

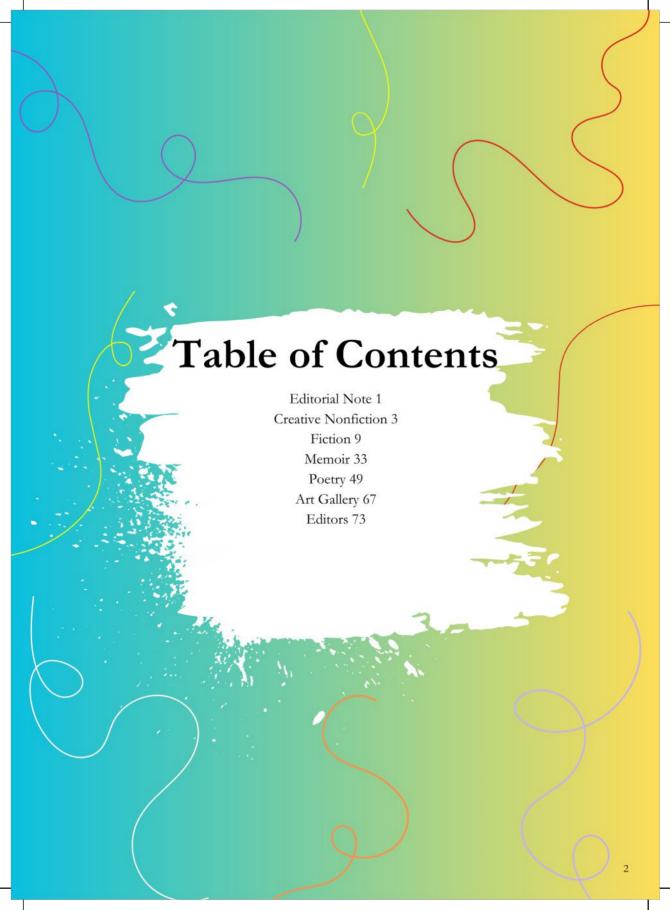
### **Editorial Note**

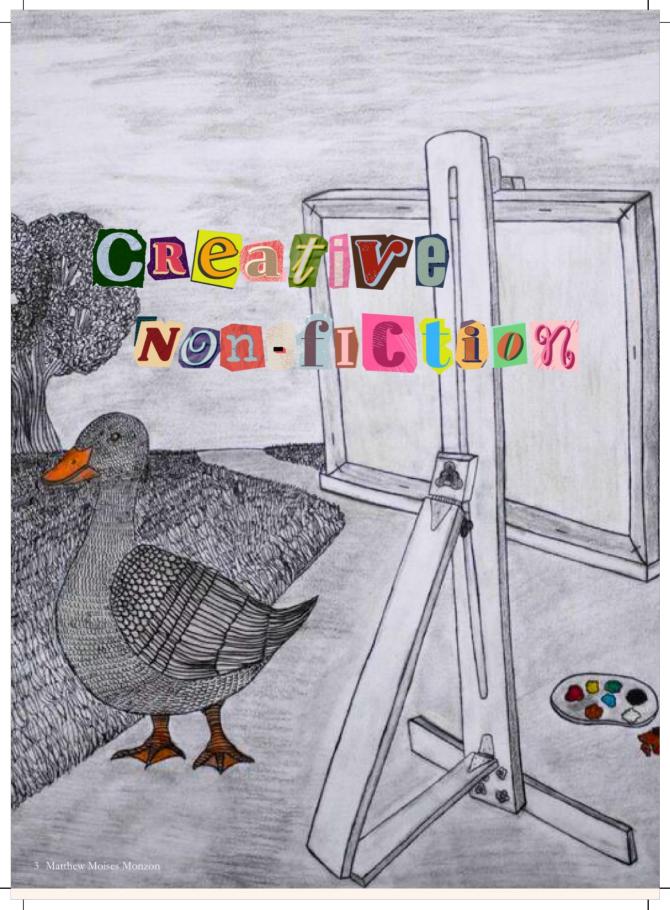
While writing this year's edition, the staff and I were moved by the issues we are facing within today's society. The Supreme Court's ruling on Roe v Wade hit our female-dominated team hard. We found it impossible to believe that women's right to choose was taken away, and we spent weeks in disbelief over this ruling. Moreover, the decision made by Florida's officials to ban books deeply affected our literature-loving team. We felt these decisions were out of a novel such, as Handmaid's Tale or 1984. It's also imperative to note that the majority of the staff comes from a Hispanic background, and we were moved by the events we have witnessed for generations within our very own community, such as the long-standing homophobic and racist sentiments.

When assembling this edition, we immediately knew we wanted to address these issues. The contents of this edition hold a special place in our heart as these are problems that have directly affected members of our community. I'm beyond proud of the edition that our team put together. It was not an easy journey-a brand new staff, none of us knowing exactly what were doing, it was like the blind leading the blind- but we persevered and put it together under a strict deadline, limited time and even more limited resources; much like we know that despite these catastrophic decisions, the good people of this country will persevere. We will rise above these rulings and work toward righting the wrongs of our current leaders.

While the legislative policies to ban books and safe abortions are detrimental to democratic societies, I know the officials who try to lead with fear will not win. As the wise Robin William once said, "Words and ideas can change the world." We, at Metro, hope this year's edition will provide our dear readers with words and ideas so they can go out and change the world. Despite these unjust decisions, we ask our readers to rise above, to become tomorrow's leaders, and to right the wrongs. A dear friend once told me: "There will always be people that come across as leaders, but when the Ocean needs crossing, they drown." Readers, we at Metro ask each and every one of you to be leaders; you will not soak in sin as so many of these corrupt policymakers and flawed thinkers do. You will lead. The Metro team wants to thank Professor Coro for her support and Professor Mazpule for her ideas, and both for being the best advisors we could ask for. As well, we would like to thank Professor Henry, who graciously opened his classroom to us and whose wonderful ideas contributed to the creation of this magazine. Thank you for crossing this ocean with us.

The metr[o]morphosis team





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## Gay Epidemic

### by Pablo Llorens

Gay people aren't real. I don't know how many lies you've heard so far, but it's the truth. Since the dawn of time, the beauty of heterosexuality has been strikingly evident in everything. From prehistoric drawings to societal expectations to men's anuses, heterosexual people and culture have dominated and continue to dominate the population. Only recently did gay people come into existence, and it's all because of the damn Left. As a heterosexual expert, having received my Ph.D. in Heterosexual Studies from Harvard Community College, I will present why gay people don't exist and what you can do to prevent them.

Let's start by discussing the emergence of gay media. Most individuals discovered the existence of homosexuals when they appeared and started pelting rocks at us during the Stonewall riots. When the new beings revealed themselves, with their grotesque facial paint and androgynous attire, they were a shocking sight to behold. The fact that they were surprised when we responded to their attack on normalcy with violence is enough to confirm their otherworldliness. As the Bible states, "They know not what they do." Surprisingly, their sudden appearance in public media led some to garner sympathy for the new class of fiends, feeling bad for their self-imposed, effeminate cries for help. Groups like my family tried our hardest to prevent this outbreak from reaching new heights, but when a fag gets lit, there's no stopping the fire.

I first came into contact with homosexual propaganda through a magazine that I found inside my dad's drawer. The front cover contained the most appalling yet intriguing image I had ever seen—a large, three-dimensional penis. As I flicked through the pages, my teenage eyes could not handle the overwhelming erotica. I confronted my father about it soon after, shoving the penis-filled booklet into his face and demanding an explanation. "I'm researching, son. To beat them, you have to think like them. Don't tell your mother, though," he whispered to me. I later found the burnt remnants of the magazine in the fireplace, along with several other issues of GayTimes.

Following his advice, I began consuming any ounce of gay medial could acquire. I visited dive bars and clubs and even dated several men in my twenties. One of them, a gentle fellow by the name of Adam, actually revealed that he had known my father a while back. I didn't question him further. I soon discovered that I had fallen victim to the ways of the gays. I had let myself be seduced by the promise of integue and sexual gratification and, instead, become disdainful of my lack of spine and loyalty to my heterosexual origins. I needed to fix myself, so I began to research.

Restlessly scouring through Fox News and other expertly-sourced news outlets, I realized that the origins of homosexuality were, in fact, entirely fabricated by the Left. One article, with the author and credentials unknown, clarified how the true origins of homosexuals lie in Area 51, where aliens are known to reside. This theory would explain their extraterrestrial allure and preference for probing devices up anuses. Furthermore, most scientists have concluded that aliens possess mind-controlling abilities, harboring the skills to influence mass populations to believe in bizarre things and act in ways that contradict their nature. I deduced that the only possible reason the Left would utilize such extreme measures was to gain more votes for future elections and have majority control of government sectors. I wouldn't bat an eye if word got out that they also worked with the Russians. They were the only "reds" that the Left liked. After years of confusion over where homosexuals and my experimental period stemmed from, I finally had the answers.

Now knowing where the issue stems from, you can work to effectively prevent the source from ever affecting you, your friends, your children, and the world. The first step is to never become exposed to any form of gay media. You must control what they watch, whom they speak to, and what they listen to. It is all a precaution for their protection. When did you ever hear of gay children before they started appearing on television? Never. Considering how the Left has made it impossible to avoid them—whether through force-feeding us gay characters in children's shows or slapping rainbows on coffee brands—this is a difficult task to follow. But I promise you, even if you become exposed to them, there is always a way back to normalcy. I suffered from past exposure, yet look at me now! I am happily heterosexual, a Harvard graduate and have four Mormon wives.

The second step is to follow all traditional gender roles and norms. If you are a man, this means speaking in a low voice, participating in sports, having extensive knowledge about cars, using colloquialisms such as "bro" and "man" in your everyday vocabulary, being overly defensive about your masculinity, only playing with action figures, never letting a woman speak over you, and more. If you are a woman, this means having little to no facial and body hair, wearing mini-skirts and playful clothing, laughing even when nothing a man said was funny, maintaining an aloof facade to make men feel more comfortable around you, birthing and raising multiple children, donning "no makeup" makeup looks, and more.

Adhering to these standards will lead to a happy and fulfilled heterosexual life. If my dad had continued to let me play with Barbie dolls when I was younger, I wouldn't be the man I am today. If I hadn't learned that allowing yourself to accept your true feelings wasn't masculine, I wouldn't be as happy as I am today. I hope that you grow to accept that there is a clear path to achieving life satisfaction and that the happiness promised by fabricated homosexuals is just that, fabricated and false.





A sunny afternoon, a pair of Mormon missionaries, and an untied shoelace. Who would have thought it would lead to a holy apparition? It was a regular Sunday. My father and I decided to go on a bike ride together. As we got ready to begin our leisurely activity, we were approached by a pair of Mormons. "Hello, my name is Elder Smith, would you like to hear about our church of Latter-day Saints?" I turned expecting my dad to answer, but he just looked away. I guess he thought that if he avoided eye-contact they would not see him. It worked though because Elder Smith then looked at me expecting an answer. "Uh, sorry not interested," I said awkwardly. His eye twitched slightly and his smile faltered, "That's fine. Here, take this in case you change your mind. Thank you and Goodbye." He handed me a small card with the details of the church and a portrait of Mormon Jesus.

With that he was gone, so I turned to my dad to hand him the card. "Um I don't want that," he said. "Okay, so what do I do with it?" I asked. He rolled his eyes. "Just throw it

away. Come on let's go already." And so, my dad rode away and left me alone with the son of God. I looked down at the tiny portrait of Mormon Jesus. I gazed solemnly at his historically accurate blue eyes and luscious blond hair. "I'm so sorry, Mormon Jesus," I whispered under my breath as I approached the trash can and threw Him away. I don't know why I felt so sorry for him. I guess my catholic guilt transcends denominations. I quickly caught up to my dad and zoomed past him on my bike. I relished the wind in my hair as I dashed downhill.

But suddenly, I felt a tension in the pedal. I looked down and saw that my shoelace had gotten caught in the gears. I slowed quickly to a stop and pulled over slightly to try to untangle myself. When I bent over to free my shoe from the jaws of my bike, I lost my balance and flopped over onto the middle of the path. Ouch. But before I could fully process the pain of my body flopping onto the asphalt, I felt a sudden sharp pain in my

fully process the pain of my body flopping onto the asphalt, I felt a sudden sharp pain in my lower back. It happened in a flash, the impact, and then the result. I saw a hairy man fly over me and hit the ground tumbling. I focused my eyes on the stranger, and that's when I realized what happened. My dad had run me over with his own bike. I hobbled up and looked around. The park I was at was full of spectators due to a sporting event taking place. They all saw the tragedy. Embarrassment painted my cheeks. My dad mumbled his apologies, but I wasn't listening. Another gust of wind passed; this time it felt holy. The leaves rustled and it sounded.

like a whisper, as if God himself was saying, "Take that, bit



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## Bumper Sticker

#### by Erzel Smith

I lock the door and start walking. "How will we find where we parked?" Amethyst asks. I turn around and point at the obnoxiously bright pink bumper sticker I have on the back of my car which I designed for one of my graphic design classes. It has the feminine symbol in the right top corner; below it in yellow block colors MY BODY IS NOT A POLITICAL PLAYGROUND with a shadow drawing of my best friend holding up her middle finger. It is my favorite piece, even if it was the simplest. She looks at the bumper sticker and then back at me, releasing a slight chuckle. Her black braids wrapped with pink ribbons and her brown eyes steeled and ready. I look at her and ask, "Ready?" She nods.

We charge up the court steps to meet the masses already gathered. Men, women, and non-binary humans pack the steps of the courthouse. This is a protest to remind them that we exist and that we are pissed about this decision. The sun beats down on us, my skin is moist. I am close to tears from the power emanating from these women of all races, ages and sizes, and I feel the fear that this decision induces. The sweat runs down my thighs yet I cannot stop yelling MY BODY IS MY CHOICE! MY UTERUS IS NOT A POLITICAL PLAYGROUND! All around me are signs filled with slogans urging society to listen to us when we say that we are tired of our bodies being out of our control. I see my best friend with tears rolling down her face because she knows that if she had not had access to an abortion, she would be living with her abuser's child right now. That abortion saved her life, and she is wrecked that it is not an option for every and anyone.

There are pro-life protesters on the other side telling us that God has a plan for us, and although I agree that my God has a plan, I do not think his plan is government control on women's bodies. They tell me to hope and

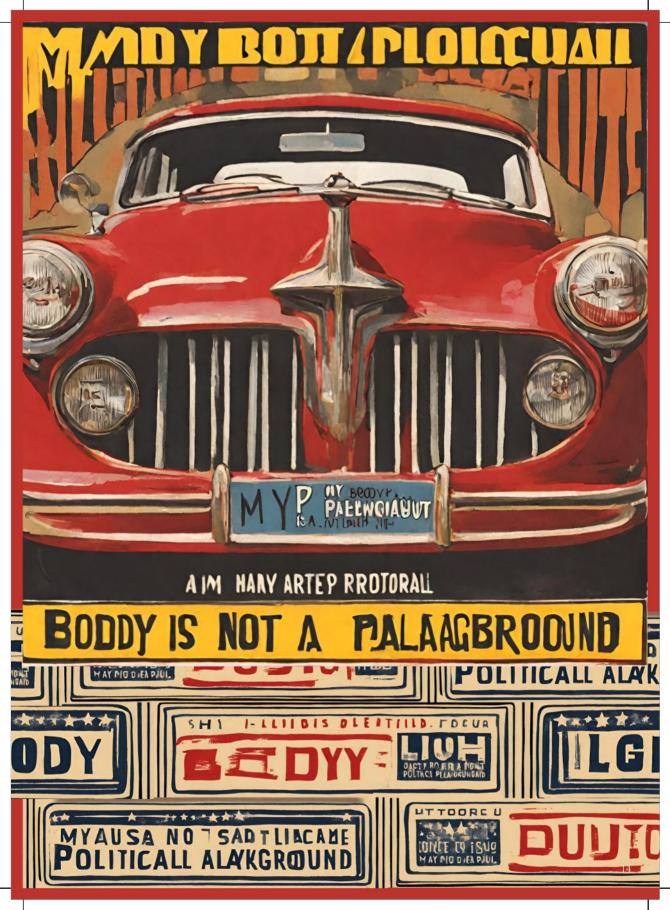


pray, but rage permeates my body. I cannot help but yell back, "hope and pray?! When my friends and my family are dying from life threatening illnesses because they don't have access to safe abortion what is hope and prayer going to do for me."

Then the energy in the crowd changes. I hear the marching footsteps of the police boots surrounding us. I grab my best friend's hand and run straight to our black

2019 Jeep Wrangler, easily recognizable because of the bright bumper sticker. They are behind us, the cacophony intensifies and I know it is ending. I open the door and as I hop in, I smell the cinnamon aroma, something that usually instills peace in me but ceases to help now. I push the gas; I am trying my best to get us out.

Amethyst is heaving, her breathing is stuttered, she was always bad in high pressure situations. I tell her "YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN, NOW." I toss her a bottle of water from the cooler that we have on the back seat and I see the barricade they are starting to build in front of us, but I also see an exit, a space we can squirm through. As we pass by, I cannot stop myself from turning around and poking my head out the window yelling, "This time you are not in control." Then for a second, I see their defeated faces staring at my best friend's middle finger up pointing at them as we drive away. A reminder of the reason that I was even here, that it is my body, and it is my choice.





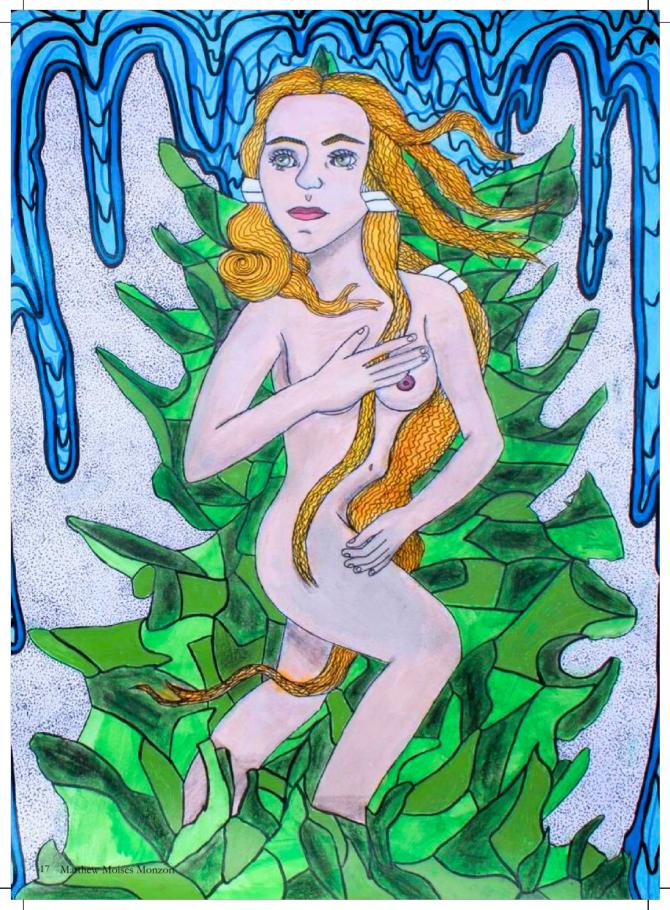
## A Tuesday In March

### by Ian Escarra

The only thing that has been going through my mind has been her. We spent long nights watching movies she picked out. Me taking her to her favorite spots. Both waking up on her couch to be sent on a seemingly null adventure through her life was enough for me to fall for her. My thoughts of eating, drinking, living, all these thoughts came second to my thinking of her. She is a beauty incarnate. Her hair faded with dyes of previously illustrious and vibrant colors. Her face, a pale canvas of Vermeerian and Botticellian magnitude. Her body is a sculpture never seen and never to be created again. Her smile was a descent into madness for anyone willing to take part. Comfort and lust lucidly waltz in my mind when accompanied by my dreams of her. I sit alone, afraid that I've let myself become consumed with the thought of her. Stories and poems of love long before I existed told tales of love being the only stream that flows two ways. A legendary avatar who grants all who indulge in it, serenity and bliss. On the other hand, for me, the stream flows one way. Love has not been good to me. It drives me to wrench and then divide myself in two. One half a puppet in open view of onlookers, cheerful and celibate, loved by all. The other half is a man standing atop the puppet holding the control bar, a lustful husk of a man who lives vicariously through the marionette, ignorant of his existence.

I told her I loved her. She told me she didn't love me. I lost my last friend.
I'm cold. I'm alone. No more of us. No more horror movies until we pass out.





# Be That of Queens by Arquimedes Rivero

"My dear Tsarina, come. Sit on your papei's lap," said Fyodor, a stout man with graving hair, peering at his daughter from across the room with a cigar poised between his index and middle fingers.

Ekaterina Sigmunda was limber and incredibly lanky for a girl of fifteen years. Her frame was willowy, almost to the point of emaciation, and it betrayed her upbringing as a noble scion. In spite of the lack of comeliness that came with her frame, her eyes met her father's with a fervor that blossomed innately in those of her exalted line - that of the proud Kuramovs

Her father once claimed her eyes were a gift: the eyes of champions, the eyes of a Oueen. She strived to believe him and the others at the court of Nova Caelum, the Capital of the Heartlands.

She resigned to sit on his lap. His supple arms embraced her as their eyes peered into the kindling within their hearth.

"Tomorrow, we leave for Yurisgrad, Kochy," Fyodor noted while caressing his daughter's chestnut tresses, then kissing the crown of her head gently. "Will the King like me, papej?"

"Da, my daughter, for you will be his queen."

"Your Majesty," a servant beckons, bowing steeply before the regal figure while she passes him. She reciprocates his greeting in kind with a nod, swiftly maneuvering through the halls of Ekaterinburg Palace.

She inhales as she halts at a door. "Mama!" exclaimed two twin children in unison, bounding forward to embrace the now-aging woman. Grinning and mirthful, Ekaterina wraps her arms around them and lovingly greets her children, Pyotr Andreivich and Maria Andreevna.

"Now come, sweetlings. Let us find your siblings."

As she disembarked from the yacht, Ekaterina took a deep breath and plastered on a thin smile. She surveyed the desolate shores of the unnamed lake before her, fingertips fiddling. She was welcomed by the twenty-nine-year-old, Duke Alexander de Sarchaiy, a favored cousin of hers. They locked eyes, grinning whilst clasping hands. She briefly did the same with his younger sibling, Nicholas, and soon thereafter flanked him.

"You've arrived just in time for court, cousin," Duke Alexander commented with a whisk of his hand as he eyed the teenaged youth. "Nicholas shall escort you. Do make us proud, young Kuramov."

The trek to Yurisgrad was a curt one, yet arduous; the landscape taking its toll on the weary steeds that transported the trail of ornate carriages. Yet, Ekaterina's determination seemed to urge the collective to persist, so she arrived at the city's gates alongside her cousin in a quarter-hour's time Immediately, the girl garnered glances from the peasants. After all, she did not fit in,

Aonning imperial fabrics and her gait emulating a sort of pretension. After her arrival in the Palace Thurov, the court began, and all present rose for King Andrei. The proceedings ensued until a herald announced: "All petitioners of His Majesty's Court, make your way before the dais.

Everything was still, the present courtiers not prompted by the beckoning. However, Ekaterina resolutely looked to Nicholas and sashayed forward, stilling just before the throne. She was surprised by who was before her—a boy with dark hair and unmistakable northern blue eyes. He was limber, just as she was, flowering into adolescence. He wrapped his fingers against the armrest of the throne in a manner that resembled an aged monarch.

She knew through her training to be vulpine and effortlessly graceful, it would be easy to deceive this boy. She had done so in the past, plastering on an expression of remarkable confidence, of charisma; if only they knew that inside was but the mere ploy of a child grasping for her father's approval.

Trapezing into her room, the woman lets out an exhausted breath, squaring her shoulders. Brushing her fingertips against the furred fabrics draping over her bed frame as she frowns.

The room has always been empty. She has not seen her husband in years. The war had kept him preoccupied, and her jaded. She was understanding; however, such is a king's duty, she told herself.

Not letting her mind succumb to further reverie, Ekaterina clicks her tongue. She breaches her balcony's entrance, finding solace in the sunlit humidity arising from Lake Sigmunda, her namesake.

What had her actions done, she wonders, to warrant the admiration of her people—to have her family's homestead and residing lake, a pillar of national resilience, named in her honor? She has only done her God-given duty; what has been demanded of a Royal Consort; what had been taught to her from an early age.

She did not have much time to contemplate the thought. Hands, cruel and ruthless, furl around her throat, carelessly thrusting her frame, nearly buxom after three pregnancies, against the stone balaster.

The court hushed with her entrance; a quiet reverence reserved for moments of great

deplace (Unsulash)

anticipation. Her husband's absence had certainly placed her in a new role, the Queen-consort but without the King, she had stood beside him for years. As she stepped forward, the sight took her aback, like a painting of forgotten dreams.

Seated confidently upon her husband's throne was the Lord Chancellor, Karl von Leonswald, draped in authority and commanding respect from the Kingdom's subjects. His words, though echoing with eloquence, seemed to resound through her very being, leaving her feeling almost translucent, like a specter in her own palace.

She couldn't help but frown, a subtle furrow of her brows, as she gracefully lowered herself into her habitual spot upon the royal dais. The room held its breath, and for a moment, it felt as if she were a mere ornament, unnoticed and untouched by the world around her:

"Such is my fate," she mused quietly, her thoughts akin to whispers on the wind, "yet, I refuse to embrace this silence without contest."

In the midst of courtly grandeur, she held tightly to her resolve, like a lone flower pushing through the snow, seeking sunlight amidst the winter's chill. With every subtle gesture, every unspoken thought, she began to lay the foundation for her subtle rebellion, a masterpiece of defiance painted with strokes of grace and hidden strength. The world might have overlooked her, but she would rise like an exquisite tapestry, weaving her essence into the fabric of the kingdom's fate.

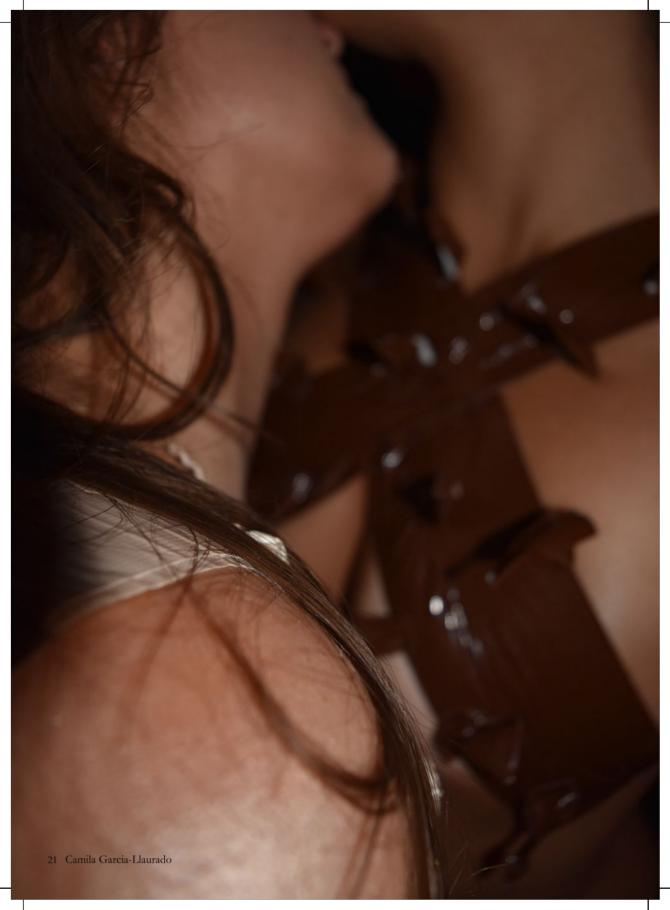
Ekaterina gags, clutching at her throat. She looks at the person blankly, lilting her chin.

"Do it, then. I'd rather die a Queen than a dowager. Such is a fate much too dull for me, and even at my age, one does require some excitement."

The injuries of the blade her assailant carries shallowly impale her. At first, a burgeoning pain seared through her. Periodically, it continues—each merciless thrust distancing her further as carmine seeps into her dress thoroughly, leaving but the vestiges of its former craftsmanship. She thinks not of her children; she thinks not of her people. At this time she, the woman who has devoted nearly sixteen years of her life to her people, thinks of herself.

Her near-lifeless body experiences little pain at the end. The fall from her tower is swift and instantaneous, and perhaps this is the greatest betrayal of them all: the mundanity of her demise, she who has toiled so much to achieve illustriousness in life. All become equal in the face of death, and even Queens must make obeisance and kiss their matronly ring.





## Adulterium Immaculatum

### by Violeta Rothschild

"Can we please just go to the wedding, Lucy? My parents have been bugging me about it for a while now, and we only have a week to book our flights," my husband screams at me from across the house. I am still getting dressed to go to work while he is yapping away about this wedding we MUST go to. I got nothing left to throw at him to derail this urgency of his, so I yell back, "FINE, book the ticket. I'll find us our outfits, deal?"

"Deal," the door slams shut. Some positives will come from the wedding. The one at the forefront of my mind would have to be his cousin Fortuna, goddam what a fucking woman she is. She's tall, dark, and beautiful, as well as curvy in all the right places, and has a look that screams, "I'll fuck the shit out of you." Too bad both of us are tied down to our dogs.

The wedding is in a massive barn, all decorated in white. The wedding organizers perfumed the place extensively in what I assume is an unsuccessful attempt to mask the barn smell. The wedding was nothing special. I am falling asleep even before the bride is brought out. Like an unattended golden retriever, my husband is awake and active enough for both of us. He is clapping his hands like a seal or an extra who is trying too hard in a movie. There isn't a switch in the world that could represent how turned off I am. Jasmine walks up to me, probably triggered by my slouching in my chair to prevent secondhand embarrassment.

"Everything ok with you, Lucy? Are you still jet-lagged from your flight?" My husband looks over to see the commotion Jasmine has caused. Nosy fucking bitch is blowing my cover. I tell her I'm fine, which prompts an argument with my husband.

"Are you fine? If you don't want to be here, can you at least act like you do?"

"I don't want to fucking act. You're acting like an idiot and embarrassing me in front of everyone."

"Why would you give a shit, Lucy? It's my family, but you think you know them better than I do?"

"It's not just your family. A whole other family is sitting on the other side of the aisle."

"Like I give a fuck what they think. I'm here for my cousin and her wedding." sitting on the side of the bed while contemplating how my decisions have made me arrive at this point. I decide not to do this tonight and hit the strip instead.

"I'm just going to wait in the car. Call me when it's over."

I've been waiting in my car through the wedding and the reception when I get a call from my husband. He is in a pretty bad state, drunk and talking nonsense, which infuriates me. I order him to lie down in the back seat and hand over the keys (something my sober husband would have a fit over). I drive the septic tank back home and walk him to our room, where he instantly falls into a deep trance. I'm sitting on the side of the bed while contemplating how my decisions have made me arrive at this point. I decide not to do this tonight and hit the strip instead.

The bar envelopes me with dimly lit red lights that suffocate my eyesight. Everyone at the bar next to me and the tables behind me speaks loudly in their desperate attempts to relay information to those around them. My dress, a dark blue gown with silver floral decals around my chest and waist, contrasts with the casual environment of the bar. I sit alone at the corner, feet swaying, occasionally colliding with the foot railing beneath me. The bar stools and booths in the back are furnished with dark brown leather. The booths sit high and are made of American dark walnut, and the stools match with copper bases. The bar makes me feel sexy and comfortable.

I am on my third glass of wine when I feel a breeze brush along behind me. Then, a slow tracing of a line on my upper back and a warm hand resting on my left shoulder. As I look to my left, a hand softly reaches out and cups my lower right jaw as the woman utters, "Are you waiting for someone?" She wears silver flats, and a dark blue satin dress accentuates her curves. It's Fortuna.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, surprised to find her in a bar like this. "The reception wasn't anything to go home about, so I decided to hit the strip." Fortuna is an elegant and posh woman, so to hear words like this come out of her mouth is out of the ordinary.

"What about your husband, is he waiting outside?"

"He's down the street with his friends at the strip club. He's too drunk to barter with. Thus, I decided to rip him a new one in the morning."

"So, what do you have planned while you're in town other than castrating your husband?"

"That's going to be the highlight of this trip. Therefore, I am open to listening to any suggestions." I let out a poorly contained chuckle and look at Fortuna. She does the same. Our eyes lock. Hers are stoic and in control, and mine are nervous and entranced. We know that the conversation from this point on is a formality. We drive back to her place. We violently wrestle each other, lips interlocked, as we rip clothes off one another and walk from our cars to her front door. She grabs my shoulders and slams me into her front door; my chest exposed when we get there. I am not



putting up much of a fight, and she is still fully clothed, which turns me on even more. She towers over me and throws my dress to the floor. Fortuna reaches for my arms and holds them at my side, "Do you want to go inside?" she asks slowly in a demanding tone. "Yes... please," I answer like a dog whose owner hasn't fed. She slowly lets go of my right hand and opens the door. "Up the stairs, to the right, the first door to your left. I'll be there in a minute."

I am so caught in the moment, I leave my dress on her porch and slowly walk up the

stairs on the balls of my feet while Fortuna observes. As I get onto the second floor, when I look back, Fortuna is already gone. I shimmy into the designated room and lay on my side, waiting for my goddess and her plans for tonight. As I lay on the bed, my bra on my hips and underwear on the floor, a flickering light appears under the door. Blood rushes all over my body in anticipation of what Fortuna has planned for me. The door slowly opens to show Fortuna completely naked, hips slowly swaying side to side, as the candle she's holding follows suit. "Take off your bra and panties and face away from me," she tells me as I rush to follow her orders, breaking my bra while doing so. I hear the slow rhythmic pacing of her steps gain ground behind me. Her cold hand brushes across my right shoulder but drops of hot wax fall onto my left shoulder. I wince in unexpected pain, and before a word comes out of my mouth, Fortuna drops the candle on her nightstand and puts both of her arms around my waist.

One of her hands jolts onto my throat, and the other slowly reaches down to my vagina, where she begins to finger me slowly. "I've wanted this for a long time, just follow my instructions," I instantly orgasm. Fortuna turns me and puts both of her hands on my breasts. She begins to fondle them. I reach to match, but she slaps my hands away, "this night is for you. You can return the favor another time," she says in the sexiest way one could imagine. Before I can think or say anything, she grabs my hips and throws me onto her bed, propping up my legs as I lay on my back. She gets on her knees and begins a line of kisses up my inner right thigh. My mind begins to melt in ecstasy as the train of kisses flows closer

to my vagina. Right before she reaches the promised land, she looks up at me and tells me to put my head back. The only thing keeping me from going over the edge is

seeing what is happening. I put my head back and close my eyes to embrace what is about to come. A rush of energy shoots through my body as her lips begin dancing on my outer labia. I grip her sheets and make poor attempts of holding in my verbal euphoria. My thighs, as if they have a mind of their own, clamp onto her head, and my back arches. I have never felt this type of lust before, and Fortuna can tell. Like clockwork, she wraps her arms around my thighs and lifts me to where I'm vertically planted on my shoulders as her tongue digs and shuffles in my inner labia. My eyes roll back into their sockets as I shiver and lose control of my body, but Fortuna does not stop. I am in a pool of my own doing by the time she is done with me. We lay next to each other, legs and arms interlocked. She occasionally reaches and grabs my ass or breast. We begin rolling over on each other, changing whoever is on top every minute. However, as we roll around, I see my husband's face replace Fortunas in quick instances. I gasp as Fortuna lays over me. She stops, concerned she did something wrong. "It's nothing, Fortuna, I lost my breath for a second."

"I tend to have that effect on beautiful women," she says.

I push her on the back of her shoulders to get her close to me and kiss her.

Although I'm getting dressed to leave, Fortuna stops my hand as I'm zipping up my dress. She is still naked, I blush as I turn around to talk to her. "We can go for round two. My husband sleeps over at his friend's house when he binges, so we have all the time in the world." She pulls me back by my wrists to her bed, but I shake my hands from her grip. "I have work in the morning, and my husband is probably suspicious of what I'm doing out so late." Her smile flattens at the statement. She throws her beautiful body under her covers and turns away from me. "You owe me a round two. I'll see you later," she begrudgingly utters as the door closes behind me. As I go down the stairs, the gravity of the situation shoots to the front of my thoughts. I just cheated on my husband. I've never cheated before. What is my husband going to think of this? What is Fortuna's husband going to think of this? As soon as the thought comes, it goes. My husband deserves this shit. After all this time of being put on the sidelines of my marriage, I deserve to be loved by someone who gives a shit about me. Fuck whatever my husband thinks. I run up the stairs and slam open the door to an excited Fortuna.

"Round two?"



# Sea Salt by Ian Escarra

If only I had pulled through with the wedding! I can't think two steps ahead and as I sit waiting for my flight out of the Bahamas, I wonder what I'll be doing for the next two weeks. My ex-potential wife was in charge of the American Airlines account and I'm lucky she hadn't canceled the flight, either out of ignorance or pity. I've been a failure throughout my life; it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that I failed in my promise at everlasting commitment. I cheated on my soon-to-be-wife two weeks before the wedding. She would've never found out about it had it not been for the insurmountable guilt which consumed me to the point of mental paralysis. I told her the night before the wedding and ran off. I decided I wouldn't confront the consequences.

What people don't tell you about runaway grooms is the amount of text messages, phone calls, emails we get from the "left at the altar party." I bet if it was a different time our families would have sent me their resentment via fax or carrier pigeon. As if the guilt wasn't enough, the flood of grievances from both sides of the aisle was the nail in the coffin for my already fleeting sanity.

With the little money I have left, I am able to book an Airbnb in a housing development area called Fortune Cay. The whole place looks like a luxury retirement resort with big houses, big pools,

big everything. All things considered, I got this place at a steal. The neighborhood doesn't have the same feel as the city; the quiet rings in your ears. Distant partying in the night would surface every once in a while. But the houses are sparsely populated from the highway to the beach, which spans across a forty-by-forty mile area. It's a proverbial ghost town of sorts, other than the occasional parties in the area that blast rhythmic nonsense every night. I know those years are past me, but I'd be lying if I said the temptation to crash and melt in ecstasy isn't there.

I am limited to the sparse luxuries of Fortune Cay, only because the city presents opportunities for me to run into a relative of mine or hers. Interacting with anyone I know would be the emotional equivalent of dishonorable seppuku. Confronting them, fully aware of the possibility of forgiveness, is not enough of a reason to pull me away from this dissociative state. I love both sides of the family, it's half the reason I signed up to marry her. But love is not reason and my love put me in the situation I am in now. My head is the battle ground of these warring thoughts that take up valuable synapses in my brain. The feeling is like a slow and powerful venom coursing through the cognitive functionality of my mind, physically batting me from the solution because catastrophe lay alongside it.

No

The days in my house of mirrors start to blend into each other. There is only so much entertainment one can consume before the rot begins to sink in. The couch in the living room has a print of me laying down etched into the lifted fibers of the cushion. The coffee table has a bleached water stain in the form of a plastic cup within reaching distance of my couch cut-out. When I look at it walking back from the kitchen, all it's missing is numbered stands and yellow tape to be considered the crime scene of a violent murder. Time when I'm rotting is time I am not suffering, and my body has become accustomed to the comfort. I'm not sure if it's a combination of the stress and boredom that is causing me to go into a state of blissful delusion, but I know for certain that if I keep on this path, I'm going to be a completely different person by the time I get home. The way I decide to take myself out of my uneasy



vegetative state is not foreign to me, a coping mechanism for lack of a better term. Drugs and alcohol are my vices, and I, in the state that I'm in, fall into their promises of escape. My preferred method of sedation is the all American classic bourbon. Fifty one percent corn and one hundred percent delicious, best enjoyed alongside the embrace of a cuban cigar in a non air-conditioned area. aUsually, bourbon is not a lonely drink, enjoyed in the company of others. Not to take away from the enlightenment that comes from a book and bourbon, but I personally don't like to read. It's three days before the flight and I wake up in an

usual state. Feeling animated and almost sober, it's like I have been bestowed this day to correct my wrongs and conquer whatever was holding me back. This feeling lasted about three seconds before my eyes panned to the half-opened bottle of Maker's Mark resting beside my disheveled bed. As ZNS Bahamas played incoherent noise in my ear while I lay in my preordained spot on the couch, a notification on my phone rings. Because this day already feels off, I push through the anxiety and pick up my phone. A Tinder notification, as red as lust itself, sits on top of my screen. If that's the case, I definitely let myself go off the deep end last night. The fact that I allowed myself to swipe incoherently through an app I hadn't used in years leads me to believe someone came into the house with the sole purpose of getting me a rebound. But with no signs of forced entry, not even an unlocked window, that theory is laid to rest. Her name is Sandra, a twenty eight year old visiting Freeport. Her profile is five pictures, all in the same red dress in different locations around the world with a caption that reads "Love me or hate me, the red dress stays on during sex." I'd be lying if I said I didn't mind. She had curves in all the right places and a face that screamed, "I know what I'm doing in and out of this dress." My body, in an instant, detoxes itself and I am wide awake with blood rushing through me. I mute the TV and make my best impression of a person who has his life together in an attempt to woo this girl. There are two messages exchanged between us, mine and an address. The address leads to a resort on the beach called Taino Beach Resort and Clubs. I get really excited at the club part of the name, no woman I've known has been

able to resist the way I move these hips. I text her that I've arrived, and she says to tell the gatekeeper that I'm here for apartment #3412. A fourth floor view of the ocean can't hurt when I'm trying to get laid. When the guard calls her and tells her that I was let through, she texts to meet her at the beach. A night time beach excursion is guaranteed sex back in the states, so I'm hoping the Bahamas are equally patriotic.

I wait here on the beach for about fifteen minutes before Sandra arrives. She's in a bright red bikini that pierces through her sheer sundress. A light tan purse in her right arm matches her light tan sun hat that is comically large for her stature. No words are exchanged as she walks up to the pool towel I laid for her beside me. A silence thunders in my head as we lay next to each other and scan each other's bodies. I can't say I'm nervous because I'm not thinking, something else is in the pilot seat and in it hasn't had sex in months.

Sandra jumps onto my hips like a bat out of hell. I instinctively put my left hand on her waist and my right on the back of her neck, thumb on her cheek. She wraps her arm around mine and guides my right hand to her waist alongside my left. She violently rips her top and bottom off then proceeds to dig her hands in the sand and kiss me. It's all happening so fast that for a second, I lose feelings in my hands and legs, quickly resuscitated when Sandra pulls my shorts to my ankles. I am not in control of the situation, which induces a panic in me that has never surfaced, the blood rushing to my penis had other plans.

I would like to say I put on a good performance. All the other women in my life had told me fifteen to twenty minutes was enough for them. Sandra made it clear that she did not receive the same memo. She angrily clothed herself and left with that same red dress from her bio dangling out of her bag. I'm sitting naked on the beach at night, my shorts are pulsing with the incoming tides as I have an epiphany. I still love my fiancee. She still loves me. I am the one holding back the marriage because of my actions. The moral code that I've bound myself to and broken, is my Achilles heel. I say I am a man of morality and honor, yet fall at the slightest whiff of temptation. I don't think marriage is a path for me; I don't want to hurt another woman. She doesn't deserve it. A notification pops up on my phone, "You can now check in for your flight to New York City coming from Freeport."



## Dad Worm

#### by Isabella Carbajales

My mom is a strong and independent woman, my dad is a worm. I love them both equally of course, it would be messed up if I didn't. However, part of me wonders how my life would be different had I not had a worm for a dad.

For starters, growing up would have been easier. Unlike most children, I didn't learn how to walk properly until the age of three years old. The main cause of this was my tendency to mimic my father's way of transportation. He would (for lack of better word) "worm" around the floor to get from place to place. Not quite a crawl, more like a subdued slither. Anyways, after countless physical therapy appointments I was able to kick the habit and become bipedal. But I won't lie, sometimes when I'm home alone I worm around the house for old time's sake.

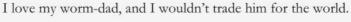
Making friends was tough too. Although I did not inherit any of my father's physical worm traits, it was hard to hide that the man-worm was my dad. For starters, he would drop me off every single day at school. Not a big deal, right? Wrong. My dad does not own a car, he slithers from place to place. It takes him about an hour to travel twenty-seven feet. So, every day I had school, I had to wake up HOURS in advance to make it on time. Not only was the speed embarrassing, but the vehicle itself. I would sit on a small sled that was tied to the back of my father's worm-body, as he pulled me to school. As I grew into a full-grown woman, this became harder. As you know, worms do not have ample horsepower to transport 110lbs of flesh and bone. But my dad tried nonetheless, I guess he didn't want to admit I was growing up.

I also don't hang out with my dad the same way most people do. For example, lots of people enjoy fishing with their fathers. Fishing is very traumatic for my dad; his grandfather was used as bait once.

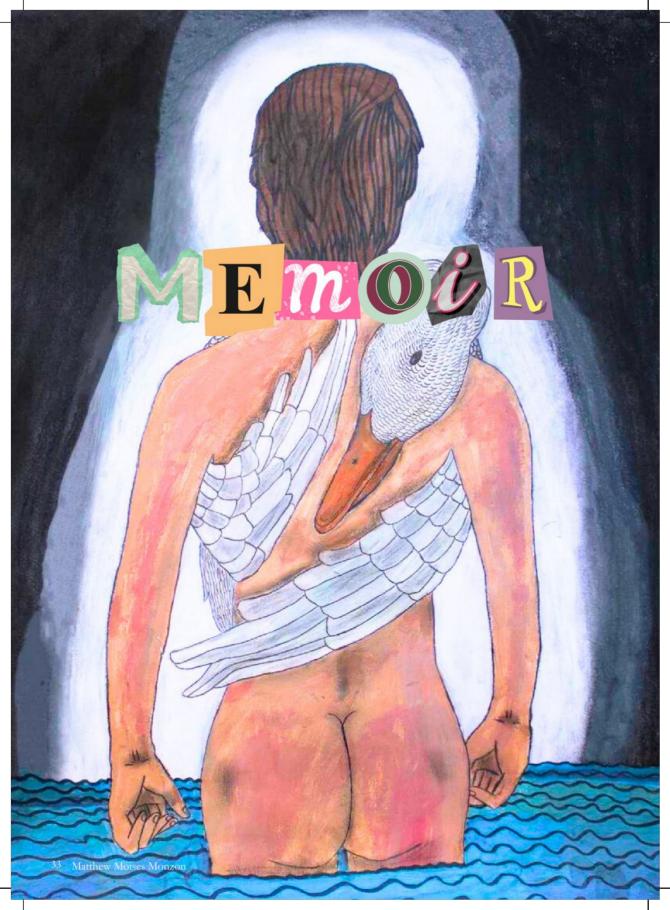
Because of this, I try to be accommodating. My dad's favorite activity to do with me is burrowing. He loves digging around in the garden, he'll do it for hours. He has no hands, so he just digs it up with his mouth. It sounds weird but I've grown up with it, so it makes sense to me. Although I do not like the taste of dirt in my mouth, I put up with it because I like spending time with

him. He also has a very particular diet. My mom gave up on cooking him dinner years ago, because he would much rather rummage around in the trash. One time, for Father's Day, I took him to the nearby compost center and let him roam free. He ate so much junk. People gave me a lot of weird looks, but it was worth it to see my dad so happy. In fact, his feast helped with the quality of the compost. Now every second Monday of the month, I take him there and let him go wild for like half and hour. There's a lot of things in my life I always wanted to have but could never get because of my dad's worm status. For one, I've always wanted a dog. But since my dad is only ten millimeters, it wouldn't be a smart idea to have an animal running around the house. One time, while at a family friend's house, my dad was viciously attacked by their pet Chihuahua. The dog almost completely eviscerated my father. Luckily, my mother was able to control the beast and save my dad's life. That's how they first met. Pretty adorable if you ask me.

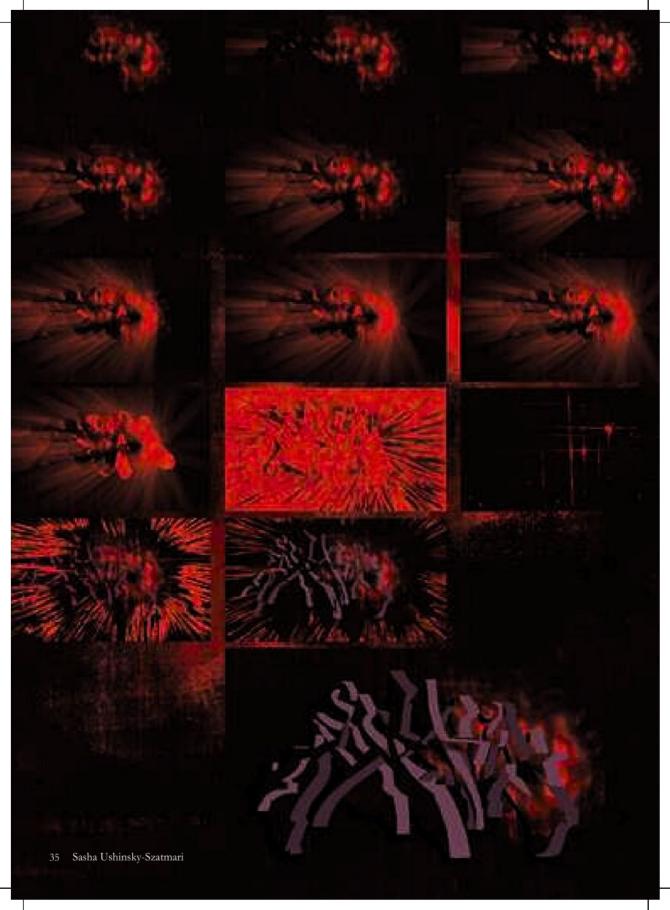
Although what I've said so far might lead you to believe the contrary, there are a lot of fun things about having a dad-worm. To start, he can climb walls. So far, I have not encountered any practical use of this special talent, but it is a neat party trick so there's that. Secondly, he is very portable. Whenever we go on family trips, my mom and I just smuggle him into whatever place we choose to visit. When we went to Disney World, we only had to pay for two tickets instead of three. This was achieved by my mom hiding my dad in her bra. Once we got passed security, she let him out, and we had a fun family vacation at a discounted price. Another perk of having a dad-worm is that he helps me cheat on tests. When I took my SATs I was so nervous. My dad decided to help by hiding in the collar of my shirt and whispering the answers. My dad never went to school though, so I ended up getting a 400 on the test. Thankfully, he can't read. So, when the scores came back, I just lied and told him I got a 1600.







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### The Morning After

#### by Jennifer Suarez

It is the morning after you died to me but not to the world. I wake up dragging myself out of bed feeling the weight of my sadness along with your loss, I stumble towards the bathroom, my movements sluggish and reluctant. As I undress, my eyes fell on the big, red stain left on favorite pair of pajamas and I realize, shit, I got my period.

Holding back tears, I pull aside the cheetah print shower curtains and step into the frigid water to let the cold shock serve as a reminder not to fall into my own self-destruction. "Tata!" I yell your name. No response. I forget. Leaving puddles everywhere I step, I rush back to my room without a towel feeling the combination of humidity and chilled air sending shivers down my spine. Now, standing in front of the mirror, staring into the hazelnut, brown eyes we share, I tear up with the memory of you. I glance over at the photo booth pictures of us that sit atop my vanity and remember a time when this house was filled with laughter and love.

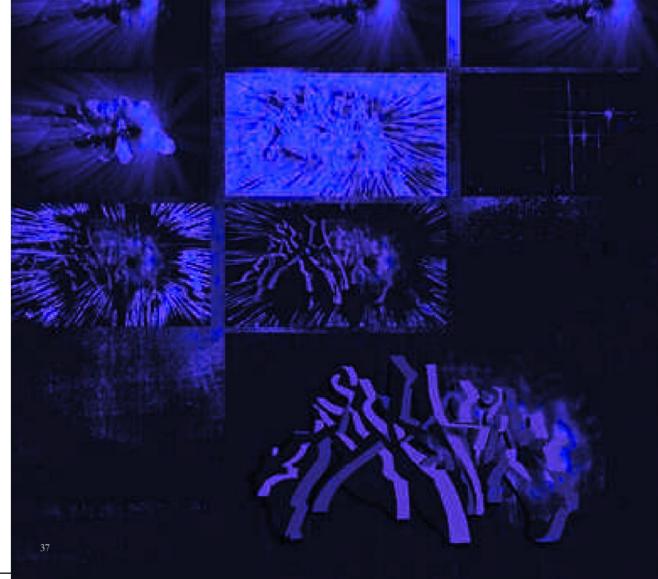
I remember our monthly movie theater visits where we watched the latest superhero movies. I remember all the cool "old school" songs you'd show me on the way to school. I remember learning how to play the tenor saxophone because I always wanted to follow in your footsteps. You were my greatest inspiration.

Now, dressed in my bright, piss yellow polo with the Mayfield Middle School logo sitting above my heart, I am filled with anger rooted from your hostility and violence. My older brother, the person who was supposed to protect and love me, has hurt me the most. You instilled fear in our home by filling the air with the linger of your distasteful words. Your rage towards our parents built walls decorated with barb wire in our home, further separating us from the unity our family needs. Your schizophrenia and beautiful mind haunt my heart and soul as it serves as a constant reminder that you were the first man to break my heart.

Walking towards the kitchen, the place where you'd tutor me for math, I prepare myself a simple breakfast of dad's signature café con leche and an everything bagel with cream cheese. As the clock strikes 8 a.m., I stand in front of your door, memories flooding my mind of when I used to knock without hesitation, back when I knew the

person who resided behind it. However, before I could even knock, you opened the door. Towering over me was a 6-foot-tall man with jet-black hair that despite the similarities in physical appearance, was not the brother I remembered. "Are you ready to go?" asked Tata.

As I lock eyes with the stranger standing before me, a feeling of emptiness consumes me. This man, whom I once knew so well, is now a mere shadow of the person I had grown up with. The brother I had loved and cherished was no longer there, replaced by someone unrecognizable. And at that moment, it hits me like a ton of bricks: my brother wasn't dead to the world, but he is dead to me. With a heavy heart, I reply, "Yes, Tata."





# A Fatherless Upbringing

#### by Anthony Makhlouf

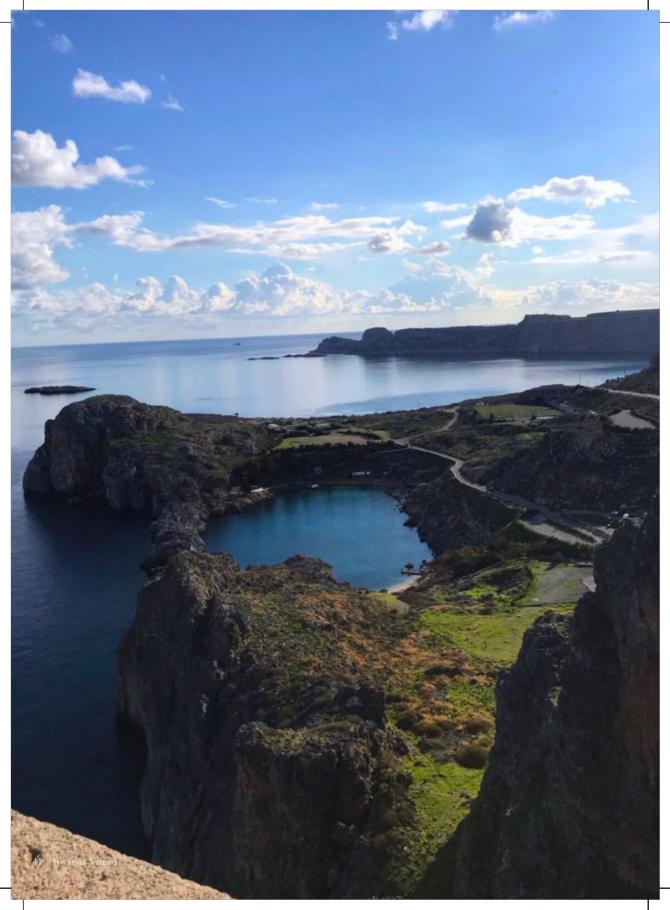
The concept of a father never occurred to me as a child. I grew up in a female-dominated household with my mother and a sister who was five years older. Even the family on my mom's side consists of 7 different women—not a single man. As a young child, I was oblivious to the fact that my father was not present in my life. Whenever my friends in school would tell me how much they admired and idolized their fathers, all I could do was smile and nod. There wasn't an ounce of relatability I could find. Before they would ask about my father, I would find an excuse to go to the bathroom to avoid the dreadful question. I never truly appreciated the work and care my older sister and mother provided me as a child until I migrated from Lebanon to Miami and met my father for the first time in years.

It was a major adjustment moving from a third-world country to the most wellknown country in the world. The cultural shock I experienced ranged from new grocery stores, a new education system, and a multicultural environment known as Miami, the vice city of South Florida. It was a big shift for a 12-year-old kid from a homogeneous country where diversity is nonexistent. But the biggest adjustment was living with my father for the first time. I was naturally excited as I could finally relate to my friends who grew up with their fathers by their side. At first, it was all sunshine and rainbows. He took me to places I had never been to, like the Everglades and niche restaurants, but it was just a matter of time before the problem of money came into play. It had been a problem from the start, and instead of dealing with my mother about it, he dragged me and my sister into the situation. I would become his therapist every time we spent time together, and it became less enjoyable being in his presence. Despite my young age, I could see his character's true colors. He was focused on providing for himself and not for the family. Yet he still wanted the luxury of having his kids around without helping in any way when we needed it most. It pained me to see this as a young child, being unable to help my sister and mother financially and seeing what my father was. It was truly disheartening.

As we rode in the car, I gazed forward with my father's words lingering in my head: "Money is stacking up, Anthony. It's up to God at this point to make sure the bills are paid." I was 12 years old, and he has repeated these words ever since I

stepped foot on American soil. I didn't know what to say or how to comfort him. I was in an extremely tough dilemma. On the one hand, I felt bad for my father. He had been in this country for over 40 years(since he was 18), yet he still lived paycheck to paycheck. I learned this from the stories my mother told me about him. On the other hand, I felt increasing levels of disappointment and resentment toward him. Why didn't he teach me lessons I could carry with me throughout my youth? Why didn't he tell me stories of his childhood and what molded him into the person that he is today? I felt like a knot in the middle of a rope, being tugged to either side of these emotions. Year year, this would continue and worsen my confused attitude toward my father. years later, he decided to leave the family and not return. It was a difficult moment to process because of the accumulation of several conflicting attitudes that I had felt toward my father. I can admit now that I had grown tired of always trying to give him my love, even when he didn't accept it. You cannot help someone if they can't help themselves. It isn't love if you have to force it onto them. There was a moment when I saw no point in moping over what had happened; I had to take charge and accept the reality of it all. I cannot control external factors. Not having a father figure certainly affected me, especially during such a crucial transitional period. In a way, however, there is beauty in the chaos. I gained my independence and learned what it is to "be a man," hopefully passing my wisdom down to my children in the future. I will provide them with what my childhood lacked and ensure they always have a parental figure to turn to. I don't hate or resent my father. I loved him and always will, but I accepted that perhaps things are better this way.

Throughout all of this, I only had my mother and sister to thank. They played both parental roles like a package deal. Through the downfall of my father's time with the family, I only gained more appreciation towards my mother and sister's efforts to make me feel loved and attempt to provide this "father figure" in the house. My mother fostered in me enough tenacity and determination to always get things done right and to never give up on my dreams, goals, and aspirations. My sister instilled in me a level of self-belief that I didn't know I had before. She helped me understand that my capabilities can never be limited by anything but myself. She always made me believe in myself and build up my sense of confidence to power through anything in my life. These two amazing and impactful women have had the most profound impact on my life. I am grateful for how my life turned out and have learned to love the highs as much as the lows.



# Operation Oyster by Laura Sanabria

When you're thirteen years old, the world is your oyster. For some reason, we all value finally turning thirteen. Being a teenager opens the door to so many new experiences and opportunities. We dress according to the age group. We start going out without our parents. We begin the journey through all the many twists and turns of adolescence. I was in a new, big school, I was finally allowed to get dropped off at the movies with my friends, and I was allowed to wear mascara. How could it possibly get any better than this? The world was my oyster until it wasn't.

Shortly after my thirteenth birthday, doctors realized that my scoliosis was getting bad, bad enough to consider getting corrective surgery. Two years before that, a screening at school showed that my spine was not curved to the typical degree and that this could pose a problem in the future. I always had the dilemma of potentially having to pause my life for surgery buried deep in the back of my mind because when you're that young and naive, you never think that things will happen to you. It's why so many young people are involved in car accidents or partake in activities that can harm their health in the long run because, to the immature mind, the world is your oyster. Except now, my oyster was threatened. "If you do not get this surgery sooner rather than later, you will not make it to see your senior year." I was barely old enough to graduate eighth grade, let alone even think about my 12th-grade graduation. Life just started! Suddenly, the world around me went dim, and the only words ringing through the forefront of my mind at all hours of the day, every day of the week, were, "You will not make it to senior year." From that day forward, the conversation around my scoliosis was a touchy subject. This was no longer something physical therapy could fix. This meant a life-changing procedure that would completely alter the way I lived my day to day. I was born congenitally amputated from my right arm. It took a lot for me already to see life in the same way that my peers did because, for me, it was nowhere near the same. In order for me to get to the very places that others were at, I had to put in twice the effort. Most times, my effort would go unnoticed for that exact reason. But now, I was expected to be disabled and operated on for a corrective spinal surgery. It sounded like madness to me. All the sleepless nights and the tears I wept to catch up to the rest of the world were some that were never supposed to be repeated. I had dealt with congenital amputation since birth. This was different. This was new. This was thirteen for me.

A time when I was supposed to dive into the world of teenagers was now being spent worrying about whether or not I'd make it out of adolescence alive.

The obvious way to go about this was to get the surgery out of the way and then focus on re-centering my future. This was only an obstacle, one similar to the millions of others I had faced in my life thus far. Fourteen now, I decided that I was ready. News of a compromised lung was the match in the powder barrel. On June 25th, 2018, I received corrective spinal surgery to treat my scoliosis. For reference, a normal curvature for a spine was one curve of about 7-10°. My spine contained two curves, one at 70° and another at 76°. No procedure would be worse than that, and that was my solace. Ultimately, I knew I would be stronger (in the least cliche way possible). That day was the beginning of it all for me. That day, "the world is your oyster" became so much more than a phrase.

I wish it had all been as easy as getting up post-op, and things suddenly returned to normal. It took a lot to get there. Little things had to be learned all over again. Little is not an understatement here; I mean as little as picking up a spoon to eat a bowl of cereal or getting up from the chair and lying in bed. Everything had become a two-person job. My mom was the biggest help, and it often felt like we were a team. At this point in my recovery, I laughed at thirteen-year-old me. Now that I had seven broken ribs and a nearly collapsed lung, deep breaths were something I longed for that I always took for granted at thirteen. I craved one of those deep breaths or sighs that I used to do so frequently. At the state I was in, there wasn't a single thing I could point out in my life pre-op that was devastating enough to prompt such constant sighs. It was then that I realized that there was one thing that I had always taken for granted, and that was life.



I was so caught up in the latest trends and the new cell phone that I was finally allowed to have that I forgot to look at the world around me and really appreciate every aspect of life. I was so obsessed with the idea of making the world my oyster that I completely forgot to actually take the steps toward getting there. That realization was the core of Operation Oyster, where life began for me. After all, I only had two options: mope or tough it out. I won't lie; I

moped for a while. Poor little me couldn't do things by herself and needed assistance even if she wanted a mere sip of water. But I knew I did not want life to turn into me being dependent on my mom; I had made it this far with congenital amputation; there was no way this would be what hindered me.

Every day, I took more steps than I had the day before. Each breath I took felt more fulfilling than the last. Every task that I was able to do by myself was one more task that I did not need to ask my mom to help me with. This was the way Operation Oyster was intended to go down. In ten years, I won't remember the name of the movie I watched in theaters with my friends. I won't remember my first brand of mascara or the teacher I had in seventh grade that made my life a little harder. I will remember taking that spinal fusion by the horns and making the recovery process a learning opportunity. I will remember the sleepless nights that led me to a better tomorrow and all of the tears that I wept on my way to playing catch-up with the rest. Those are the things that make me me. Those are the things that make the world my oyster.



# Captive

#### by Natalie Vazquez

I was kidnapped at the age of six months by my mother. If "mother" was a thing, she wasn't it. My father went to jail at twenty-one leaving my mother free to do whatever she wanted with me.

I was placed in the Dominican Republic, where I was abused as a child. Twelve kids, two aunts, and two grandparents lived together in one house. There is where all my tears were buried, where fear lingered. I thought it was customary for all that to happen at that time. My mom wasn't around much. She left me like I was her luggage. She headed to the airport and barely returned to pick up the bags she had left behind. She came twice a year, on my birthday, and the other time varied either summer or Christmas.

Despite her neglect, I loved when she came. Like any child, I yearned for my mother and grasped for her. When I turned seven, my mother finally came for me. She picked up her luggage, and together, we fled to Puerto Rico with the promise of a new beginning.

However, there I learned the truth. I discovered my mother was a dancer of the night, a doll anyone could play with for a dollar, a cheap doll. We lived behind the club she worked at. It was located in Isabela, PR. It was owned by a Colombian lady who took pleasure in the abuse of other women. She took advantage of their desperation for life, a life worth living.

I spent half the time with my babysitters and the other half with my mom, who was asleep for about 10 hours because she was hungover. She would wake up to make herself food or scream at me for making too much noise. But even she was better than the babysitters. I've had about 10-15 babysitters in my life. Most of them were worthless people who did nothing but abuse me for personal entertainment. My first babysitter was a "friend" of my mom, who claimed she would take good care of me. I hated her. She would starve me, and her "little angels" would hit me constantly. Her daughter once bit me and pulled my hair. I told my mom this; she wanted me to bite her in front of her parents and other people around the club. The little girl,

who was so tough, seemed so scared now. I hesitated and told my mom I didn't want to do that. She made me do it anyway. So I did it; I bit her hand. She cried. My mother got me McDonald's afterward as a reward.

My second babysitter had a different technique. Every

time the bed would make a noise, she would hit me. It was funny because the mattress was old and loose, so it would naturally make a noise from the slightest movements. I would wait in a specific position until she left the room, then move and sleep comfortably. She would also hit me

whenever her nephew blamed me for something; it didn't

omatter whether it was a lie. Those were my two favorite babysitters. When I turned eight, my mom and I moved in with one of her friends. She had gotten fired from the club, so we didn't ave a place to live. We were practically a charity case. My mom

always had to clean, cook, and ensure the laundry was done for us to stay there. The lady's son hated my guts, which I understand entirely. I had invaded his safe place,

his room. We went to school together as well, and he also hated that. He was just three years older than me or so. But I loved his sister; she made me happy. We used to go on car

rides together, sing, and she would pick me up so I could hang out with her and her friends. 1

She made a big difference in who I was at that time. She had type 1 diabetes. She died soon after she was diagnosed. I still remember what she told me. She said, "Natalie, I know you're smart, I know you can do many things, but you can't do

anything without effort.

I see great things for you, but I need you to try." That may not seem significant to many, but she was among the only people who believed in me. She was the closest thing I had to a sister and the

only person in my life at the time who seemed to care for me. And all the while, I lied to her.

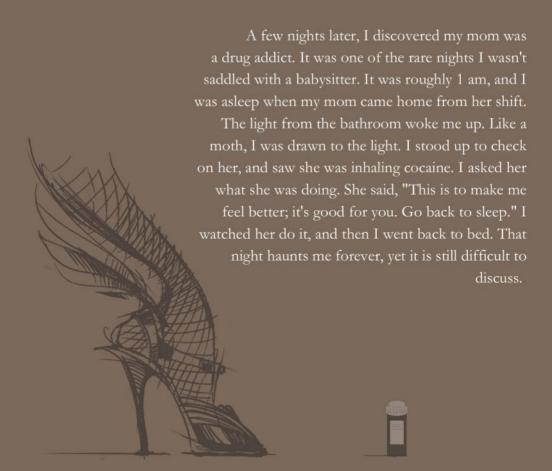
While she was sick, I learned of my mother's affair with her "friend's husband. She tangled me in her messy web, making me promise not to tell anyone. I felt like I was lying to the closest thing I had to a sister, the first person who seemed to care for me. A few months after her death, the lady discovered the affair and kicked us out.

Rationally my mother decided to move to Miami. We lived from shelter to shelter, home to home, never stable. In one of the shelters, my mom "fell in love." Whenever she and her lover fought, I always paid for it.

Once, while they were arguing, he hit my mom. When I went to defend her, he hit me with a clothes iron. My head got swollen, and I was dizzy and nauseous. After that, my mom broke up with him and profusely apologized to me. I said, "está bien, no te preocupes." I felt guilty because I felt like my mom wasn't happy since she had broken up with her boyfriend. Soon after, we moved into a different shelter that helped us get an actual home. We moved into an apartment; my mom found a job at a club. But even this new life felt like the life we had left in Puerto Rico. I was alone most of the time since she worked at night, and when she was home, she wasn't. She was drunk or high 90% of the time. I had to take care of her; she was my mom, no matter what. It was like our roles switched: she was the kid and I was the adult.

My mom found a new babysitter for me. The babysitter had two kids. I used to stay there six days a week from 8 pm to 2 am. I liked their home. It felt different from mine, cozier and cleaner. They were also nicer than my past babysitters.

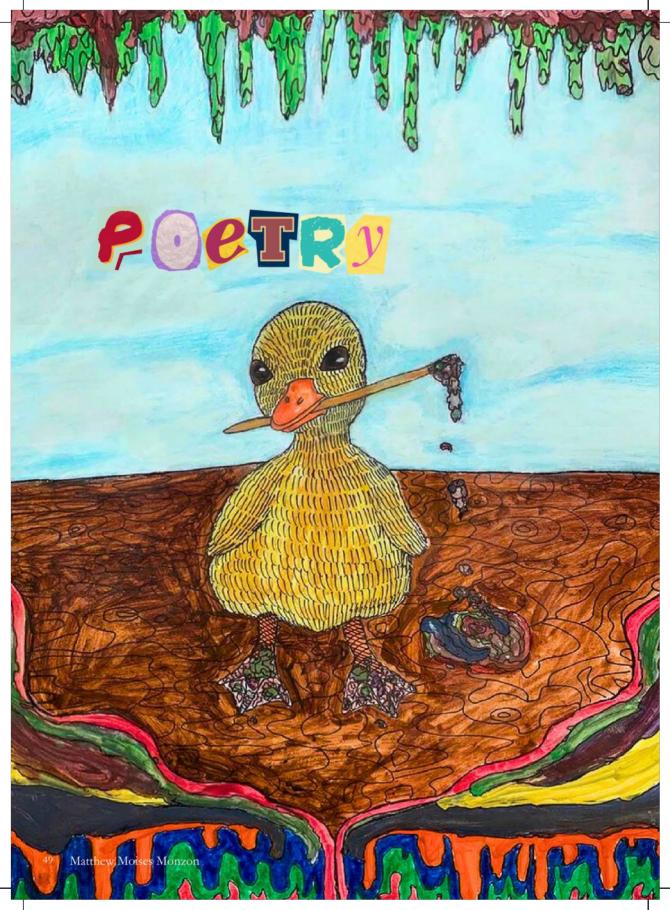
One day while at their house, their daughter and I were scrolling past the channels when we came across a show. Now that I am older realize that it was pornography. But at the time, we thought it was an entertaining show. The boy would often put it on, and it became our favorite show to watch together. He would touch us, but we didn't know any better. He had autism, the little girl was 5, so I was the one that should have known better. I was the most conscious one. Her parents found out a little after, and they forgave me as if I was the one to be blamed for their negligence.



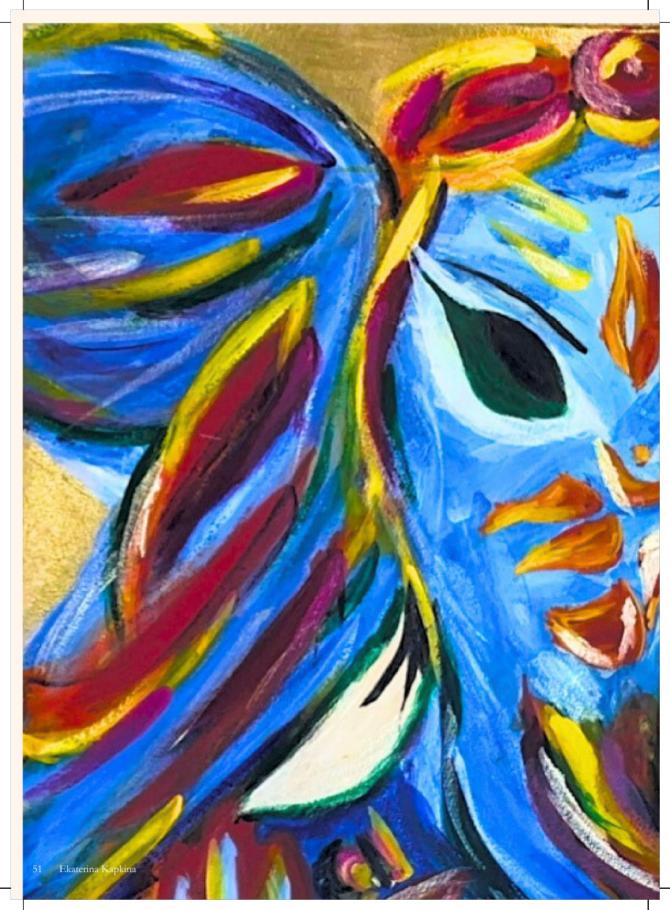
A few months later, around October, curiosity surrounding my father began to arise. I started to reach an age where I wondered about him nonstop. I searched for him on Facebook but couldn't find much. When I asked my mom about him, she didn't know much, but she did help me find him. We learned he was married and had a kid. I asked my mom if I could message to meet him.

She initially said no, but after a few hours, she caved and allowed me to contact him. He agreed to meet me at my apartment. I would finally know my father, the man I had always dreamed of meeting.

A few days later, there was a knock on the door. My mom had forced me to wear this ugly and uncomfortable dress. But it didn't matter because my father was at the door. My father was right before me, not 500 miles or three countries away; he was here. The man I spent my whole life imagining and wishing for was finally here. I knew that he would save me, help me. I didn't know it then, but even he was no better.



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## Citizen's A <del>Woman's</del> Plea

by Alexandra Nicole Ceballos

The time has now arrived,
I am handing over my rights to you.
For all these years, I have survived
Constant trivial fears turning into
Armed conflicts, the world burning,
My hands fight and mouth yells
And yet I feel so... helpless...

Do you know what it is to fight with two hands
While just yelling with one mouth?
It makes what I do seem like just the backdrop
Of a chilling scene with high-stakes
Running all the stops, there are no breaks.
In this high-stakes world running off of
Fossil fuels and stock-shopping sprees,
In this high-stakes world that is run by Greed
That just takes and seems to ignore the people's aches
In this high-stakes world that is at its end
I live as the dreamer whose little life is beginning

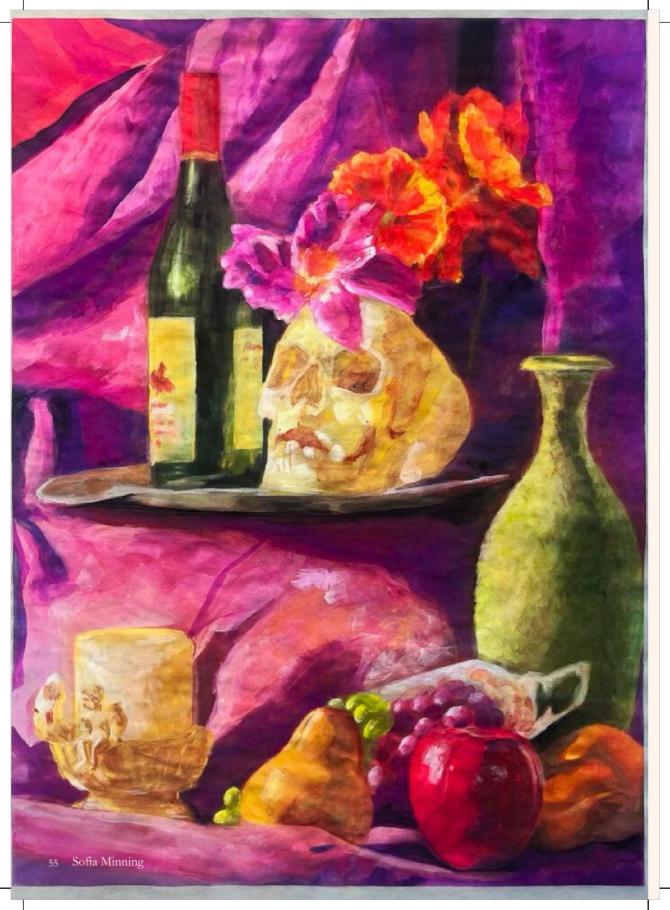
Amidst what seems like its Great end



I am a dreamer, una luchadora

That represents her people with Family-loaned, caramel-toned fists Cradling a pen to form words And freeform verses with the promise to transform The world from the ground up And be the reform running across The marbled Congressional halls To really show the world that its we they answer to

So as I hand you my rights,
Your end of the bargain still holds.
So as you usurp what you may,
Your actions to the world I can still relay
So as I prepare to succeed you one day,
This citizen can and will too play the game.
1 Spanish word that means "fighter"



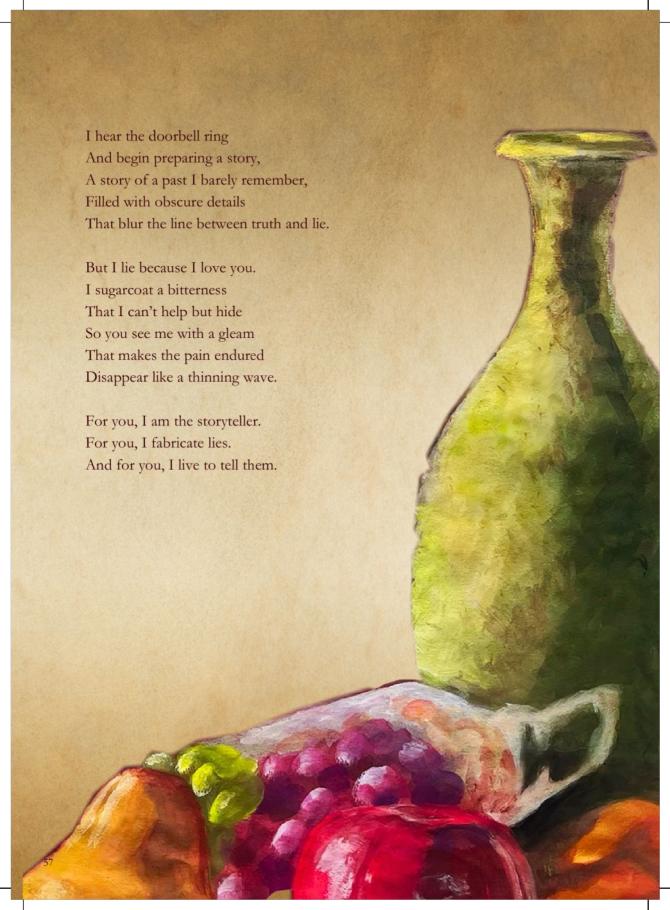
# Dinner with June by Jose Restrepo

My daughter is coming over at seven With a family I cling to since she left. Spoken over the phone With the briskness of A casual affair, it was planned.

The tables have been set
Since my wife died late August.
I eat alone in my room
Every day to avoid seeing her
In the table cloths and blue-green
Cutlery that I gave her for
Our anniversary after our thirtieth.
Today marks four months since.

I see her everywhere
And nowhere all at once.
She has stayed like the air
Of an oven fire,
The char that lingers
Even after the smoke is gone.
I breathe it in with a welcome ease.

The past rests within the walls,
Waiting to be uncovered
With the sensible touch of
One who has known loss
And will cherish whatever memory comes—
Like a fallen ocean pearl
Resting on a sheltered cove.







Initially, our bond was a McDonald's napkin—an inconsequential thing, some might say. I bought her fries and told her to discard the napkins. "No need," I'd say, "they're unnecessary." But, she asked to keep them in my car's middle console, an unlikely sanctuary for remnants of our shared meals and laughter. A place I'd never thought to store such restaurant detritus. Occasionally, in moments of necessity, I'd reach into the console and draw out a napkin. Each is a fragile memory of our shared time, slowly unraveling us. We kissed like people do when love is real, but the taste was different. It was tinged with a bitter afterthought, the looming reality of what we were becoming. A subtle shift, a change in tide, and our connection waned. Each kiss was an echo of what used to be. A dwindling mirage of our togetherness. The dwindling number of napkins—our shared memory. The last few moments, the last few napkins, a haunting parallel I couldn't ignore. And then, there was the final napkin, preserved, I thought, a remembrance of our inception, a piece of the past, untouched, untarnished, unused. It was a piece holding the memory of us frozen in time. I forgot about the napkin in the throes of our discord. Convinced there was no

salvaging us, I ended it. Tears streamed down my face. Mascara painting my cheeks. The world is reduced to a blur in the car, driving home. I reached for a napkin, any napkin, to wipe my grief away, but only there was one final napkin.

The one I thought was perfectly preserved, untouched, was smeared with makeup. I didn't realize I'd used it; just as I hadn't realized our fate. I had ignored the signs, the slow decay of us, and the dwindling napkins. I'd kept that last napkin, not like the others, discarded and forgotten. Despite its torn, chaotic state, I'd kept it, a precious relic of a past no longer ours.

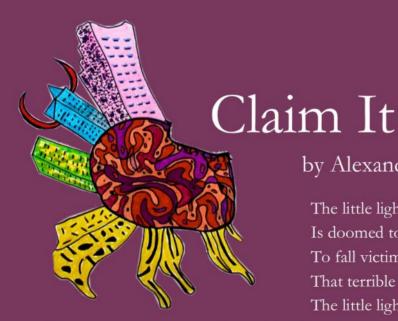
Today, it's still in my car, the last reminder of her, of us, of a time when we were whole and in love. Its torn, dirty state mirrors my heartbreak. Why does it still mean something to me, this little piece of paper? Because although she left me broken, I still love her, and that torn, dirty napkin is the only thing that reminds me of the person she was in the beginning, the love that was, that no longer is And so, I keep it, a bittersweet emblem of our past, a reminder of what it feels like to be loved, truly loved; even if it tears me apart, I hold onto it

I'm attached to that napkin and the memory of her. Only that one, that last one, holds the essence of us, a symbol of our love, a sign of our end. Perhaps I shouldn't have used the napkins in the first place or allowed my heart to hope and love, but what is life without hope? Even in pain, heartbreak, and loss, there is a bittersweetness. The napkins dwindled, just as our love did, an inevitable, heartbreaking progression I could not halt. I spent our whole relationship in fear and crippling anxiety, worried that each moment could be our last, that she would grow weary, and that she would leave without warning. I knew, deep down, that once the napkins ran out, so too would our time together. The last napkin, I thought I could save it, save us. But it was torn, used, destroyed—just as my heart was. There was no saving it, no saving us. It was an unchangeable course, a love doomed to end, yet it was neither the napkin's fault nor mine. It was just the way things were, the way things are.

Now, I still keep that napkin, that last torn piece, the only thing that reminds me of the sweetness of our beginning and the pain of our ending. The only thing that captures my heartbreak. A small piece of our shared past, a token of a love that was, and even though covered in makeup and food, it's beautiful in its way, a testament to real love. After all, the napkins were me all along. Used, then discarded, forgotten, like a fleeting moment. She'd hurt me, and I'd deny it, push it away, until I could ignore it, just like the napkins. But the final napkin, torn and broken, reflects my broken self, the aftermath of a love loss. I wonder if she understood the weight of her last chance. If only she realized that her indifference and refusal were the final straws. She didn't want to go, she didn't want to try, and it was different. Because she never said no before, she never gave a reason. Did she realize that was her last chance, like the previous napkin? Was she as unknowingly destructive as I was with the napkins? I should have never used the napkins in the first place. I should have never given myself my heart so freely. But love is a gamble, a risk we all take, and sometimes, it leaves us broken, like a used napkin.

I wish I'd never run out of napkins and she'd never run out of love, but wishes are whispers in the wind, echoes of a past long gone. In the end, it's just me and the last napkin, a poignant memory of a love that was and a love that could have been. Perhaps it is a lesson that even the most insignificant things can hold the most significant memories. And even though it hurts, I wouldn't trade it, not for all the napkins in the world.





#### by Alexandra Nicole Ceballos

The little light that burns within you Is doomed to soon dim.

To fall victim to your neglect,

That terrible lack of care.

The little light that burns within you

Exists as you exist, as you live and breathe.

It identifies and becomes you,

Simply waiting for acknowledgement.

The little light that burns within you

Can come in many forms.

I have a little light of my own,

Except I willed it become a flame.

The little light that burns within you

Is exactly what makes you what you are,

But does not control who you can become.

So demand of it what you can.

The little light that burns within you

Can become a flame.

The little light that burns within you

Can become a fire.

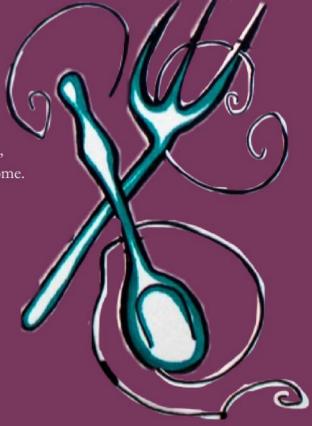
The little light that burns within you

Is more than just little.

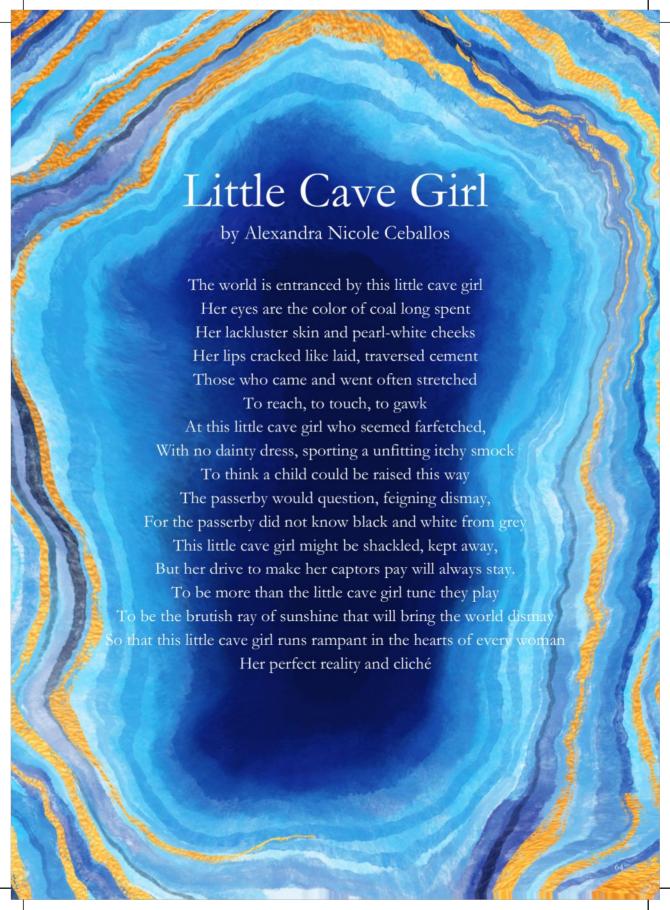
The little light that burns within you

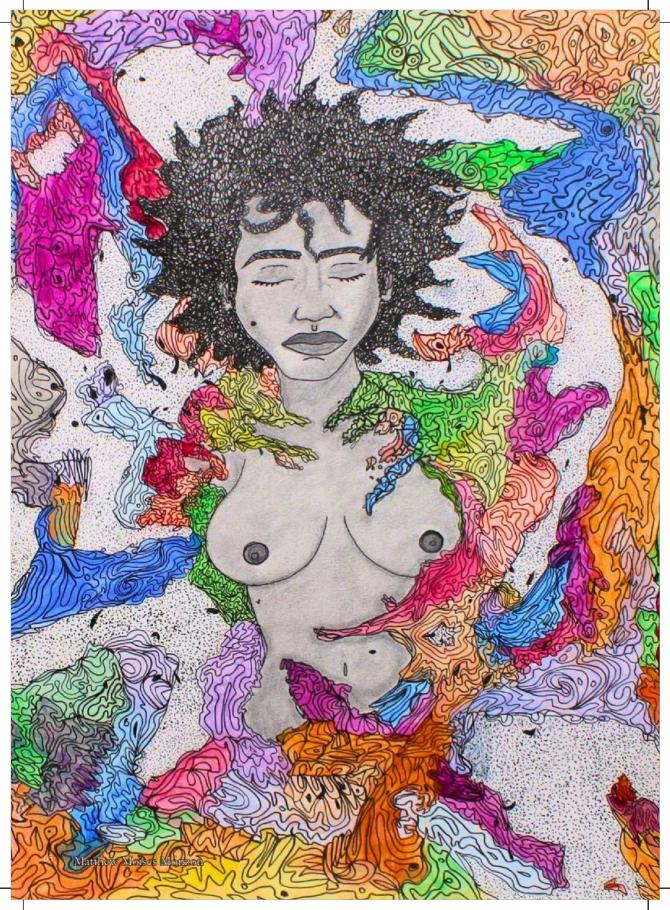
Is you.

Claim it.









# Seductress

by Erzel Smith

I watch my family bleed for the soil Watch us be chased back to the fields, we relent Hands wrapped around me as tight as my coils The color of my skin is already consent

Watch us be chased back to the fields, we relent What is a black woman if not a whore? The color of my skin is already consent Our no's translate to more

What is a black woman if not a man's whore?

I traded in my shackles for bruises, my chains for cuts

Our no's translate to more

Your hands dig at my skin during your ruts

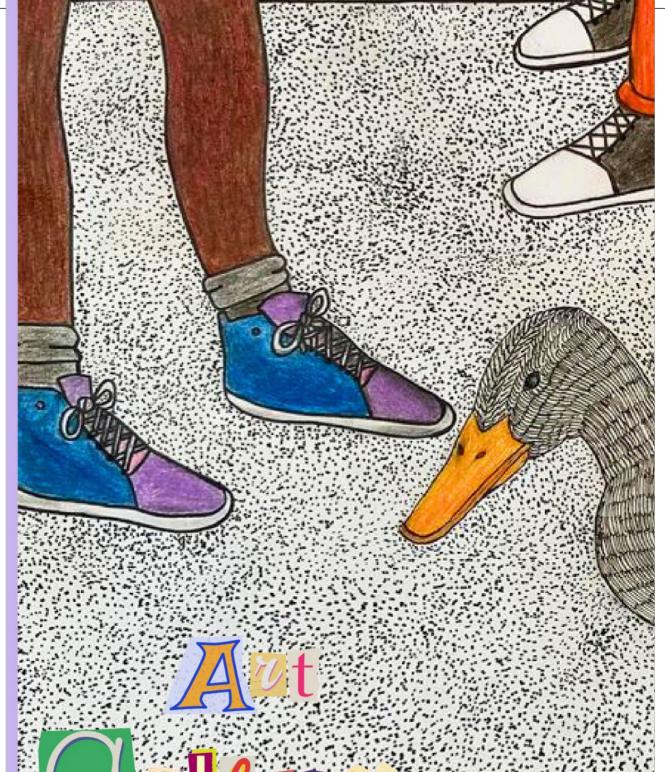
I traded in my shackles for bruises, my chains for cuts
Can the crime of assault even occur against a negro
Your hands dig into my skin during your ruts
We watched R. Kelly kill Aaliyah you think she didn't say no?

Can the crime of assault even occur against a negro. I was wanted before I knew how to want.

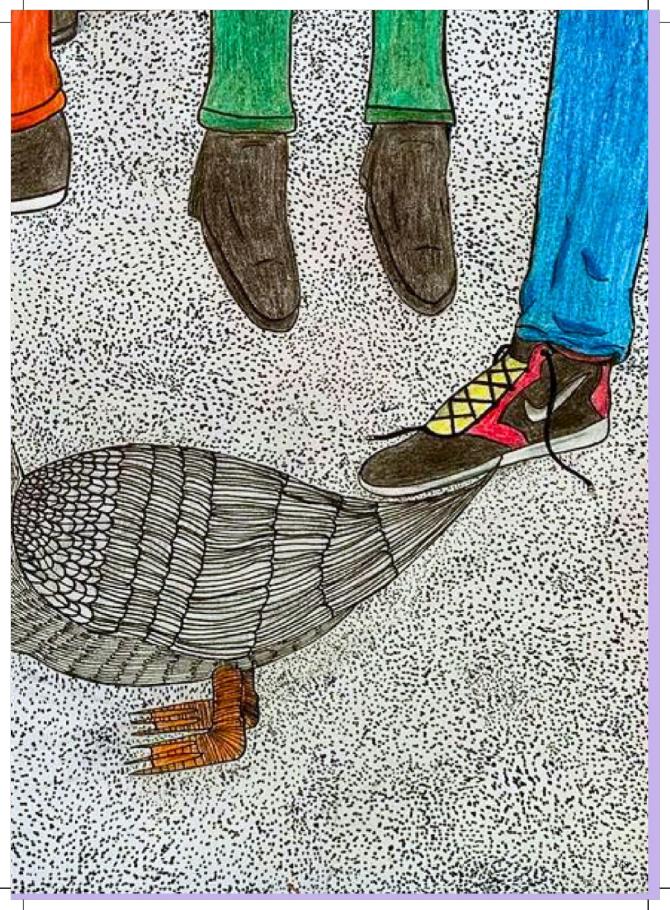
We watched R. Kelly kill Aaliyah YOU know she said no My Ancestors mourn me, and I mourn the infants

I become Jezebel that they made me out to be
I watch my family bleed in the soil
I become resolved to the fact that I'll never be free
Hands wrapped around me tight as my coils





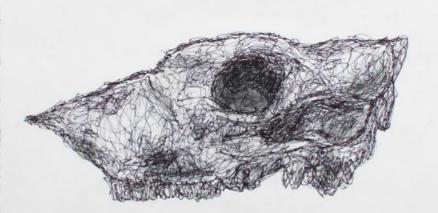
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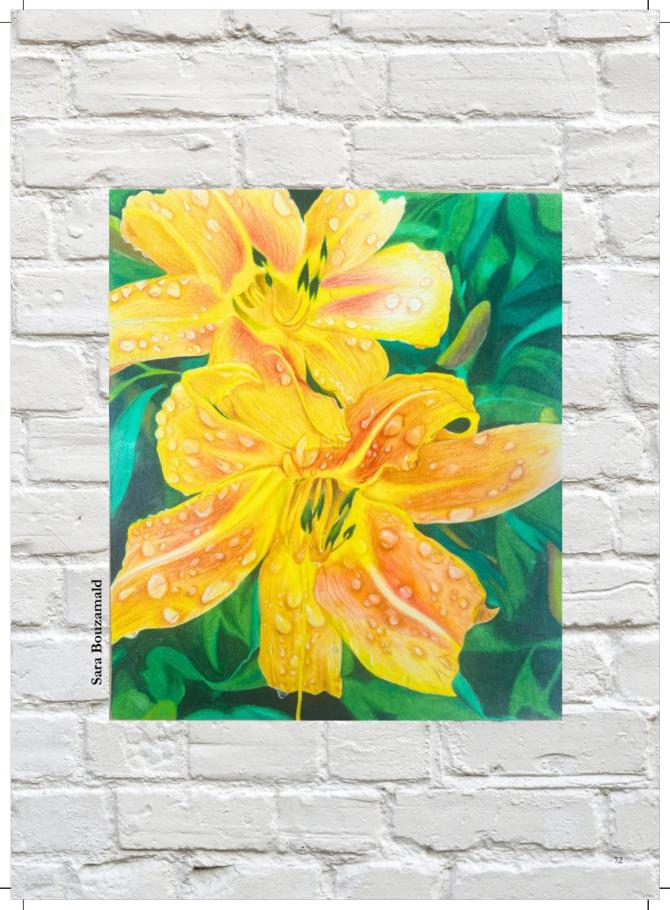
Ayana Harper

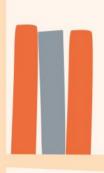
Matthew Moises Monzon











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Professor Gabriella Maria Coro Faculty Advisor





Professor Yousi Mazpule Faculty Advisor

Paola Arriaza Editorial Director



#### Christina Blanco Co-Art Director

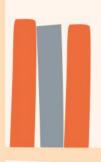
#### Camila Garcia-Llaurado Co-Art Director





Jose Restrepo Director of Poetry & Editor

Ian Escarra Writer-in-Residence



#### Anais Ayala Artist-in-Residence

Efrain Landaeta
Staff and Contributor





# Erzel Smith Staff and Contributor

Thank you to all of our staff and contributors!

# Dr. Jennie Canete Julia Goodwin Jonathan Diaz Reyez Anna Vinogradova Matthew Moises Monso

Pablo Llorens

**Emilio Pesantes** Natalia Escudero Isabella Carbajales Elizabeth Perez Sara Bouzamald Arquimedes Rivero Violeta Rothschild Sean Lim Sasha Ushinsky-Szatmari Jennifer Suarez Joshua Mobley Iovanna Vinani Laura Sanabria Natalie Vazquez Ekaterina Kapkina Alexandra Nicole Ceballos Sofia Minning Mathilda Julia M. Ayana Harper



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