver  
turnstiles long melted to the side  
everyone has free healthcare.

you head to the doctor for an appointment  
about your free gender-affirming surgery  
dysphoria, diagnosis of the past  
you can now have multiple surgeries

in your lifetime change your name & ID  
just as many too never sign documents  
to verify you are not committing fraud  
you love your mother & your mother loves you.

there are no more task forces on bullying  
White House initiatives no longer launched  
for taken lives we see each other  
for our spirits we make room

for everyone's growing the last president  
is trans and then  
there are no more presidents

we lead each other council of youth & elders  
who have been detained incarcerated  
abused & unhoused map networks  
of care of thriving of de-escalation

we self-govern look to neighbors chosen family  
& our own bodies for safety

after the last prison walls closed  
& were spiritually cleansed  
the billions no longer allocated  
to imprisonment ended houselessness

jumpstarted universal income for all.  
you smile at students headed to school  
with shiny new backpacks put on sunglasses  
when passing newly renovated schools

glass-dome ceilings power solar  
energy to classrooms sunlight spills  
into windows during math class  
shelter drills remnants of the past

there are no unprovoked fires no bomb threats  
no armed shooters no guns no rain  
of bullets ever-blooming flowers  
fill train stations that once held death

you walk home knowing  
you will always be alive.

## *On the Day the Last Prison Closed (I)* **River 莹莹 Dandelion**

we gathered by the holographic television  
& watched in disbelief many of us caught  
midway with our jaws dropped the awaited day

had finally come we held each other's hands  
& listened as the anchorqueer announced  
dates of the Last Prison's demolition.

one of us let out of a whoop one of us let out a *yeah!*  
the rest of us just cried some of us had been fighting  
for abolition for so long, victory felt

like bacteria in our bodies many of us  
so accustomed to living in a surveillance state,  
walking outside & not seeing flashing

red & blue lights,  
had our nervous systems  
still in flight.

we watched aerial footage of guards standing  
at the entrance of the Last Prison's gate,  
so used to protecting walls from itself,  
they didn't know where to go & who to serve.

some walked in to return badges  
& galloped to their cars in joy  
others scratched their heads,  
fastened weapon belts & paced  
perimeters, waiting for commands.

suburban mothers had husbands  
hurry to Home Depot to build  
picket fences higher   corporations expanded  
barbed wire loops on buildings  
pigeons still nested between spikes.

some people can have freedom  
right in front of them & not know  
where to go   we certainly didn't.

all we knew was the Old Order  
was on its way out, finally   the triumph  
from a generation's long struggle, so sweet,  
even the trees seemed to be shouting with us.

# The Great March Home (I)

River 莹莹 Dandelion

was indeed a march.  
decked out school buses  
with scratched peace stickers  
waited in the main parking lot.

drivers hugging boxes  
of gourmet lunches & fruit  
juice popsicles greeted  
each grandparent & caretaker by name.

former political prisoners  
wore their new satin suits  
& limousine drivers escorted  
them home the Council of each city

welcomed them back with KBBQ  
six-figure checks & gym membership  
to crystalline community pools.

the \$81 billion no longer devoted  
to imprison funded the rebuilding  
of lives. *it isn't much to compensate  
for the times endured at hands*

*of the Old Order, but we hope this begins  
to make amends,* the Council's letter read.

every formerly incarcerated person  
was hired to weigh in  
at the next Town Hall's  
plan for reparations.

a man with toffee-toned skin  
beard now greyed, stepped forward  
at the departure gate & let out a chuckle.

the note in his hand wavered in the wind  
flew back into air he watched it soar  
above barbed gates & whispered a prayer

may inked intentions find their way  
back to source, meld with bark from whence  
it came may truer truths be carved instead.

## *The Great March Home (II)*

River 莹莹 Dandelion

artists wore sunglasses on lawn chairs  
many commissioned by the Council  
to document history as it unfolded

at the bus depot by the piers, vendors brought  
string-light balloons, home popcorn  
machines, & cotton candy    aunties scooped

cookies & cream    everyone slurped paletas  
painters propped their easels by the river ready  
to capture silhouettes of mothers embracing  
now-grown children

poets laid on fluffy grass fields & penned  
ekphrases inspired by the murals outlined  
along once abandoned buildings

choreographers set up boomboxes at each pier  
& blossomed into pirouettes as teens  
gathered reluctant family members  
to record new dances to commemorate this day

no politicians gave speeches    none were allowed to  
the mothers who hosted the Great March Home  
set up speakers for the chorus who sang  
old songs of freedom.

when the decked-out school buses & limousines  
finally arrived, the cheers of the community  
could be heard from outer space    NASA saw  
a large cloud looming over the capital city

anchorqueers reassured them there was  
nothing to worry about    the smoke  
was just a collective exhale from earth  
happening at the same time    all around the world.

SHORT





# FICTION



## **JOSIE PICKENS**

SHORT FICTION JUDGE

upEND's program director Josie Pickens is a Houston, TX-based organizer, educator, journalist, and culturalist whose writings and public conversations focus on race, gender, and sexuality. Josie has been regularly published in *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Bitch*, *The Root*, *Cassius*, *Mic*, and more. She has more than twenty years of community organizing experience where her focus has been prison-industrial-complex abolition, family policing system abolition, and building mutual aid networks.

GRAND PRIZE WINNER

## JESSYKA LINTON

### *Homeland*

Jessyka Linton is endlessly interested in what it means to be human. She often finds herself writing stories, penning poetry, wandering museums, and traveling. Houston has allowed Jessyka to define home for herself, and for that, Jessyka has undying gratitude to the H.

In the short story *Homeland*, a teacher recalls how and why *Homeland* came to be in an interview with his student. *Homeland* alludes to *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, and is in many ways a tribute to her work. Butler is often attributed as the “mother of Afrofuturism,” a genre that centers Black history and imagines its future.


“Octavia has freed me in a lot of ways. Not just as a writer, but as a thinker in general. I think she’s given me a lot of options that I didn’t know about, whether I agree with them or not. I think as a result of having read Octavia’s work, I just know that more worlds can exist than the ones that we’ve seen. So borrowing a little bit from the world she’s shaped and then borrowing a little bit from my personal experience, that’s *Homeland*.”

To write the story, she spent time reflecting on the experiences of her community and lessons she has learned from family policing activists. “I just sat with the idea of, what could life look like for a group of people who aren’t policed, whose family structure isn’t policed?”

Jessyka also draws inspiration from art that moved her as a child, citing Brandy’s *Cinderella* (1997) as a work that shook up her imagination. “It’s not like she’s the hated stepchild because she’s Black. There is a perfectly whole and happy family that is Black and white and Asian. As a kid, I was like, duh, why not? Why can’t that be so?”

Those feeling stuck to the family policing system in hopeless cycles of reforms are invited to borrow from past and present leaders to build an abolitionist future.

“I think we have a great many ancestors to pull from who have been infinitely creative. And even there, like within their lifetime, their vision hasn’t been brought to fruition yet. So if you’re not creative, go take the vision of someone you love and respect, right? Like, we have not seen the future envisioned by Angela Davis yet. And she’s still here with us. We haven’t seen the future, the present, that the Black Panthers brought for themselves in Northern California. We haven’t recreated that yet. There are so many futures and possibilities that have already been dreamed of. So if your imagination is running short, I think a great number of our ancestors would be okay with us borrowing their imagination.”



**"I JUST SAT WITH  
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POLICED?"**

## *Homeland* by Jessyka Linton

It all started because my kid brother was obsessed with Octavia Butler. More specifically, Octavia Butler's *Parable* series: *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Those books are *science fiction*. Almost no one in either book accepts any of the principles in them wholeheartedly or without skepticism. And yet, my kid brother modeled our future after the books and the principles they hold.

I suppose I should back up. J told me that's why he picked me - because I get to the main thing first. I think it makes me a sloppy communicator. How can I expect you to understand what I'm saying if I don't give you the context? Anyways, you know me as Chief Dre. I live in Block X. I am uncle to 12, teacher to 20 more. You know our life as it currently is. But things were not always this way. In fact, for those old enough to be uncles, teachers, or chiefs, this way of life is still so new that we guard it with our lives. We hope it lasts long enough to be taken for granted and is cared for well enough to never be.

And according to J, story-telling is one way to ensure *Homeland* can be cared for and last. J says the past gives us something to interrogate our present with. I don't know where he got that brain from and why I didn't get at least part of it. But that is why we are here. To capture our past.

Before there was *Homeland*, we were Americans. I know, hard to believe. But you should - you have a dual citizenship - your American citizenship was bestowed upon you at birth and cannot be revoked but by the American government. I do not know how you Young Ones started to believe that was a rumor - it is truth. But we will get to that later. As I said, we were Americans. Black Americans. No, not all of us of course, but J and I were.

J and I were born to a beautiful woman. Her name was Andrea Jay. Yes, a bit of a narcissist.

Really, that is the accusation she received most often. Remember earlier when I said I did not know where J got his brains from? I lied. He got them from her. Andrea Jay was a history student and believed in incorporating the lessons of the past in her way of life. She was fascinated with the way the enslaved peoples in America named their children uniquely so that they could be easily identified if separated. She hated the idea of the only tie between her and her children being the name of a man she had no respect for. So she tied us to what she had: her name. My full American name is Drea Jay Jackson. J's full American name is Jaybird Annie Jackson. If we were still in America, we would still be fighting something as silly and frivolous as pronouns.

Andrea Jay was cunning. She hated things that she perceived were inefficient. She knew how to get by on very little and she was quick to quit a job that she perceived was beneath her. Certain traits are grenades in a Black body in America. I've often thought that if Andrea Jay were born to a wealthy white family, her temperament and qualities would have made her head of a company. But instead, they made her a stereotype: Welfare Queen. Side note: have you ever thought about how mainstream - of course, I mean white - America goes out of its way to make a caricature out of a Black Woman? Let a Black Woman express any ingenuity, creativity, economic fortitude whatsoever, and mainstream America finds a way to label it filthy. Oh, Young One, I know you haven't thought about these things, you do not need to. J has asked me to return to a way of thought I have not engaged in in decades - a few stray thoughts from that time are bound to pop up (yes, exactly like change coming out of a pocket during the wash cycle). If I reminisce as I recount, smile and wait for me to return to my story.

According to the white people - we'll get to which ones in a bit - Andrea Jay did not do anything the way she was supposed to. Notice, I've made no mention of a second parent. As far as we had any proof, Andrea Jay was something like the second Mary - we never heard of

a man. Andrea Jay did not mention why whoever helped her create us was not an active participant in our day-to day. Andrea Jay was fiercely independent. She had parents - she had to come from somewhere - J and I never heard of them. The concept of a grandparent was a television fantasy. Andrea Jay did not mention if we had other family at all and, if we did, why they were not around.

J and I had each other and Andrea Jay as a provider. Holidays were nonexistent. In hindsight, anyone can see the woman was working those days - pay was often double or triple for those non-coveted shifts. But. Andrea Jay believed in celebrating our birthdays. Those days had tradition to them. We would wake up earlier than usual and be expected to present Andrea Jay with a list. There were no parameters - the list could be as long or as short as we wanted. The goal was to get through as much of the list as possible during the day. I treated the list like a Birthday Scavenger hunt. Every year, my list was different and ridiculous. J's list was the same each year: get dressed (each person could wear whatever they wanted), walk to the local cookie shop (J was funny that way - why would he make us walk? Houston is not made for walking), walk to the closest bookstore, everyone was to choose one book, walk home, read, Andrea Jay draw a picture. J has never told me why he knew to ask for that. I did not know our mother was a talented artist until J made a request for a picture each year. They were timely, beautiful, and always featured us somewhere in the picture.

I think I have failed at painting the picture but here is what I want you to understand: J and I were provided for. We were not hungry. We

never missed school (except if we were sick and for our birthdays). Andrea Jay was an amazing teacher. She taught us how to spend and save money (we were given a small weekly stipend), how to cook, how to do laundry, history (world history and U.S. history that she knew we would not learn in school). But working often meant she was out often. And because she did not let people in her business, they got in it. Forced themselves in it.

The first time Child Protective Services showed up at the door, J and I were confused. Why were they here? How did they know where we lived? Why would they expect our mother to be home at 4:30pm? Even on tv, people worked until 6 (of course, Andrea Jay would not be home until much later than that, but 4:30 was a stupid time for them to expect a working adult to be home). We were confused, but there was no way they would be back, so we didn't think about it again. Didn't even bring it up to Andrea Jay. And then they returned. Asked us the same questions. This time, J had the wits to lie. Said our mother (called Andrea our "mother" - something we did not do) was just around the corner picking up an ingredient for dinner and would be

right back. Unfortunately, the adults looked like they were much more familiar with this song and dance than we were. Scribbled a few notes on a clipboard, left us but promised to return within a month. This time we did tell Andrea about the inquirers. Andrea asked when they said they'd return. We said within the month. That was the end of that conversation.

I am going to quickly run through what happened next. The details are painful, arduous, and not necessary to get where we are going:

## CERTAIN TRAITS ARE GRENADES IN A BLACK BODY IN AMERICA.

- Andrea had a sister - yes, this fact was a surprise to us too. Andrea called her sister and she was scheduled to move in with us 2 weeks later. The sister was a model who worked odd jobs. Andrea and her sister had never been close. The sister wanted nothing to do with children. But she was willing enough to help her sister not lose hers. We did not know anything about the sister before Andrea told us she would be coming to live with us.
- CPS lied. They were back a week later. Andrea was not home. Andrea's sister had not yet moved in.
- This third visit started our career in the foster care system.
- Blessedly, we were not split. Many sibling pairs or groups cannot say this - our hearts go out to all they lost.
- We had no way to and were not permitted contact with Andrea. The next time we saw her, over a decade later, she was a distinguished painter and on tv as a advocate against the foster care system.

We'll put a bookmark there and come back to Andrea.

We were allowed to bring a backpack amount of our lives with us to our first plantation. Hold on, there are a few things to clarify before I go on: because I am going to revisit the mindset I had at that time, I will talk about that time the way J and I did then. We did not say we were a part of "foster care." Instead, we said we were kidnapped (we were). We did not call the people we lived with "family." They were no kin to us. Instead, we called them Mister or Miss so-and-so or "massa" if J and I were alone. We did not call the place we were removed to our "foster home." We called it the plantation.

So, we were allowed to bring a backpack amount of our lives with us to our first plantation. Thankfully, Miss so-and-so (there was no Mister at the first plantation, though there was supposed to be) was less than interested in J and me. J was allowed to read his book, I was

allowed to attend my extracurriculars so long as she did not hear from the school. We were good little checks and, for our own peace, we tried to keep it that way. *Parable of the Sower* was the most recent book J had gotten on his birthday and made it in the backpack during the kidnapping.

And then, as is usual with Destiny, a few unrelated things happened all at once. First, J took geography as his elective. See how that should be nothing? Electives rarely mean much in high school. In geography class, J had to do a presentation on a country he had never been to - easy enough, we had never left the country. Randomly, J chose Liberia. I'll say more in a second. Second, J met a friend, Nick, in physical education class.

You know about Liberia - geography is a required class in Homeland - but allow me to give a brief recap for the sake of continuity. In the process of preparing his presentation, J learned that a country had been founded by free, formerly enslaved Black Americans. This notion alone blew J's mind. Now of course, Liberia has not experienced freedom from the reach of the U.S. But the idea, mind you, of leaving the oppressor behind and creating a home of one's own transformed J - he was forever changed by that idea and has never looked back.

Let us pause here to acknowledge the truth before we proceed. Now, Child, you and I both know better. We know that Liberia was the dream of those who hated Black Americans. That that hate ran so deep, they preferred to spend their money on shipping people to a continent they did not know to colonize an area that did not belong to them rather than see those Black Americans have all the rights of full-fledged citizens. We know that Liberia is yet another sin that America will have to atone for. We know that J's perspective - his ability to gain such a lesson from Liberia had little to do with the country itself and everything to do with what J was ready to learn at that time. We will forgive

and honor the optimism of a child. Back to our story.

At the same time that J and I were flippantly joking about being kidnapped (we were, but one must survive one's trauma somehow), so was Nick. Nick, born in South Korea, was sold to - adopted by - a white American couple from a small town in Texas. The couple was extremely religious, and at the time, it was very en vogue for white Christians who could not birth their own children to go to another country and buy - adopt - a child. They considered it long-term evangelism. Perhaps, one day, the child would grow up and take the Christ they learned in their white American homes back to a land they were removed from typically too young to have any memory of. And that is how the two found each other - slightly different joke, same punchline. And that is also an idea that changed J forever - the amount of ways that governments allow people to buy and sell children. That the only person the government seems unwilling to lend support to - monetary or otherwise - in the process of raising a child, is the child's biological parent.

I think if J were anyone else, each of those things would have stayed separate, insignificant happenstances. But J is and, even then, was J. So they all spoke to and influenced each other.

But I almost left out a third piece. Octavia. *Parable of the Sower* was the book J last received from Andrea before we were kidnapped. All I knew at the time was that my brother was obsessed with some sci-fi book about the shitty quality of the world. Why would anyone be interested in that while their life is shitty? Needless to say, I was not interested in reading the book for myself and would tune J out when he would start to talk about it. But J was persistent - he has rescued me from my ignorance on more than one account. One day, J started reading the book OUT LOUD. Ridiculous. I conceded - I read the book for myself. Not my cup of tea. I am more partial to accurate accounts of history and the occasional

romance novel. But I could see the appeal. Once I read it, I at least had context for J's love for the book. I thought the book itself was a positive obsession for J. I could have never dreamed that it would be something like the ink in J's pen - his instruction manual and roadmap.

J had me and Nick and *Parable of the Sower*.

And so we ran away. Not literally. And not right then. We waited and did it in a way so that we would not be punished. We each graduated and got into college (J planned that too - he and Nick got into the same engineering program and I got a scholarship to swim at the school down the street from theirs). We lived together. And we started planning. And we started modeling what we would later bring forth.

J was our philosopher - our social engineer, our writer. The question that grew out of that time and was always close to J's lips was: What does it take to raise a child? More accurately: what does a human need in order to become?

The first answer that came was stability. J took this piece from Andrea. Our lives were stable. We knew where to be and what time to be there, where to get what. We understood the parameters of our home. We did not worry about what we would eat, where it would come

**WHAT DOES IT TAKE  
TO RAISE A CHILD?  
MORE ACCURATELY:  
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from. Worries about one's day to day life cloud the mind and make it nearly impossible to think, plan, dream about anything else.

The second answer was family. J was hellbent on redefining this word. Family would no longer mean "father, mother, children, pets contained in a home." Family would mean "a collection of people committed to the rearing of each other." A few things are captured in this definition: to be part of a family is to be part of a living whole. The family requires each member - everyone is loving and growing and learning from and of and for each other. A family can and must choose each other. Entirely. Family is not predicated or determined by blood. And even where blood connects the family members, each member must choose to be part of the family and the family itself is for the greater good. Together, the members get to decide what that greater good is, and the family shapes it, wills it to being.

The third answer was freedom. In order for a person to become, they must have the ability to dream of who they are. If one is told they must be something, they may become that, but that person has not created their life in freedom. They may have created a good life, but a good life dictated by another is not a free one. So, one needs room to dream. And play. And make mistakes. And think they know who they want to become and change their mind. Structure (stability) and freedom go together. Like the sweetness of play once all the chores are done. Like the way color is all you can see after an artist has painstakingly mapped out the painting. Oh, humans are so creative once their basic needs are met.

Do these sound familiar yet? Yes, Young One, the Principles were born long before Homeland was. Where Octavia Butler and *Parable of the*

Sower had Earth Seed, J had the Principles.

Nick was our architect - our structural engineer. He saw what a thing should be long before it existed. Saw what the thing would need in order to become. Nick saw our current situation, saw what we could become, and determined that we would need to be rich. And then Nick got us jobs. For me, a job that paid well enough, matched my temperament, and would not interfere with my swim meets or practice obligations. I worked security. First for the school, then for different local clubs and concert venues. IT work for J - quiet, easy questions with easy answers, and the work allowed him to

continue his researching and writing. Nick kept things cordial with his kidnappers. They were well-connected to wealth, like gas money. Nick took turns interning at various large companies. Eventually, Nick interned at a place where the manager did not know how Nick got the internship. The manager made snide remarks about Nick's race (the remarks were boring and uneducated - like referring to Nick as

the wrong ethnic group). Nick started recording the manager and by the end of the internship, approached HR with his experience. The company was typical - more concerned about being called "racist" publicly than the emotional and physical safety of their employees. Nick mentioned posting about his experience and the company offered to "pay his tuition." That check became the seed money for Homeland.

Ahh, and what about me? Well, I am beautiful to the eye and charming to the mind. There was no need to laugh that hard, Young One. Especially since I am not exaggerating. Those two brilliant people made me the face and voice. Of what

## SO, ONE NEEDS ROOM TO DREAM. AND PLAY. AND MAKE MISTAKES.



you ask? I believe at last, I have given us enough ingredients to discuss what we made.

Four years after we graduated from college, we took Nick's hush money and we purchased twelve acres of land. Houston was home. It never stopped being home. And just 40 minutes away, there was rural land. We took what we had been dreaming up over the years and we started building. We did not make three different stand-alone homes for each of us. Instead we planned blocks. On each block, there would be enough room for a family or group of families to determine how they want to be structured. Would they choose apartment-style homes? One large home with everyone under the same roof? Several homes, cul-de-sac style? We wanted each block to determine what it would be.

For our experiment to work, Homeland would have to be self-sufficient - or as self-sufficient as possible in a modern, global world. We got animals and planted crops - taught ourselves how to farm. We took the kinds of jobs that allowed us to work from home so that we could continue to build while we continued to earn. Sound familiar? We had to convince J that naming our experiment "Acorn" was one step too far - we told him it would put too much pressure on us to get it "right." And after we did all of that, we incorporated - gave our home the protections of a business. We found that the American government is gentler with businesses than with families. We disguised Homeland as a mixed-structure development project. Houston was perfect for this - Houstonians are accustomed to seeing things next to each other that have no business being next to each other.

But then, we also tried to learn from some of the mistakes discussed in *Parable*. Instead of excluding ourselves from the powers-that-be (which would have been all of our preference), we tried to work beside them. We proposed Homeland as a "last chance" before CPS "intervention" (kidnapping). The government ate it up. They love to have a list of resources

so that when they pilfer the life and well-being of their citizens, they can say that the person "had so many resources, so many chances" to prevent the government action.

We advertised Homeland as affordable housing. Invited families we met through local community events and friendly nonprofits to apply. Other families (a few) applied using the list of resources provided by CPS. As a part of the application, we asked the applicants corny questions that should not have been on government-approved documents:

- If you did not have to worry about money, what job would you do?
- What is one topic that you could talk about every day and never get bored of?
- Circle the response that most speaks to you: Children are (1) an investment in the future, (2) a reflection of oneself (including one's choices), or (3) people with needs and creativity.

The first and second questions were about whether the applicant could help fill a need in Homeland. But people are multi-faceted and cannot possibly know which of their traits may contribute to a whole. So neither of these questions typically excluded a person from an interview. However, the third question was a deal-breaker: we only interviewed people who circled answer 3.

And this is the way we built Homeland. One nearly-stolen family at a time.

Eventually, we had enough teachers to not just home school the children of Homeland, but to establish a school. Soon, we were able to expand the school and offer it as an alternative school. And this was how we were able to accomplish Nick's dream - provision of home for those who were already made family-less. Kids who were already kidnapped or otherwise under government control still had to attend school and could consider our school an option. Kids could either come attend the school as usual, or they could apply to live on campus. If students

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chose to live on campus, they got to live in student-only housing. This allowed students to get acclimated to Homeland. As student-members of Homeland, each was assigned a Teacher - someone responsible for the student-member's growth and betterment beyond the classroom. Our hope was that once the students graduated, they would feel comfortable enough and know they were welcome to find a home in one of the blocks and continue on Homeland.

So once finally developed, Homeland was a series of families who had chosen to live together. Homeland was a farm. And a school. And a cafe. And many other lucrative individual and family-owned businesses. But above all, Homeland was a collection of families. Eventually, blocks became several families that decided, in varying degrees, to blend together.

Homeland has Principles. These are the foundations - the "why" behind Homeland's existence. If, at any given time, a resident of Homeland feels that Homeland has strayed from the Principles, an emergency meeting may be called. The members and families of Homeland have Guides. These are suggestions. No one can be told what to do in Homeland - either the members and families are content with the Principles and what Homeland has decided, or they can leave. This is not a threat. This is Principle Three in action - to be welcome in love means to have the freedom to go. But suggestions can be made. So, there are Guides for all members of Homeland, and each block may agree on additional Guides. One Guide is that the families meet weekly. Another Guide is to determine the family structure. One of the favorite family structures includes a Chief over the block. The Chief is a respected elder. For our families that have a bit of a harder time breaking the previous mold of "family" and are looking for a "father-figure" or a disciplinarian, we suggest they have a Chief. The Chief does not discipline. The Chief is not a father. The Chief listens. And counsels.

Eventually, Homeland grew a bit too large. And

the government decided that our mission was political. I don't disagree - existence is political, way-of-being is political. And we began to get attention that was not to the benefit of our families. So we began to look abroad. If J could have his way and we had a bit more money, perhaps he would have asked us to look to the stars. We petitioned over twenty countries. In the end, Mexico granted us asylum (a benefit and irony of the friendly but often rift relationship between the US and Mexico). But one of the many conditions was that any Americans who became part of Homeland had to retain their American citizenship. As it turns out, America prefers to determine not just who comes into its borders, but also who leaves. Who knew freedom could be so terribly difficult to find?

But I believe we have come terribly close to finding it. We are Homeland. We have ourselves and we have each other.

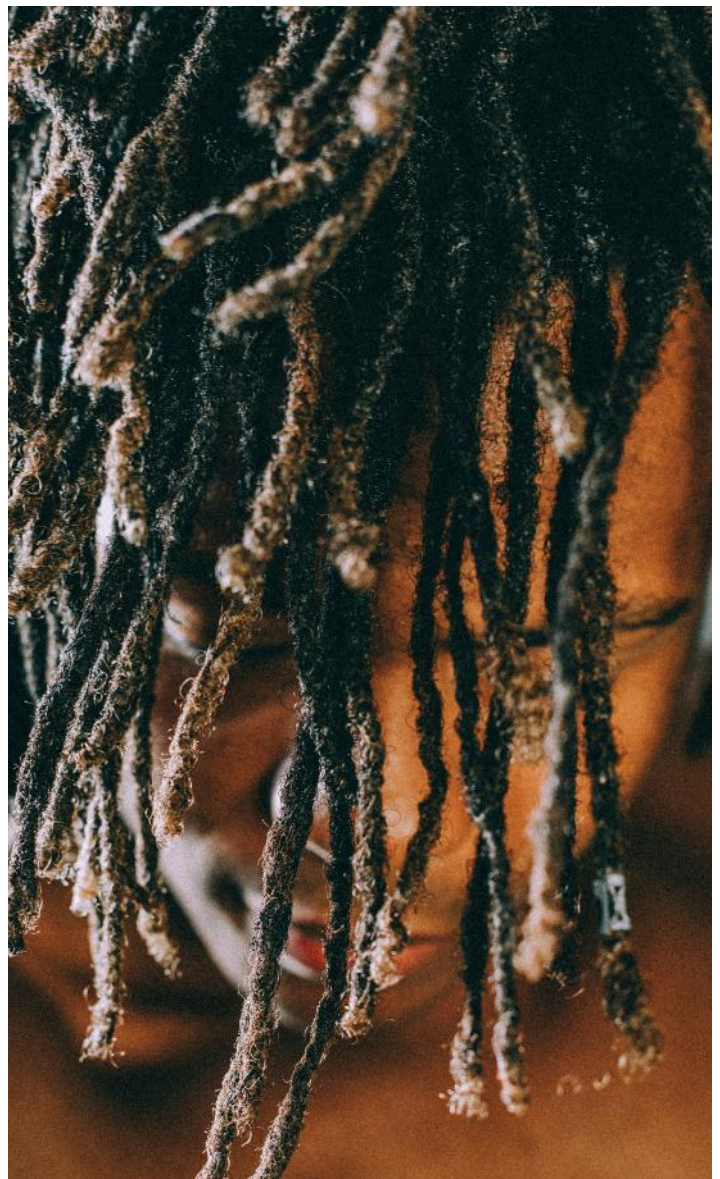
Oh, but I nearly forgot. We got Andrea back. Remember when I said we saw her on tv? By that time, Homeland was already in its early days. And we had already built a home, a room in each of our homes with Andrea in mind. So we reached out. And she met with us. And we told her who we were. And we cried. And you know her as Granny A. The term "Chief" was a bit funky for her. But she liked the freedom of renaming herself. Her art practices continue. So does her advocacy against foster care and all types of legalized kidnapping.

While Nick never met his birth parents, he discovered three half-siblings. Two think of Homeland as a cult. The other is here - Aunt Jan.

Young One, here is what I want you to understand. People are not shaped in a vacuum - or at least, they should not have to be. To have family is to shape and be shaped. It is to love and be loved. And what Homeland knows, what we are built on, is that there is not one single way to do family. Where there is a group of people determined to care for each other and choose each others' good, there can be

family. So you know, Young One, that family is not comprised of a certain number of genders, a certain number of adults or children. Humanity is endlessly creative. Where there are two or more, there can be family. And they can determine how to do it.

Have I said enough? Good I grow tired of the sound of my own voice. Do let me know how your project goes, Young One. I look forward to seeing your thoughts on what we've built. But more than that, I look forward to how you and your generation will shape it. Homeland is yours.



PRIZE WINNER

# JACQUELINE PEOPLES

## *Baby Che'*

Jacqueline Peoples is a Rutgers Newark 2022 English graduate with an MFA in Creative Writing from the Writer's Foundry at St. Joseph's University in Brooklyn, NY. After experiencing the horrors of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, Jacqueline has spent years recovering and making remarkable strides to move forward in life through the written word.

Since ASFA was enacted, more than one million children have had all legal ties permanently severed from their parents. The law compels states to move toward the termination of parental rights, also known as the family death penalty, after a child has been held in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months and gives financial incentives to states when they increase adoptions.

If ASFA is a curse, storytelling may be an antidote. *Baby Che'* is an uplifting tale of a community's response to the system's abduction of a child. The protagonist Shamika educates and organizes her neighbors to save the lives of Black children and their families. *Baby Che'* makes organizing tangible, demonstrating how friends with a humble clipboard can start a revolution.

Jacqueline wasn't sure the story of *Baby Che'* would ever be submitted or even written. Like her protagonist, Jacqueline called upon the community she found in her graduate creative writing course, asking her professor to bring the exercise of dreaming a future without family

policing to their classroom. "I had to open my mouth and say something to my professor because when the prompt came out last summer, I knew I wanted to write."

"I was impacted by the system, so I'm close to the narrative. I used to pray that DYFS, now it's called CPS, be dismantled because it's egregious. It was in my prayer life where I started praying that they eliminate it, get rid of it, cancel it because it doesn't work."

While she loves to write fiction and poetry, she is currently working on a thesis for her *Memoir of Child Abuse and Neglect* which involves reviewing years of material. "I'm not going to say I'm totally enjoying writing the thesis because there are moments when I'm in my private space and it hurts, you know? But I'm getting through it."

Jaqueline's story of *Baby Che'* illuminates how each person we bring into the movement is a building block towards the future we want to see. "I just thank God that upEND is focusing on the trauma suffered by those affected because for so many years it's just been silent. It's like you're in a prison all by yourself. It's a death sentence that never goes away. You live with the painful separation. So, I'm hoping that the movement grows and those impacted will come together and begin to say something about the harm family policing has caused their family."

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## *Baby Che'* by Jacqueline Peoples

Shamika Ellis was sitting in a chair next to her bed, staring out the window at falling yellow leaves. It was that time of year. The leaves were dry and crisp beneath your feet. The breeze cooed gently inside the ajar window. Shamika turned her head and saw a childhood picture of her friend Tangie on top of her dresser drawer. Someone had called Child Protective Services, and they had removed her daughter. Tangie never recovered. So many families had been ravaged and devastated by the political systems of oppression. She had heard and read that children were removed from their homes for little reason. Drug abuse, no housing, lights, or food were the common excuses the state and local government used to separate and place children in foster care and then up for adoption.

Rumor had it Tangie didn't have food. Then there were other stories. Stories she didn't want to hear. She wasn't asking; it was like birds chirping in her ear. The news came without asking; it was obvious. Baby Che' had gone missing a year earlier, after Child Protective Services knocked on Renee Chambers door. Shamika remembered seeing Renee pushing the plump little guy in his stroller with the biggest smile one summer day. Once, she saw his mother buying him an ice cream cone from an old Good Humor truck. The solemn news hit her neighborhood and terror gripped hearts. Shamika began to read the New York Times to see if there were reports, but cases were silent death sentences in judicial circles. The only news that came was from neighbors.

Shamika stood up, stretched her hands and arms towards the ceiling, dropped them in disgust to her side, and shook her head. She had come out of a momentary trance of wondering. She turned slightly toward the door and strolled downstairs to the refrigerator for a cool drink.

*We have to do something*, she muttered to herself. As she opened the refrigerator door, a magnet fell at her feet. She bent to pick it up then closed the door halfway and placed the magnet back on. She was deep in thought. The child welfare system sucked the life out of black families. *How long are we going to keep allowing the government to harm our families?* Shamika opened the refrigerator door wide and reached for her favorite Minute Maid strawberry kiwi drink carton. Then, opening the cabinet for a glass, she spoke: "We have to do something," -she belted out. "Baby Che' is a handsome little butterball. "My God," she moaned, "we can't stand by and allow this," Shamika walked out of the kitchen towards the front door and went outside.

A light zephyr massaged Shamika's face as she turned her head. To her right, she saw Mrs. Bell Morgan and May Saunders talking on the next porch. She stepped off the porch and walked towards her neighbors, holding her glass. The weather was kind, with the temperature around 68 degrees. The sun peeked from around the clouds, playing Hide-Go-Seek.

Mrs. Bell looked up, and May Saunders's eyes followed in unison while the light, brisk wind kissed their puzzling faces. Bell Morgan was a pudgy, dark-skinned black woman with long, thick, silky salt and pepper hair she kept in a bun. Her glasses appeared to be falling from her face most of the time since her nose was wide and flat. Mrs. Saunders was tall and skinny, and she had almond skin. Her eyes were hazel, and they glowed in the sun. She wore her short, light brown wig cropped which resembled a hedgehog mushroom, but she had handsome features.

A passing car rolled slowly down the street, blasting an unknown rapper's music that faded into the distance. Ms. Williams pushed her crying baby along the sidewalk in a stroller, while she hollered behind for the oldest girl to keep up. Across the street, the boys played touch football. The season had just begun.

# THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM SUCKED THE LIFE OUT OF BLACK FAMILIES. HOW LONG ARE WE GOING TO KEEP ALLOWING THE GOVERNMENT TO HARM OUR FAMILIES?

Some young girls were gathered on a stoop talking with a baby in a nearby stroller.

"Hi, Mrs. Bell and Mrs. May," said Shamika politely.

"Hello, we were just talking about that beautiful curly headed baby boy named Che'. Cute little fella! Do you remember him?" said Bell Morgan.

"Yes, I do, " said Shamika. Gossip was spreading about baby Che's mother. She'd been walking around without her hair combed ever

since she lost her child.

"I believe he's three," said Shamika.

"Do you remember Mrs. Lucy Chambers? " said Bell Morgan.

"Who?" said May Saunders.

"Lucy Chambers," Bell said "Down the street in the second block?"

May's eyes began to roll upward. She hadn't seen Lucy Chambers in years.

"Yes, yes, yes I do. Lucy passed away a while ago," said May.

Sheila Dorsey waved to everyone as she hurried up the block into her house two doors from Shamika's. She was always rushing. You couldn't slow her down, but age was catching up. "Do you remember her daughter Renee? She only had one child, you know," said Bell.

"Yes, I do remember her daughter. She was quiet," said May.

"Oh, that child don't comb her hair," said Bell.

A football sailed from across the street, landed at Mrs. Bell's feet and hit her knees. She screamed while May and Shamika ducked.

"Those dam boys need to take that ball up the street and play in the schoolyard. They don't have any manners," said Bell. A young boy, about eleven, ran across the street and spoke.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Bell."

Mrs. Bell tossed the ball back with a rebuke. "You boys need to play up the street," she said. "I don't want to be hit again by a football." As her head shook like a leaf.

The boy looked stunned. He swallowed in fear. "Thank you, Mrs. Bell," the boy said and ran

back across the street.

"I got the ball!" said the boy, and the others cheered. Bell sighed.

"Are you alright?" said Shamika and May.

"Yes," she grumbled, face contoured.

"Oh yeah, Bell that's the style now. The only thing we used was the hot comb and perms. Times have changed. Young people wear their hair different. We couldn't wear braids or afros to work. They would look at us crazy when we were young. Afros were worn by the radical people, like Stokely Carmichael. Remember Huey? You know, so what's wrong with that?" said May.

"No, May, that child has lost it; she doesn't wash her clothes. She's unkept, it's a shame," said Bell.

"I mind my business. I have my own problems," said May.

"I remember Lucy; she stayed down the street at 247 South 9th St. Her mother passed away ten years ago, if I'm not mistaken, something like that, but it's a shame. Renee lost her mind. Those people downtown took her baby, Che'. I hope I am saying it right. The names these chillin' carry today are nothing like our chillin' names," said Bell.

"For what?" said May.

"I heard she didn't have food, and I think her lights were out," said Bell.

"What! That's awful. We all have run short in our lifetime, and my lights have been out before. Lord, have mercy! The white man's laws were

never good for black people; they took babies in slavery, and not much has changed in this present day. "We used to take care of our own kids. I don't know exactly when the state started involving themselves in our business. We used to help each other. Remember Bell?" said May.

May's face wriggled and became sullen. The wriggles in her forehead creased like curtains as her head dropped in thought. A car slowed down and honked its horn at the boy playing in the street.

"Get the hell out of the way!" the man yelled.

Shamika stood there listening to Mrs. Bell and May. Shamika looked around as she sipped her drink.

"We have to do something! Mrs. May, you mentioned Huey. And what about Martin? They organized. We have to do something to help our community. They are not taking another baby in this neighborhood," said Shamika.

May lifted her head, and Bell stared in shock. Shamika was concerned and wanted to organize. The last time black people organized was in the 50s and 60s. They looked at her like she was crazy.

"How you gonna organize? They killed every black leader in this country. It ain't never been the same," said Bell.

"I'll think of something. We can't sit or stand by and not do anything. Too many of our men are in prison, and it's damaging our families. Oh well, I got to go. Mrs. Bell and Mrs. May. I'll talk to you later." She turned and looked at Mrs. May and asked, "Hey, Mrs. May, did your

## "THIS COMMUNITY HAS TO ORGANIZE."



husband go fishing this past summer? I wanted you to know those porgies you gave me last summer were good," said Shamika.

"No, he didn't go, he had some transportation problems," said Mrs. May.

"Okay, thanks for telling me. I appreciate what you did. I have to go in and reach out to a friend," said Shamika. "This community has to organize." Shamika turned toward her apartment, holding up her glass to her eyes. It was empty. She had drained it. "See you, Mrs. Bell and Mrs. May, we'll talk again soon."

Shamika returned to the house and went into the kitchen to place her glass in the sink. She pulled out her cell phone from her pocket, scrolled through her contacts Veronica, Camille, no, Mecca, yes! Mecca, she thought. Everyone called Rasheeda Mecca; that was her nickname. She had said that no one calls her Rasheeda but teachers. I am calling my girl Mecca. Mecca knows everyone on this block, and beyond. Those people who work for the state find little reason to take black babies.

Back in Shamika's college days, everyone had an organization. It was time to organize and step up. She dialed Mecca. The phone rang three times before Mecca picked up.

"Hello," said Mecca. She was breathing hard, out of breath. "Hello," said Shamika.

"Girl, I forgot my phone. I left it upstairs," she said, panting.

"I was outside raking leaves; the weather is great today. I needed some exercise. Please don't confuse it with sexercise," said Mecca. She gasped for breath as she giggled at her joke. Shamika laughed.

"Take your time and relax. I need your help," said Shamika.

"For what?"

Mecca's breaths were returning to normal.

"Have you heard how many black babies are in foster care in our community?" said Shamika.

"I heard a little something. It's slim, without men. What's up?" said Mecca.

"We need to organize our community. We can't continue to allow the state to cause harm.

They come up with the wildest laws to sabotage our people. Remember baby Che'? Last year, my friend Tangie from the southward lost her daughter," said Shamika.

"Wait, you are too emotional," said Mecca.

"It's time to be emotional! No one cares about blacks in this country. Our community is dead, everything is dying, and we can't allow black families to wilt on our watch. Now, I understand that poem by Langston Hughes, a Dream Deferred. We are drying up like a raisin," said Shamika.

"Girl, hold up! And slow down. You know you are my girl, but we have to think this through. You know, you're going to have some push back. Black people are something else, but we can try," said Mecca.

"We need to start by manning our block. We could start by knocking on as many doors as possible and talking about being there for one another. We need to keep the government out of women's homes. How about planning on going out on Saturdays to spearhead the idea," said Shamika.

"I don't have plans for next Saturday. You want to meet at 10 am? We need to start now! It's October, and the leaves are falling. Winter is coming, but we will persevere. I am sure we can use social media. Zoom or some platform," said Mecca.

"Great! I'm excited. It won't be easy, but all

things are possible. I remember that as a little girl when my grandma took me to Mt. Olive Baptist church. We needed the faith of God. All we can do is try. Trying never hurt anybody. I'll call you on Friday," said Shamika.

Shamika hung up the phone and walked into the living room. She sat in the chair, where she had her desktop computer and started to research organizing strategies. She thought of the push back Mecca warned her about from some of the neighbors at John J. Philip's housing complex. However, she had no intention of arguing. Shamika was determined to help and not fight fire with fire, but she knew she had to be gentle and sympathetic to get their attention and organize.

The evening was growing dark. She glanced out the window; the sun had descended, and the sky had a line of orange running through it. She had lost track of time immersed in reading about organizing.

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On Friday night rain came down, drumming at Shakima's window. She called Mecca.

Her phone rang twice. She picked up.

"Hi Mecca, how was your week?" said Shamika.

"Good. It was a little hectic early, but I got through it," said Mecca.

"Are we still on for tomorrow at 10 am?"

"Yes, I don't want you to be upset if we run into rudeness. I got your back. We can do this. We are good if you can get through to at least ten people. We need to explain the consequences of how to handle CPS. And how we need to unify and help each other form small groups. First, we have to build up their confidence. Our people are broken in so many ways. We have to explain that," said Mecca.

"I've been praying God will help us. That's one more thing my grandmother taught me. Thanks, Mecca, you are special. Sweet sleep and see you in the morning! Oh we can meet at my apartment then leave from here," said Shamika.

"No problem, see you in the morning," said Mecca.

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Sunshine lit up the morning sky. Shamika rose with excitement in her heart. She showered went into her closet and pulled out a pair of jeans and an orange blouse to accent the fall foliage. She grabbed her Nikes, went downstairs and made a cup of coffee. The doorbell rang, and Shamika hurried to the door and opened it.

It was Mecca wearing her denim jeans, white button-down tunic shirt, and jean jacket.

She had the cutest red sneakers and was ready to go. Shamika hugged her.

"Hey, Shamika, we should start down the street and work our way back up the block. Let's see how many fish we can catch today. And keep that smile. Smiles matter in the hood girl you know," said Mecca.

"Okay, let's start at the John J. Philips housing project," said Shamika as they exited her place.

"On our way there, we'll still talk to people," said Mecca as they headed down the street.

"Let's knock on this door; we have walked a block; let's begin here," said Shamika.

Shamika looked up at the dilapidated, dull-greenish-gray house where the porch steps leaned to the side. The shade was tattered and ripped to the left like octopus' tentacles hanging in strings at the window. A can of Pepsi sat on the windowsill like a flower vase. Shamika and Mecca approached the steps and went up,

and Shamika gently knocked on the old grayish door.

"Girl, knock a little harder; they may be asleep," said Mecca.

Shamika tapped on the door a little harder, and a woman appeared, peeking through the threadbare shade, and then opened the door.

"Good morning. My name is Shamika Ellis, and this is Rasheeda Murchison. We are knocking on doors this morning because we are organizing women and men if they choose to protect their families from CPS," said Shamika.

"What? Who?" said the woman. Sleep was in her eyes. She appeared to have a hangover. "CPS, Child Protective Services," said Mecca.

"Are you serious," said the woman. You have to be kidding. You woke me the hell up behind those dam people. Bye," said the woman, and she slammed her door.

Shamika and Mecca looked at each other.

"Girl, come on, we got this," said Mecca. She waved her hand at the door.

Mecca started singing Mary Mary's *Can't Give Up Now*. The music rolled off her tongue effortlessly.

"Mecca, you know how to roll a stone another way quick, fast and in a hurry," said Shamika.

"Let's knock on the door over here," said Mecca.

Shamika looked over at the two-story house where the curtains hung neatly in the window. The door had a welcome mat. The railing to the steps was shaky, with peeling paint chips separating itself from the old white finish. Mecca and Shamika held on and ascended the steps with delight.



The door opened abruptly. A young woman appeared wearing a scarf wrapped around her head and polka-dot flannel pajamas.

"Good morning; my name is Shamika Ellis, and this is Rasheeda Murchison. We are out this morning, organizing women," said Shamika.

"For what?" the young lady said.

The baby was starting to cry. Mommy, Shamika, and Mecca smiled.

"Child Protective Services; CPS has been abducting black babies for years and destroying families in black communities. We have to stop allowing CPS from taking our babies," said Shamika.

"I know a girl around the corner at John J. Philips housing projects who lost her two kids a year ago," said the young woman.

Her three-year-old daughter meandered to the door, hugged her mother's leg, looked up at Shamika and Mecca, and cried, Mommy, lifting her toy.

"What's your name?" said Mecca.

"Carla Willis, I'm scared." She picked up her baby. Shamika and Mecca smiled.

"Are you interested? We'll be coming out on Saturdays until we select the day of the week for community meetings," said Mecca.

"Once we come together, we can use social media to help take the burden off attending in person. Can we have your contact number? I live up the block, and Mecca lives in the northward," said Shamika.

"We have to form a community alliance; everyone will have a part to play," said Mecca. "Can I get your cell phone number?" said Shamika.

"Sure. I have to go; the baby has to eat. Please call. We need to get together and do something. I'm worried," said Carla.

"We will be in touch and look for a text in about a week. My phone number begins with 862," said Shamika.

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"Mecca, we need to walk around the corner to Broom St. to John J. housing and finish our day there. Most of the families are concentrated in small government spaces," said Shamika.

"Everything is concentrated in a red-line district. There is no discrimination in poor areas. It's inclusionary," said Mecca.

"Girl, you are something else," Shamika laughed. "But it's true."

Mecca and Shamika approached John J. and

knocked on the first door. The building was fenced in. Shamika had to reach through the gaped fence to release the latch on the opposite side. All of the fence levers were inside the gate. Odd she thought.

"Who made this crap? The person who designed this mess must be on drugs. It makes no sense. Why would you lock people in?" said Mecca.

"The government, isn't helping these people," said Shamika.

Shamika and Mecca approached the door and rang the bell, but it didn't work. She knocked a couple of times and then hit it again. A young man opened.

"Yeah, wassup?" said the young man.

"My name is Shamika Ellis, and this is Rasheeda Murchison. We are here to organize families against CPS," said Shamika.

"Who?" he asked.

"Child Protective Services," said Mecca.

"Ah. Hey, don't I know you? I know I saw you before," said the young man. "Nah we don't need help."

"Are there any women home?" said Mecca.

"Yeah," said the young man. "Hassie." He called. His sister ran to the door. "What," her eyes bulged in surprise.

"We are organizing mothers against CPS, Child Protective Services. Do you have children or friends in this complex who would be interested? The state is taking our children," said Shamika.

The young man stared at Mecca and Shamika, turned around, walked back into the living room, picked up a game controller, and sat in front of the TV.

"Excuse my brother. Yes, I'm having problems with CPS. I'm trying to comply with everything. They show up any time they want. They're trying to say I don't buy food for my son and that I get high," said the young woman.

"What's your name?" said Mecca.

"Hasana Jenkins," said Hasana. And not Hassie." She said, smirking at her brother.

"Would you be interested in meeting with Shamika and I? We're organizing. We want to help young women fight back by keeping the state out of your house. We have to help each other out, that's why we're here. Do you have friends that have children? It doesn't matter if they don't; we are organizing to fight back," said Mecca.

"I feed my son, and I buy food. I can reach out to some of my friends on Facebook and TikTok media. Some have kids. Where are you meeting?" said Hasana.

"We are taking phone numbers today. Shamika doesn't live far from here, and I live in the northward on Leslie St. Could we have your phone number? Shamika will be sending out a text in about a week. You should still see us in the community on Saturday for a few weeks," said Mecca.

"Could you give me your number? I'll be in touch with you. Please get in touch with your friends. We will be scheduling a meeting," said Shamika.

"Okay, are you serious?" said Hasana.

"Yes, we are. We care. Our community is hurting; that's why we're here," said Mecca.

"Let me give you my cell phone number," said Hasana.

"Don't worry, we are going to do this together as a community," said Shamika.

"When I send you the text, please forward it to your friends. Where's your little boy, if you don't mind me asking?" said Shamika.

"Oh, I don't mind; he's with my mother," said Hasana.

"Thank you for speaking with us today. Enjoy the rest of your weekend," said Shamika.

Shamika and Mecca continued down the street, but some people weren't home. They obtained five phone numbers on the first block before continuing their journey on the next street of the complex. Mecca decided she would knock on the next set of doors. She walked up and began. There were all kinds of junk decorating the banister rail that was solid gray metal. She looked at Shamika and made a face at the garbage. Mecca stepped up on the concrete steps and knocked on the door. She knocked thrice, and a woman in old, raggedy clothes answered the door.

"Good afternoon. We are organizing today in the community against CPS."

"Who?" said the woman.

"Child Protective Services," said Mecca.

Shamika smiled. "Child Collective Service," said the woman.

"We want to help women keep CPS out of their homes. They are taking people's children for little reason, no food or lights, stuff like that," said Mecca.

"Lawd, have mercy! Pepa's used to help one another. I don't know," said the woman. "Do you have children?" said Shamika.

"Yes, day don't have chillin. I hope your organ go well. Have a nice day; the sun is shining mighty big," said the woman, smiling.

Shamika and Mecca looked at each other and

chuckled. Then walked up to the next door, and Mecca knocked. A woman who appeared to be about seventy-five with silver gray hair opened her door.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"Good afternoon. Can we speak to you today? We are organizing women how to keep Child Protective Services out of their homes," said Mecca.

"CPS?" said the woman. "Yes," said Shamika.

"Those people downtown are no good! It's modern-day slavery. They separated families in slavery. These young people don't have a clue as to what the white man is doing, and blacks are helping them out. It's awful: They sent drugs to neighborhoods, and it has destroyed families. In 1997, Clinton signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act. Safe, huh," said the woman.

"May we ask what your name is?" said Mecca, beaming.

"Pearl Richardson. Somebody needs to do something. The civil rights era changed some things, but only a little. I'm tired of young men saying, "I'm just coming home." It's sad what's happening today. Every time you turn around, they are making new laws to hurt black people," said Mrs. Richardson.

"Would you like to help in any way?" said Shamika.

"I don't mind somebody has to help these young people. They have no idea what is going on. The church used to get involved. Used too, that is. They only want money. That's a business too. Well, you can't run anything without money. I suppose. They stopped helping people long ago. The only thing they do is form a line and pass out old food. It's a shame. Take my number and let me know when you are having your meeting. My grandkids had to show me how to use the iPhone. Everyone is on Facebook and

FaceTime. That's how I keep in touch with my family," said Pearl Richardson.

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Richardson. I will take your number. We have to go now. We have to speak to more families," said Shamika.

"Yes, please keep in touch and have a blessed day. It's nice outside," said Mrs. Richardson.

Mecca knocked on the next door, and a woman whose face twisted angrily, and eyebrows circled in curtly answered the door.

"What do you want? I am not interested in anything you are selling. I am tired of Optimum and especially Verizon knocking on my door, disturbing me on Saturday mornings. They never walk around Livingston or Short Hills. I am not interested in any cable or whatever the hell you are selling. It's Saturday, and I have things to do. Leave me alone!" the woman said abruptly and closed her door.

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Shamika and Mecca continued through the complex with success. They collected signatures from fifteen young women who were glad someone was helping. CPS had affected the lives of numerous families. They had harmed friends, relatives, or people they knew. The wind of change washed over the community, and the weather heightened the climactic moment.

Shamika sent the texts as promised and decided to meet on Zoom. At the same time, she had Mrs. Richardson reserve the recreation room for meetings. It was a colossal event, a chance she took in hopes that people would attend their first meeting. One by one, people signed in like multi-colored Christmas tree light bulbs. Shamika and Mecca's faces glowed like stars in the night.

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"Good evening, ladies, and we have two men

online with us tonight. Wonderful!

Tonight, Mecca and I are going to begin explaining how CPS is terrorizing our community. CPS is using a form of brutality to separate families, and we are going to be responsible for one another. We are our brother's keeper. Who is being harmed here? Our families, directly or indirectly? Children, women, and men of all ages. We are talking about serious issues affecting our families. No one wants to lose their children to a system that is overtly racist and oppressive. What we discuss in our meetings is private. The information you will give one another is between you and your neighbor, who we will pair you with if you need help. Do not be embarrassed, please let me explain. The courts are using frivolous excuses to commodify the state. Caseworkers and attorneys claim parents are abusing their children and committing a crime if they do not have food, light, or shelter. We have to stop the genocide. We do care about the next generation.

What we are trying to do is adopt what our grandparents did before the state started to come into our homes and destroy families. That said, we will pair people off and learn how to contact each other twice a month to see how people are doing. It's up to us, or the cycle will continue. I am doing this because a friend of mine lost her child. Every time I look at her picture, tears form in my eyes. I am tired of people in high places saying we don't have pain. It's not true; we feel pain. That's why people use drugs, drink, eat unhealthy food, and have all kinds of unhealthy habits to comfort their problems. Let's try people. Love moves people. Passion drives people, but we will remain in our misery by doing nothing at all. Mecca, is there anything you want to share?" said Shamika.

"No, she said. You said almost everything on the agenda this evening. However, I will pair families together, and Shamika and I will have another meeting in about two weeks. Shamika and I

hope this work for all of you, and we would like to thank you for signing on this evening. Please let us know by text or email if you have any comments or suggestions. Understand we are in the infancy of a new beginning to something that is great and will save families. Another request is we are forming a respectful community alliance. Thank you again, and we appreciate your time and attention. Have a fantastic night, and be on the lookout for our texts," said Rasheeda.

**“UNDERSTAND  
WE ARE IN THE  
INFANCY OF A  
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FAMILIES.”**

PRIZE WINNER

# AMAKA OKORO

## *Isla's Law*

Amaka Okoro is a data analyst by day and an illustrator and writer by night, and one day, she hopes to create characters full-time.

Although Amaka's childhood dream was to travel the world as an artist, she took some time off of creating to finish her degree and support herself financially. For Amaka, the journey back to her art was a spiritual one. "Last year, during my walk with getting closer to God, he just gave me the ability to draw again."

When Amaka was searching for a place to make her mark, she found the *Dream, Create, Liberate* call for submissions and felt compelled by the prompt. She credits the *American Idol* finalist Syesha Mercado for bringing her awareness to the harms of family policing. In 2021, Mercado and her husband brought their 13-month-old to the hospital with concerns about the baby's transition from breastmilk to other fluids, only for police to escort the parents out and forcibly remove their child from them. Six months later, police surrounded the couple's car and also took Mercado's 10-day-old infant, and the video gained over 3.5 million views on Instagram.

This all too common occurrence connected what Amaka had only observed in pieces before. She had heard her peers talk about their experiences in the system when she was growing up, "then

seeing that later on in life, I'm like, oh, this is full circle now. So this is what the system does."

As a first generation Nigerian-American author, Amaka weaves in details from the African diaspora to build a world where it would be unthinkable to forcibly remove a child from their home. *Isla's Law* is a graphic short story about a Zimbabwean woman named Aneni whose trauma with the family policing system reverberates into her future. "I also wanted to have a bit of African influence in my story. I was looking into Afrofuturism, so the main characters are from Zimbabwe, and Chuma specializes in Ankara flower designs that are all across the city."

In her rendering of a future without family policing, Amaka feels that it's important to remember the horrors of the past so that we do not repeat them in the future. *Isla's Law* envisions the stories we will tell future generations about how far we've come and considers what we might have to lose if we don't fight for liberation in the present.

Amaka wants to leave readers and fellow artists with this mediation. "If you're consistent, disciplined, and you have a little hope each day, it adds up in the long run."



**"IF YOU'RE  
CONSISTENT,  
DISCIPLINED,  
AND YOU HAVE  
A LITTLE HOPE  
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LONG RUN."**



IT WAS THE DAY OF MY FIRST WEDDING...

I WAS SO HAPPY, YET SO AFRAID AT THE SAME TIME. MY DRESS WHICH WAS TAILORED EXACTLY TO MY SIZE SUDDENLY FELT TOO TIGHT. EVEN WITH THE SMALL TURNOUT OF MY PARENTS AND A HANDFUL OF FRIENDS, I FELT TOO MANY EYES STARING AT ME. I WAS SO FIXATED ON THE SMALL DETAILS AROUND ME THAT EVERYTHING BEFORE OUR I DO'S WAS A BLUR, BUT I CAN STILL RECALL THE PASTOR'S VOICE AS CLEAR AS DAY SPEAKING TO MY SOON TO BE HUSBAND.

"CHUMA! PLEASE SAY YOUR VOW TO ANENI!"

"ANENI, NO WORDS CAN EVER DESCRIBE HOW I FEEL ABOUT YOU, BUT TODAY IS THE DAY THAT I TRY MY BEST."

HE STARTED CHOKING UP AS HE RECALLED OUR FIRST DAY MEETING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL; HE TOLD HIS INFAMOUS STORY ABOUT MAKING AN F ON ISLA'S LAW EVEN WITH ASKING THE TEACHER FOR HELP ON EVERY QUESTION. EVERYONE BURST INTO A FIT OF LAUGHTER, BUT I DIDN'T LAUGH, I WAS TOO CAUGHT UP IN MY THOUGHTS TO NOTICE WHAT WAS GOING ON AROUND ME. THE LAUGHTER SLOWLY FADED INTO SILENCE AND I WAS SUDDENLY BY MYSELF AT THE ALTAR. BEING ALONE FELT ODDLY FAMILIAR, AS IF I WAS RETURNING TO A PLACE I ONCE VISITED BEFORE. MY MIND CONTINUED TO WANDER AND EXPLORE THE FAMILIARITY OF BEING ALONE UNTIL THE PASTOR LOUDLY CLEARED HIS THROAT.

"**AHEM**...ANENI, PLEASE SAY YOUR VOW TO CHUMA!"

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND LOOKED AT THE MAN IN FRONT OF ME. HIS WIDE GAPPED TOOTH SMILE EASED MY MIND AND I WAS ALMOST BLINDED BY HIS SHINY CHOCOLATE SKIN, FRESHLY LOTIONED WITH SHEA BUTTER. OR IT MIGHT HAVE ALSO BEEN THE REFLECTION OF LIGHT OFF OF HIS BALD HEAD I THOUGHT.

"CHUMA...EVERYDAY YOU PROVE THAT IT'S POSSIBLE FOR ME TO FALL DEEPER IN LOVE WITH YOU! I-I CAN'T I-IMAGINE..." I STARTED STUMBLING OVER MY WORDS AS MY MIND WAS FIGHTING OVER RECITING MY VOW AND BRINGING UP THAT FAMILIAR FEELING OF NOT BEING SURROUNDED BY THE PEOPLE I LOVE. I CONTINUED TO STRUGGLE WITH MY VOW UNTIL CHUMA DREW OUT THE ONLY WORDS THAT MATTERED.



THE PASTOR PROCEEDED TO ASK US OUR I DO'S AFTER I WAS DONE WITH MY VOW.

"CHUMA, DO YOU TAKE ANENI AS YOUR  
LAWFULLY WEDDED WIFE?"

"I DO." A SINGLE TEAR FELL FROM HIS  
RIGHT EYE AS HE SAID HIS ANSWER WITH  
SUCH CONFIDENCE. HOW I WISH I WAS  
AS CONFIDENT AS HE WAS, HOW I WISH  
MY PARANOIA WOULD HAVE DISAPPEARED  
IN THAT MOMENT.

"ANENI! DO YOU TAKE CHUMA AS YOUR  
LAWFULLY WEDDED HUSBAND?"

"I...I..."

I WAS CONFLICTED-CHUMA WAS THE LOVE OF MY LIFE BUT I COULDN'T SHAKE THE FEELING  
THAT I WAS *SUPPOSED* TO BE BY MYSELF...AWAY FROM *EVERYONE*...

BEFORE I KNEW IT I WAS OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH ALONE,  
THE EVENT REPEATING IN MY HEAD OVER AND OVER AGAIN.



3 MONTHS PASSED BEFORE I FINALLY ALLOWED MY PARENTS TO COME AND SEE ME. I LIVED  
IN A HIGHRISE IN THE INNER CITY. THE OUTSIDE OF THE HIGH-RISE WAS DECORATED WITH  
ANKARA PATTERN FLOWERS THAT REMINDED ME OF CHUMA. LUCKILY I DIDN'T SEE THEM AT  
ALL DURING THOSE 3 MONTHS; THE ONLY SCENERY I SAW WAS THE CEILING OF MY BEDROOM  
AS I LAYED IN MY BED ALL DAY EVERYDAY.

MY PARENTS VISITING ME NEVER MADE ME NERVOUS, I WAS ALWAYS EXCITED TO SEE THEM AND COOK A BIG MEAL. I PRIDED MYSELF ON KEEPING MY HOME CLEAN FOR THEM AND MYSELF BECAUSE IT GAVE ME A CLEAR MIND. BUT IF MY HOME WAS A REFLECTION OF MY STATE OF MIND THEN I FEARED SEEING MY PARENTS--**ESPECIALLY** MY MOM. I KNEW SHE WOULD THROW A HUGE FIT SEEING MY LIVING SITUATION AFTER MY 3-MONTH BOUT WITH DEPRESSION.



"LET'S TELL HER ABOUT THAT FIRST." MY DAD SIGHED AS A MEMORY FROM THE PAST CAME TO THE FOREFRONT OF HIS MIND.

**KNOCK  
KNOCK**

**KNOCK  
KNOCK**

I BEGRUDGINGLY MADE MY WAY TOWARD THE FRONT DOOR OF MY APARTMENT AND OPENED IT A CRACK. "HI DAD...HI MOM..." THE BRIGHT HALLWAY LIGHTS CAUSED ME TO SQUINT AT THEIR FACES. MY DAD SPOKE FIRST.

"ANENI...IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU...CAN WE COME IN?" "...SURE..."

I BRACED MYSELF FOR WHAT WAS TO COME AS MY DAD STEPPED INSIDE FIRST, THEN MY MOM. AS SOON AS SHE TURNED ON THE LIGHTS I KNEW IT WAS OVER. SHE STARTED YELLING,

**"THIS PLACE IS DISGUSTING!"**

"ANERUJO! HOW COULD YOU SAY THAT?" MY DAD TURNED AROUND QUICKLY TO FACE MY MOM.

"ANOPA I KNOW YOU'RE THINKING THE SAME THING!" SHE QUICKLY TURNED BACK TO ME, "ANENI! WHAT IS ALL THIS? THIS ISN'T YOU, WHAT IS GOING ON WITH YOU? YOU NEED TO TALK TO US!"

"I-"

"WHY DID YOU CUT EVERYBODY OUT OF YOUR LIFE!"

"I JUST FELT THAT..."

**"WHAT DID YOU FEEL?"**

*"I FELT I NEEDED TO BE ALONE"*

I SCREAMED AT THE TOP OF MY LUNGS.

"BEFORE I SAID MY VOWS, I GOT THIS FEELING...THAT WAS SO FAMILIAR-SO STRONG!"

MY MOM'S FACE LOOKED CONFUSED BUT MY DAD LOOKED AS IF HE UNDERSTOOD ME SOMEHOW? I TRIED TO FURTHER EXPLAIN MY FEELINGS BUT MY MOM'S CONFUSION AND ANGER MIXED WITH MY INABILITY TO EXPLAIN MYSELF CAUSED ME TO FALL TO THE FLOOR AND SOB UNCONTROLLABLY. MY DAD KNEELED IN FRONT OF ME AND PUT HIS HANDS ON MY SHOULDERS.

"ANENI...THERE'S SOMETHING WE HAVE TO TELL YOU, HAD WE KNOWN THIS WAS AFFECTING YOU THIS BADLY WE WOULD'VE TOLD YOU SOONER...A LITTLE AFTER YOU HAD TURNED 2...YOU WERE TAKEN FROM US BY THE GOVERNMENT." "THEY DIDN'T EVEN GIVE US A REASON!" HE HISSED AS HE STARTED TO TIGHTLY GRIP MY SHOULDER, REMEMBERING HOW HE FELT SEEING ME BEING TAKEN AWAY.

MY MOM CAME CLOSE TO ME AND CHIMED IN, "THEY SHOWED UP AFTER A PEDIATRIC VISIT... YOU WERE A LITTLE UNDERWEIGHT AND THE DOCTOR REPORTED US TO CPS- WE DIDN'T SEE YOU FOR 6 MONTHS! WE SPENT ANOTHER 6 MONTHS WITH VERY LITTLE VISITS FIGHTING TO GET YOU BACK..."

MY DAD SPOKE AGAIN, "ONCE WE GOT YOU BACK WE SET OUT TO MAKE SURE THAT THIS WOULD NEVER HAPPEN TO ANOTHER FAMILY EVER AGAIN...THAT LAW, ISLA'S LAW...WAS AFTER OUR COURT CASE AGAINST CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES."

"I-I LEARNED ABOUT ISLA'S LAW IN SCHOOL...BUT THE PEOPLE'S NAMES WERE DIFFE--"

"WE WERE ABLE TO HAVE OUR NAMES REDACTED DURING THE TRIAL, SO THEY WERE CHANGED TO SOMETHING ELSE." MY DAD SAID BEFORE I COULD FINISH MY SENTENCE.

"WH-WHY NOW? WHY IS THIS AFFECTING ME NOW?" MY VOICE STARTED SHAKING AS TEARS CAME DOWN MY FACE. "WHY DIDN'T YOU GET ME HELP AFTER THAT HAPPENED?"

MY DAD PAUSED FOR A SPLIT SECOND BEFORE ANSWERING.

"ANENI YOU WERE 3 YEARS OLD WHEN WE GOT YOU BACK! AFTER EVERYTHING WAS SAID AND DONE, WHAT WITH YOU COMING BACK HOME AND FINISHING THE COURT CASE WE DIDN'T THINK YOU WOULD REMEMBER ANY OF IT!"

MY MOM KNELT DOWN NEXT TO ME AND STARTED HUGGING ME WHILE SAYING,

"ANENI...YOU'RE MEANT TO BE SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE WHO LOVE YOU MORE THAN YOU COULD IMAGINE. I THINK IT'S TIME THAT YOU GOT THE HELP YOU SHOULD HAVE GOTTEN MANY YEARS AGO."

MY DAD STARTED HUGGING ME TOO AND ALL I COULD DO WAS CRY. ALTHOUGH THAT DAY WAS THE MOST MENTALLY DRAINING DAY OF MY LIFE, I WAS GRATEFUL TO MY PARENTS FOR TELLING ME THE TRUTH. I STARTED THERAPY SHORTLY AFTER THAT DAY; DURING MY FIRST SESSION I LEARNED THAT BABIES BEING TAKEN FROM HOMES WAS A LARGE PROBLEM BEFORE I WAS BORN. MY LAW...ISLA'S LAW, WAS PUT IN PLACE AS A CHECKLIST FOR THE CPS TO COMPLETE BEFORE THEY REMOVE A BABY FROM THEIR HOME.

I ALSO REACHED BACK OUT TO CHUMA. I WAS TERRIFIED TO DO SO AS I WAS SURE HE HAD ALREADY MOVED ON FROM ME. HE'S THE CEO OF ONE OF THE BIGGEST COMPANIES THAT SPECIALIZES IN ANKARA FLOWERS THAT ARE ALL OVER THE CITY! RIGHT BEFORE OUR WEDDING HE SIGNED A MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR DEAL THAT WOULD PLANT MORE ANKARA FLOWERS ACROSS THE NATION. I KNOW EVERY GIRL IN THE WORLD WAS ELATED THAT WE DIDN'T GET MARRIED.

BUT CHUMA TRULY IS MY SOULMATE. HE PICKED UP THE PHONE AS SOON AS I DIALED HIS NUMBER. HEARING HIS VOICE AFTER 6 MONTHS OF RADIO SILENCE HAD ME SOBBING ALL OVER THE KITCHEN FLOOR.



"CHUMA I'M SO SORRY!" AT SOME POINT I STARTED CRYING AND TALKING SO HARD I COULDN'T EVEN UNDERSTAND WHAT I WAS SAYING.

"ANENI...I'M JUST GLAD THAT YOU'RE OKAY. HONESTLY, I'M STILL IN LOVE WITH YOU AND I WOULD LOVE TO SIT DOWN SOMEWHERE AND TALK TO YOU..."

"OF COURSE CHUMA, THE LEAST I OWE YOU IS AN EXPLANATION FOR MY BEHAVIOR".

"YOU KNOW, I NEVER ONCE THOUGHT THAT WE WERE BROKEN UP DURING THESE 6 MONTHS..I WAS STILL TELLING EVERYBODY THAT I WAS ENGAGED!"

HIS DEEP VOICE NEVER FAILED TO MAKE ME FEEL BETTER, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN WHAT FELT LIKE A LONG TIME I HAD HOPE.

OUR MEETING WAS FILLED WITH TEARS AND SURPRISINGLY LAUGHTER. CHUMA FORGAVE ME BEFORE I COULD EVEN SAY I'M SORRY AGAIN AND WE LEFT THAT MEETING WITH OUR OFFICIAL WEDDING DATE IN MIND.

THE SECOND WEDDING WAS EVEN BIGGER THAN THE FIRST, AFTER LEARNING OF WHAT HAPPENED TO ME AS A TODDLER; CHUMA SET OUT TO INVITE AS MANY OF MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY AS HE COULD LEGALLY HAVE WITHOUT PASSING THE CHURCH'S MAXIMUM CAPACITY.

THE SAME PASTOR FROM OUR FIRST WEDDING OFFICIATED OUR SECOND WEDDING! I CAN STILL HEAR HIS VOICE ASKING US TO SAY OUR I DO'S.

"CHUMA! DO YOU TAKE ANENI AS YOUR LAWFULLY WEDDED WIFE?"

"I DO" CHUMA BEAMED AS HE REPLIED TO THE PASTOR, BUT HIS EYES NEVER BROKE CONTACT WITH MINE.

"ANENI! DO YOU TAKE CHUMA AS YOUR LAWFULLY WEDDED HUSBAND?"

I LOOKED INTO CHUMA'S BROWN EYES THAT HAD NO WORRIES OR FEARS BEHIND THEM. HOW I WISH I COULD BE LIKE HIM...BUT I KNEW THAT I HAD A LIFETIME TO LEARN.

"I DO!"

# VISUAL



# ART



## ADAM PENDLETON

VISUAL ART JUDGE

Adam Pendleton (b. 1984 in Richmond, VA) is based in Brooklyn, New York. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at notable museums including the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis (2023-24), mumok - Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (2023-24), the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (2022), and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2021-22). Pendleton's work is a reflection of how we increasingly move through and experience the world on a sensorial level. It is a form of abstraction that, in its painterly, psychic, and verbal expression, announces a new mode of visual composition for the twenty-first century and investigates Blackness as a color, a method, and a political subject—in short, as a multitude. His work also poses questions about the legacy of modernism in the present day, reactivating ideas from historic avant-gardes across mediums and moments in time.

GRAND PRIZE WINNER

## MOSES OJO

### *Life's Odyssey*

Moses Ojo is a young Nigerian eco-artist, illustrator and poet who uses his mind as a channel for making captivating arts and crafts to showcase his artistic skills. "I discovered I had a passion for art at a young age of 17 and ever since I have decided to build myself to be the best in this field. My favorite mediums are digital art and illustration."

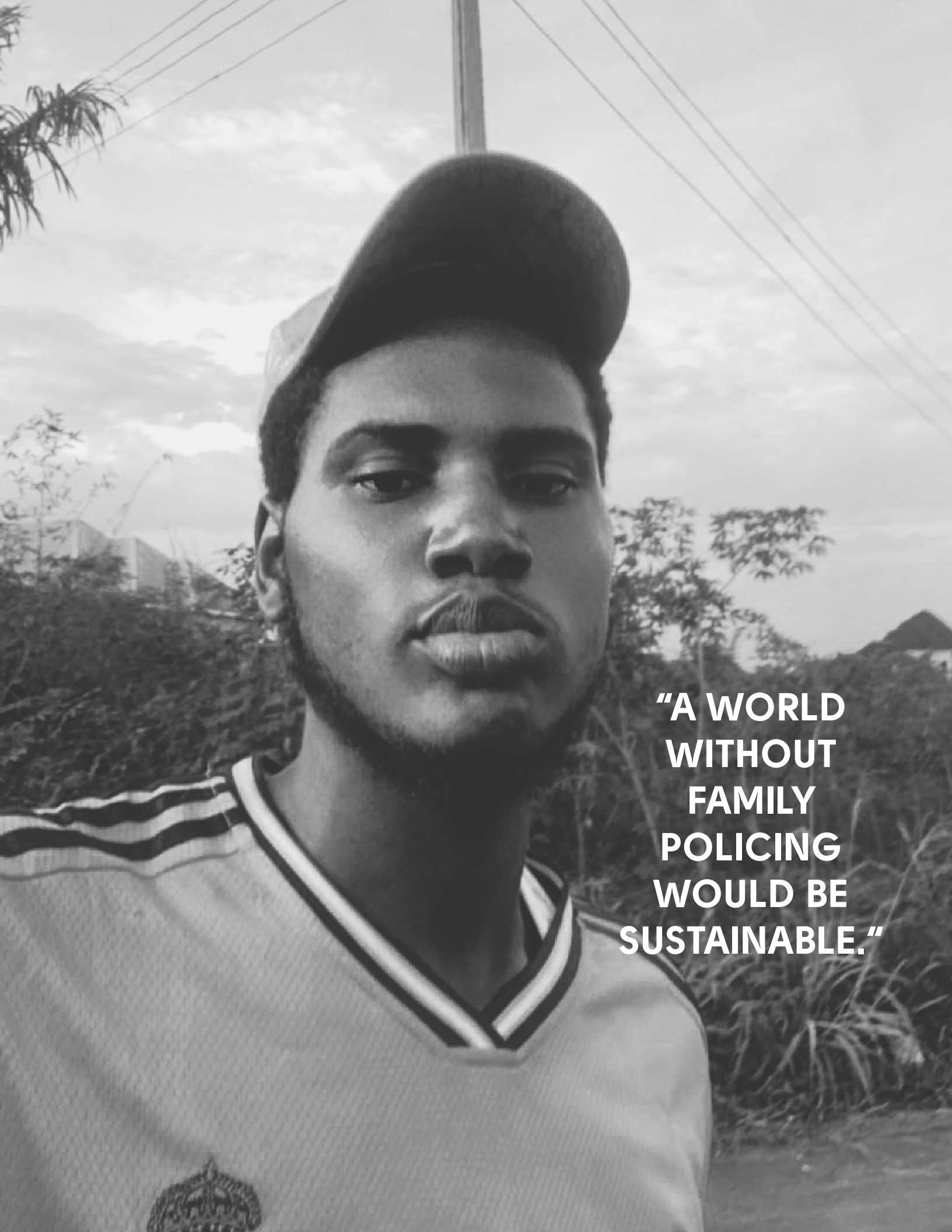
As our only prize winner outside of the United States, Moses highlights the importance of international solidarity in our liberation movements. "Families in Nigeria struggle to combine or stay as a family. It's not easy sometimes. The way it is in America, it's like that in Nigeria too, but I would say in my community it's more rampant."

Although he describes family policing in Nigeria to be "stigmatized," Moses also notes that there

have been movements to appeal to the federal government for a change. "A world without family policing would be sustainable. It would actually build a child's future and keep families together instead of tearing them apart."

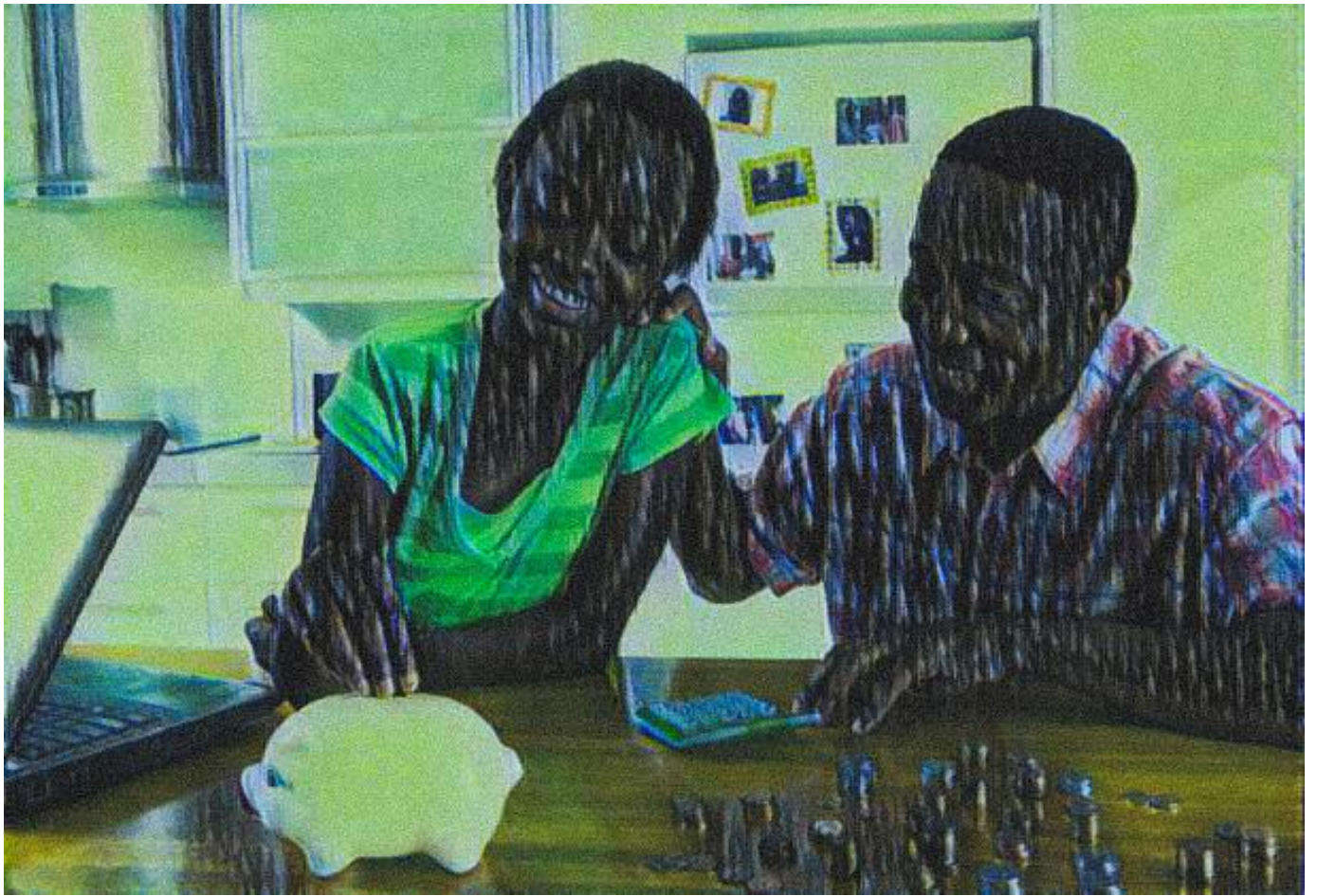
His selected piece, *Life's Odyssey* is a snapshot of what this dream could look like. "This work simply describes how I see a world and future where children and families are allowed to live and enjoy life within their means."


Moses hopes we can use art to create awareness about family policing. "Art is diverse. It can show us what is happening in society through pictures and images, then we can see and think of ways to tackle family policing."



**"A WORLD  
WITHOUT  
FAMILY  
POLICING  
WOULD BE  
SUSTAINABLE."**

Moses Ojo  
*Life's Odyssey*  
Digital Art



A young woman with dark curly hair pulled back, wearing a white long-sleeved button-down dress and a gold choker, is smiling warmly. She is standing in a room with gold-framed artwork on the wall. A quote is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**"IF WE CAN LISTEN  
TO CHILDREN  
AND HONOR THEIR  
JOY AND THEIR  
HAPPINESS, THEN  
WE'LL MAKE SOME  
MOVEMENT."**



PRIZE WINNER

# CHAVONTÉ WRIGHT

## *Minor Revolutions*

Chavonté Wright is from Texas and holds a BA in Sociology from Rice University and MA in Sociology from Indiana University. She is a practicing artist whose work is informed by her scholarship, community organizing experience, and above all, her commitment to wellness in Black lives.

Chavonté recalls that drawing was something that gave her purpose and meaning during her high school years. After the passing of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, she felt a need to focus on education. “It seemed like one of the best methods to combat injustice.”

In the summer of 2020, she found herself in a full-circle moment. “I was at home...the pandemic was going on and these protests on behalf of George Floyd were growing. It was global. I’d held protest signs and worked tirelessly within the education system, trying to educate and do symposiums and all these things. I was burned out. I was sitting still for a bit because of the pandemic, and I was looking through Devin Allen’s *A Beautiful Ghetto*.”

Published in 2017, Allen’s photography book documents the Baltimore protests in response to the murder of Freddie Gray by police. Amidst the photos of protests in Baltimore, one photo struck Chavonté the most.

“There was this one photo that took up two pages. It was a stage of these Black kids dancing. It struck me as something that really shows us what it’s all about. It’s this freedom, especially for kids—who have less, let’s say physical power or prowess than adults—the

freedom for kids to just be. To dance and to be joyful. It just really touched me. And I decided then that I would love to capture this.”

Another inspiration for Wright’s drawings includes Saidiya Hartman’s book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019). Chavonté describes how the book uses archives, lists, and photographs to “critically fabulate” the lives of girls who migrated to northern cities in the early 20th century in hopes of escaping southern racism. Faced with similar racism upon their arrival to the north, the girls in Hartman’s book insist on living, rebelling, dancing, and loving anyway. The moments that children succeed in those endeavors are what Chavonté imagines liberation is.

She says, “*Minor Revolutions* imagines the small victories that bring well-being and community into our lives. Movement and music are methods of creativity and self-determination that allow Black youth to make spaces and places for themselves in a world that too often, moves them without their consent.”

The first piece, *Minor Key* is a play on music theory. “If something is done in the minor key, it’s a little bit quieter. A child’s revolution might look a bit different.”

Chavonté proposes creativity as a means of liberation and well-being. “I do think that kids will lead the way, in their way, as far as a future without family policing. If we can listen to them and honor their joy and their happiness, then we’ll make some movement.”



Chavonté Wright  
*Minor Key*, 2021  
Graphite and Charcoal

Chavonté Wright  
*Someone to Dance With*, 2021  
Graphite and Charcoal





Chavonté Wright  
*In My White Tee*, 2023  
Graphite and Charcoal

PRIZE WINNER

# NADEEM JUSTICE

## *Heavenly Disillusionment*

Nadeem Justice is a youth advocate and burgeoning artist from Houston, Texas. “Ever since I was like, I’d say probably 12 years old, I was really interested in art. I actually had like three notebooks where I would scribble a continuous comic of a character that I just kind of made up.”

Nadeem has been honing his craft while he works to financially support himself. He dreams of working as full-time artist, becoming a video game developer, and learning to play the violin and piano. While creating *Heavenly Disillusionment*, he was intentional about including elements of music and fine arts because they create space for your feelings to be revealed. Particularly, with instrumental music, he adds “you can attribute any meaning you want to the song in question.”

As an advocate with Youth Voices Empower, Nadeem is building community, mentoring LGBTQ youth experiencing houselessness and advocating for direct supports for his community.

“It’s complicated,” he explains, “I’ve talked to a few youth and roommates that don’t really have hope for the future because they’re supporting someone else or they feel a distinct lack of determination to throw themselves in something due to past experiences.”

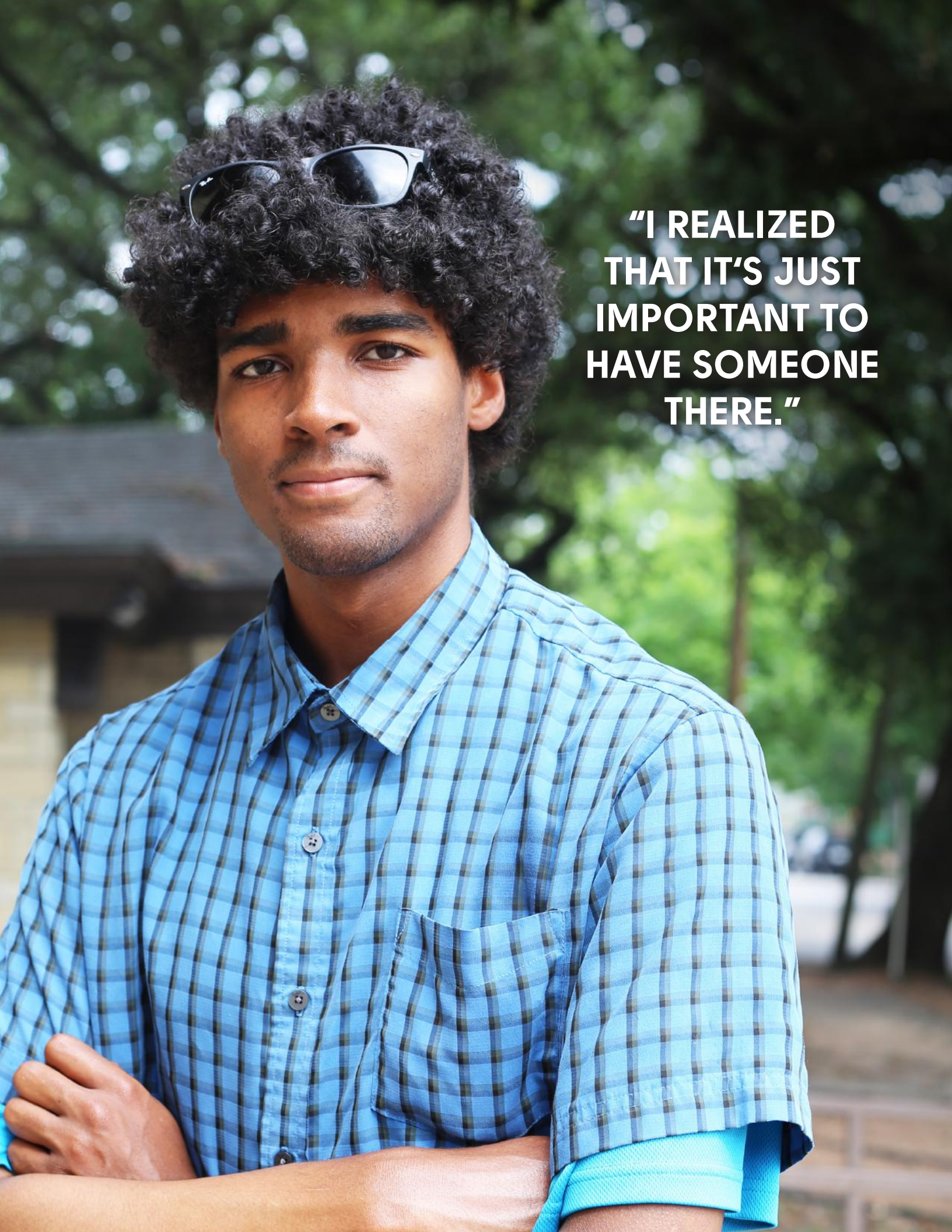
“I realized that it’s just important to have someone there. Not necessarily as a person telling you, ‘You should do this, you should get

this job,’ but rather a person that says, ‘Hey, I’m here, you can talk to me. And even if you can’t talk to me, we can at least do things together or go to fun events.’ That way they have something to look back on fondly, and maybe they can have hope for the future.”

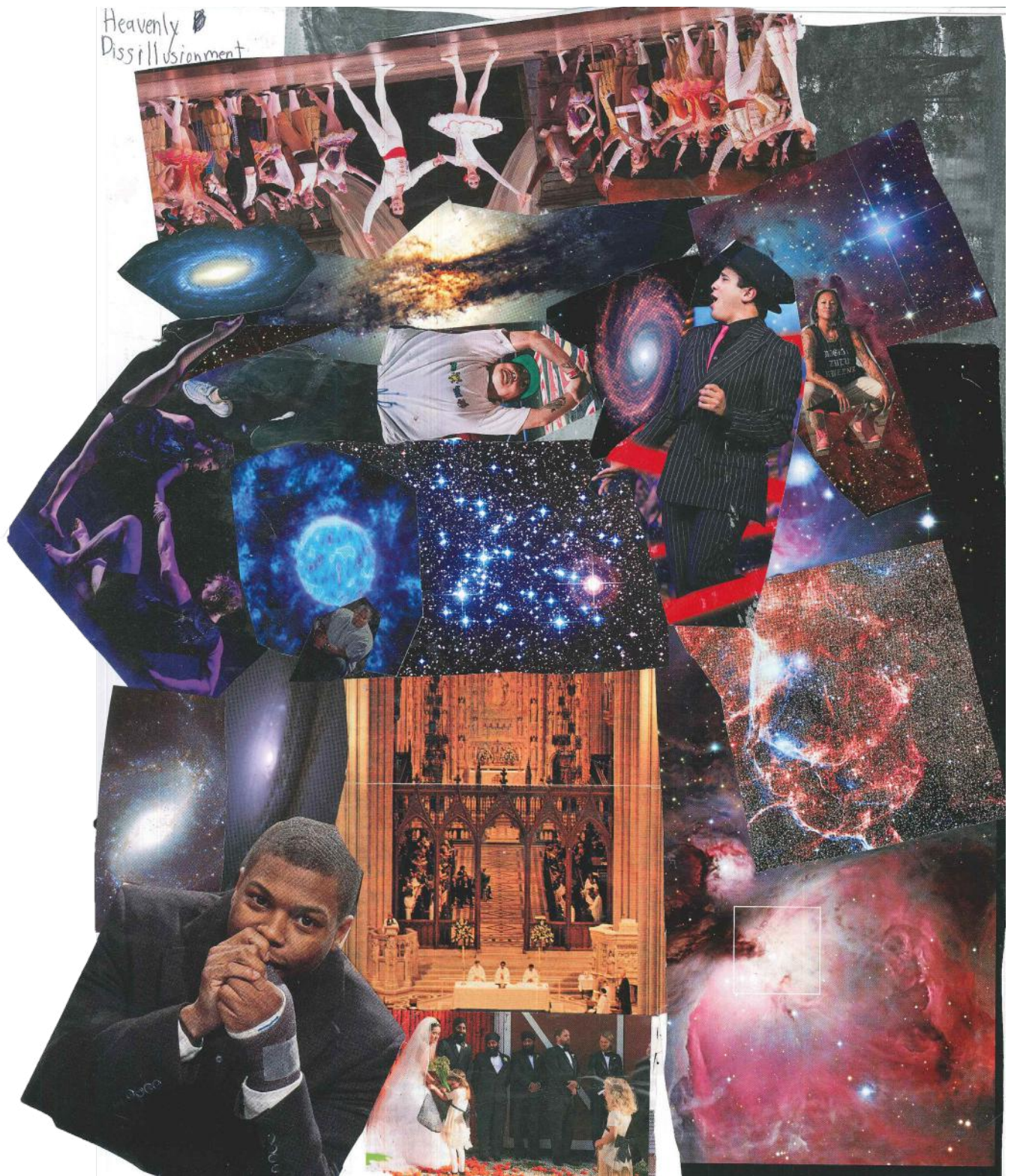
*Heavenly Disillusionment* reflects this complexity. “I called it Heavenly because I thought about having all these characters’ emotions out there for the world to see in a more opaque way.” He imagines the work as a “cesspool of perspectives and viewpoints,” with the vast, galactic elements serving as “a metaphor for a person’s emotional state.”

While capitalism creates endless cycles of job searching and daily stress for Nadeem, looking forward to new video game releases gives him hope and teaches patience. Games with open worlds and fantastical narratives inspire him the most. It’s no wonder, as these games are not structured around specific goals but give the players freedom to explore, modify their environment, and interact with other characters.

Nadeem has learned from researching the video game industry that—much like the project of abolition—game development takes many years and requires many partners collaborating to build the story, the visuals, the mechanics. How can we build a liberated reality where young people have the space, resources, and opportunity to make music and art without limits? This open world will be worth the work and worth the wait.



**"I REALIZED  
THAT IT'S JUST  
IMPORTANT TO  
HAVE SOMEONE  
THERE."**





Nadeem Justice  
*Heavenly Disillusionment*, 2024  
Collage

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are thankful for everyone who submitted to our first creative publication! This was a leap of faith and so many excellent artists answered the call. Thank you to our judges, Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton, Josie Pickens, and Adam Pendleton for your expertise in selecting our prize-winning submissions.

We also thank Montrose Grace Place and artist Tay Butler for helping upEND host a free collage workshop locally in Houston. We are inspired by the young people who opened their space to us to imagine together.

## **Image Credits**

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This long-exposure photograph reveals the circular motion of bright stars around the north celestial pole. During the exposure, a trail of light left by a high-flying jet, which can be seen tracking across the frame from left to right.

and the angst. But girls hugging and h suddenly a family."

### It Takes an Army to Change the Culture

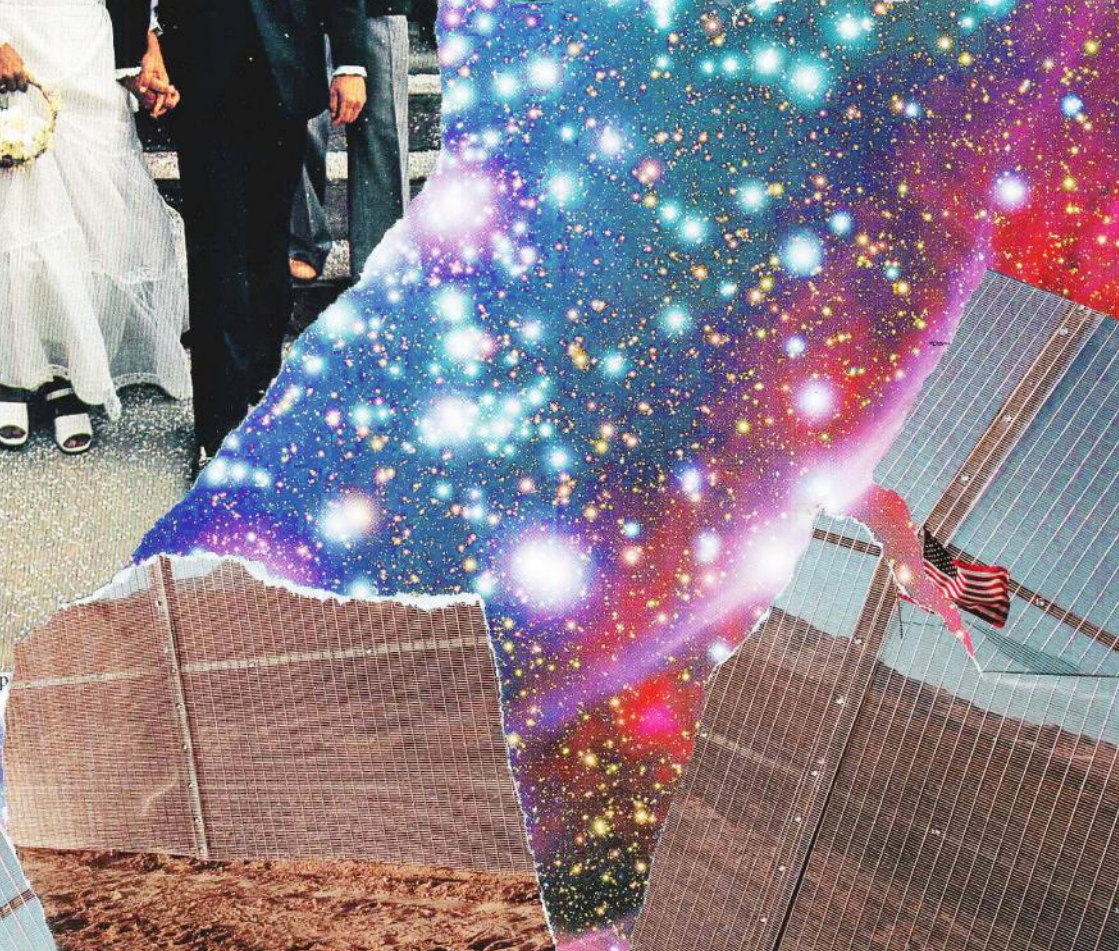
Nassar is still appealing. likelihood he's lost his freedom his family (his wife has the ripple effects that day have. In Eaton, vice Cunningham another 40 survivors spoke MSU, the and USA. The U.S. H ing inquiry. The De ly inv e rest \$50 rivo, my has p ing sor ew

ch hand. e weren't alone," she says.

### Takes One to Start a Movement

the sentencing, Stephens, s for anonymity, was the first to sp enhollander, five months p

at, was . In between even days, re than 150 su ave their statements. Raisman planned to watch from New York eeling it was too traumatic for come. "Then I saw Kyle Stephen 'Little girls grow into strong w that return to destroy your world the Olympian," and in that mon became clear to me that I wasn't And I knew I had to be there." Th day she flew to Lansing. Raisman still feels enraged she thinks of all the young wo that packed room. "It's just dev ing that we all trusted him beca





**We can build a society where children and families are strengthened and supported, not surveilled and separated.**

Current “child welfare” interventions are based on a historical ideology of surveillance, separation, and punishment in order to control families and communities. upEND advocates for dismantling these harmful systems and building solutions that address the core economic, social, and structural reasons that cause children to be considered unsafe. We believe in shifting power and resources to innovations, organizers, and community-based supports that truly help children and families.