

THE TORCH

Winter 2022

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Bowie State University
College of Arts and Science
Department of Language, Literature, and Cultural Studies

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BEATRICE AMOATENG

The Chronicles of 509

For the past three years, 509 has been something akin to a refugee camp for the fifth floor. It is not unusual to find random people sleeping on the couch, floor, or even the table. Stressed college students gather there every night with their laptops in hand, attempting to do homework but instead procrastinating until 3 am. The shouts of laughter can be heard from across the hall. The door is perpetually unlocked, and young people putter in looking for a place to talk and be seen. Often, the room has more visitors than people who actually live there.

The room has a slight air of disarray. Book bags and jackets are heaped in corners, and plates of food sit half-eaten on the counters. They don't belong to the apartment residents, but rather to the steady stream of guests who occupy it. The residents of 509 usually don't mind that their room has been ransacked and taken over by outsiders. They welcome it, and they accept the chaos that comes with it. At any given time, the group of 6-10 college-aged kids can be found heatedly discussing politics, sex, and every other taboo topic. If one were to be listening outside the door, they might think that a serious disagreement was taking place. Insults like "Fuck you" and "You sound dumb as fuck" are continually being hurled around, but that's just how they speak. Every sharp affront is met with laughter, which dulls it. Everyone knows that no comment is ever actually meant to offend.

This batch of college students longs for graduation. They cry that they can't wait to be done with school and out of this place. But these are the moments that they will miss when they finally walk across that stage and are rewarded for their four years of hard labor with a piece of paper. When they all have jobs or are in graduate school, they will miss being with one another and having everyone close. It is so much easier to show up randomly to someone's living space now than it will be then. Everyone will be so busy with life and work. They will look back at the sleepless nights of mindless conversation with nostalgia.



Portrait of Dania Reyes and Tatyana Gaskin-Wallace ('21) by Jesus Estrada ('21)

CIERRA JONES

Then and Now

“Dear Cierra Jones,



You are important to us, and this letter is to inform you that your grades have fallen below the required academic standards here at Morehead State University. Due to which, we would like to notify you that your current enrollment for the third semester has been suspended and will be effective immediately,” I read aloud to myself in my car. Shocked and dismantled, I balled up the letter up and threw it to the floor among my freshly packed boxes and trash bags that contained what remained of my life. Clothes, shoes, dishes, lamps, and everything else I owned fit into my small, 97 Saturn named Lucy. My Lucy smelled of the sweet lotions and oils that leaked from one of the boxes. The odor would have been bearable if the car had working air-conditioning or if it were not so hot. My eyes were burning from frustration, pollen, anger, and the potent mixture of oils and cleaning supplies. Parked alongside the main drag in Morehead, Kentucky, I sat quietly panicking and in disbelief. I was officially no longer a

student of Morehead State, homeless, and mentally and physically exhausted. Feeling defeated, I knew something in my life had to change.

My thoughts turned to my friend Erika, a beautiful black woman who was charismatic and motherly. Being in a small town, I had gravitated towards the locals. Soon I found myself at Erika's home. The house sat at the top of the hill with a long gravel driveway and an expansive fenced back yard. The freshly cut grass smelled minty and sweet. Her small duplex was well-manicured, and the home was warm and tasteful. Erika opened her home to me with welcoming and open arms. Walking into her house as a desperate, non-student felt different. I had been to her home plenty of times for cookouts, birthday parties, and s'more sessions over the fire pit. Before, I had my own place to return to, but now I had nothing. There was my family home two hours away,



but the thought of returning there a failure was too much to bear. The dark green welcome mat at the front door had never stuck out to me before, and my panic receded as I walked through Erika's door.

Over the next couple of days, I took plenty of time to analyze the decisions I had made and how I had gotten to this point in life. "What happened to my ambition to graduate college with flying colors?" I asked myself. I realized I had not felt motivated for a long time. I felt both stuck and

displaced. I recognized that I did not care about microeconomics or biology. I had not cared about school in months, and I did not understand why, and my lack of understanding was painful. After a while, I decided to no longer soak in my misery or continue giving myself a pity-party. I could not change what should have been. I could only learn from what had gone wrong. I started weighing various options: relocate to a different city or return home to Cincinnati, Ohio.

From a distance, Cincinnati is beautiful. Tall corporate buildings line the Ohio River, but the air reeked of corn syrup from the factories spread across the city's skyline. Most of my family and childhood friends still resided there, and I vividly remembered the long summers filled with water parks and roller coasters. Cincinnati had so much of my history, yet I felt underwhelmed and unmotivated to go back. The pace of life there, like in Morehead, was slow. The city didn't offer many career opportunities, and growth was limited. The high crime rate and civil unrest from the inner city were spreading to the rural areas. Opioids, thieves, and gentrifiers had invaded once quiet neighborhoods. It was no longer the place of my childhood, and I could not see creating new memories there.

Starting over somewhere else was a scary alternative, but it was the one that made the most sense. On September 4, 2013, I sat quietly in the back seat, staring out the window of the Jeep that my mom was driving. The trees were beautiful, and the roads were cleaner. Like Cincinnati, Washington D.C has tall skyscrapers and an official history I've been familiar with for many years, from presidents to memorials. Still, the

people were so different from home and Morehead Ky. Different cultures, exotic food, new ethnicities, and many career opportunities. I was excited and nervous at the same time. A large city like Washington, DC, made me realize how small my thinking was compared to my reality. I was motivated to do something new, enjoyable, and self-fulfilling. I was open and willing to learn.

I have wanted to be a cosmetologist since I could remember. I have been practicing and styling hair for years. I worked on my friends, my dance team members, and anybody willing to take a risk with me and a pair of scissors. My teenage bedroom always smelled of spritz and coconut-based products. I decorated my room decorated with magazine images of beautiful African American women and men. I dreamed of being a world-renowned stylist. I decided to revive that dream when I moved to the District.

In January 2014, after working and readjusting to my new surroundings, I was accepted into Aveda Cosmetology Institute in Washington, D.C. The year-long cosmetology program required three days a week, ten hours a day. While I went to school, I worked full-time at Ralph Lauren, but I was deeply committed to graduating with flying colors. While attending Aveda, I was able to enhance my craft from a technical and scientific standpoint. I learned how economics affects the beauty industry and why microeconomics has some importance in pursuing my dreams; how biology matters in all areas of life. I tried to soak up as much information as possible. During the school year, I was interested in editorial work, magazine spreads, and blogs. While my curiosity was running rampant, I networked with many people, including the Washington Wizards Cheerleading Team Director. He believed in my talent and recognized my grind. I was allowed to style the Wizards Girls' hair for their yearly calendar; I felt encouraged and valued. Upon graduation, I gained a career opportunity to assist Claude Marcel in his beautiful salon in Tysons Corner, Virginia.

Claude Marcel was everything I wanted to be: a famous celebrity hairstylist. He worked with many influential people from World Cup tennis players to some Hollywood actresses. I was flattered and delighted with excitement. His salon smelled of high-end services and extravagant flowers. Working there was like being inside of a magazine profile. The salon spoke of classic French elegance. The beautifully designed glass



Detail, *Healing Me* by Tylih Dixon ('21)

walls that separated the shampoo room from the reception area were engraved with every country's name. The floors were natural travertine. The stations looked clean and innovative, and I didn't see a cord in sight. It was in an environment that inspired, encouraged, and uplifted me. It became my home. I focused on learning everything there was to know about chemically treating hair to cutting and styling. I excelled, and I felt my world of possibilities expand.

I have not achieved my dream fully yet, but I felt that part of my mission was complete. I had another one in mind: finishing my degree.

"Dear Cierra Jones,
Congratulations! it is with great pleasure to welcome you to Bowie State University," I read aloud, my voice shaky and my stomach filled with butterflies.



Detail, *Actias Luna* by Brianna L. Taylor ('21)

ALEXANDRA OMOGBADEGUN

Courage (for Veterans Day)

How does it feel
To be labeled a hero when you're not trying to play hero?
When you're simply letting it all go
For people you'll never know.

How does it feel to save lives
When you really should try to survive
Knees trudging along hills
Birds calling when you want all to be still
Earth rotating
Enemies gyrating
And you and fellow comrades? Preparing
To dine with death unwavering.

On a day like this,
I do not ask why you chose this life.
On a day like this,
I do not question what you experienced.
On a day like this,
I lock eyes with your legacy
A safe haven is the history
The present and future story

I wear camo utility jackets and combat boots
But I do not have your courage
I do not let go of family to wallow in war
I have not lost my right arm
To keep all other arms in place
I have not been trained not to cry
And my black face does not hide in black granite
I have not leaned against trees dodging bullets

Yet unafraid to take a million of them.
I do not have your courage.



I like to catch flights
Tour the world for a couple nights
But I do not have your courage
I do not know what it is to fight in air
I have not won in space and cyberspace
And I do not know
how Atlantic winds blow
I do not have your courage

I watch battleships and submarines in movies
I do not know what it means to live in the deep blue sea
As the enemy's target
I haven't learned to wait for letters from loved ones
I do not have your courage

On a day like this,
I do not ask why you chose this life On a day like this,
I do not question what you experienced On a day like this,
I lock eyes with your legacy
A safe haven is the history
The present and future story

Today, I partake of an inheritance
That doesn't come with my last name
Today, I need you to know
That all you gave was not in vain.
Today I dwell in the Safe
haven of your Blood,
sacrifice, and Tears,
knowing your
Name will echo through
The years because of Your
courage.



KEVA COLBERT

Tacos Not on Tuesday

The perfect meal fits in your hand, and the mouth has to open fully to engulf the pure goodness.

Though it was not a Tuesday, I had a taste for some good veggie tacos. I went grocery shopping for all of the ingredients I would need. While in the grocery store, I stumbled across something I had never seen before. A hard shell taco bowl! I hurried to grab the orange and yellow bell peppers, the green and yellow zucchini, brown rice, organic black beans and mushrooms, avocado, mild mango salsa, and kale.

I was in the kitchen with Apple music on shuffle, "Whippin' the yam, whippin' a fifth of the yam. Turn the whole brick to a lam." Future's "Move that Dope" played in the background as I sautéed most of the veggies and roasted the zucchini. Seasoning vegetables does not take much. They all have their flavors, so seasoning should maximize those flavors, not conceal them. I used garlic, garlic salt, and lemon pepper. When cooking veggies, you want to work quickly, so you don't overcook the veggies and lose their nutrients. I season the oil in the pan and then add the vegetables. The individual smells rise in the kitchen and join, making an intoxicating aroma. That smell is how you know it is time to remove them from the heat and place them in their bowls.

I discovered taco bowls were quite delicate. While the veggies were cooling down, I put the bowls in the oven on broil. I had to turn the oven light on to keep a close eye on them. I wanted them to brown but not burn, and it only takes a moment between one pleasurable state and disaster. Once the bowls were done, it was time to configure the meal. The rice always goes first topped with the black beans. The sliced peppers go next, then the slices of zucchini. On top of the zucchini goes the mushrooms, kale, and fresh avocado. To top everything off, we must not forget the salsa.

I sat at the dinner table with a fork in hand, munching away at the many layers of food and putting a little of everything on my fork for one spectacular bite after the other. I plucked away small pieces of the taco bowl, making little chips to add to my wonderful meal. I repeated the cycle until the bowl was half full, and its front wall was no longer. I took what remained in the palm of my hand, like you would a pizza, and brought it to my grateful lips.



Still from *Flavas* by Jaimese Johnson ('21)



MALIKA T. HACKLEY

4109

1.

circa 1972

five children raising up to be someone in life.

their moaning creaks in my bones

In the bones of the house.

stop standing so long

in that spot, next to grandma's dresser. your footsteps keep me up at night...

the sixth child born to spoil,

she neglected my floors and tore up my mirrors

broke my teacups and trampled my floors of wood.

but she loves me though, she tells me so.

2.

I never wanted to leave. forced from comfort and tossed into daddy's care.
mommy never wanted me to go, she cried
often after her brain cells
left... before I left

my uncle and I had shows:

I was the piano,
he was the drums.
his beat was an Alzheimer's groove
but you could catch the rhythm if

you were careful.

3.

there aren't any yellow lines on Lyons Street.
we don't have opposite traffic only the souls of black folk coming from the not so
prestigious capital of divided America.

We do have neighbors bonding over the tempo
changes of James Brown
and Marion Barry's personal life: "he crazy."

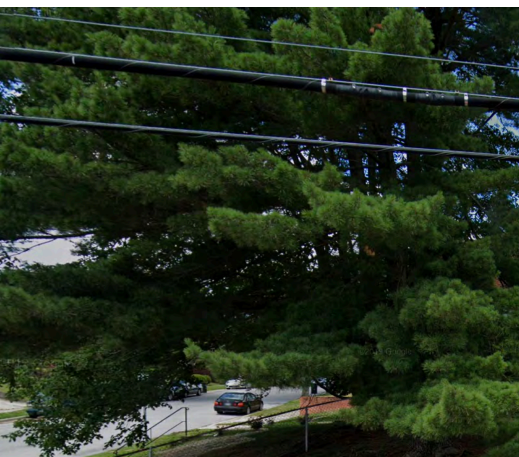
there are chitlins that smell like
the first level of the slave ship,
collard greens with white vinegar cause they couldn't afford the healthy stuff
cooked in 4110 next do'.

4.

Yesterday and today my 4109 is my life my 4109 misses me

breaking hearts and habits is hard
4109 longs for a piece of sunshine to break through
the shadow from the tree in the front yard.

"I'm getting it cut down!!" I plead with grandma not to.
Today the tree still stands
proud as the soldier coming home from war.



Letting me know where I am, “We’re home!!”

5.

Ties

what are they?

Ties like the ones the Muslims wear
selling beans pies on Penn. Ave OR
ties that we don’t speak of that I don’t speak of
The red heart shaped ones that keep me from
expressing that day when mom lost it.

I don’t know how grandma did it, if she did it.

6.

Number one. Alzheimer’s ate his brain until there was no brain left.
He told it to stop, but no mercy was shown. None.

Number two. Symptoms of the inevitable death. The
gay man’s disease.

No one was ready, no one knew. Gone.

Number three. The reason I love so deeply. I am a
queen because of that song *Love
always win.*

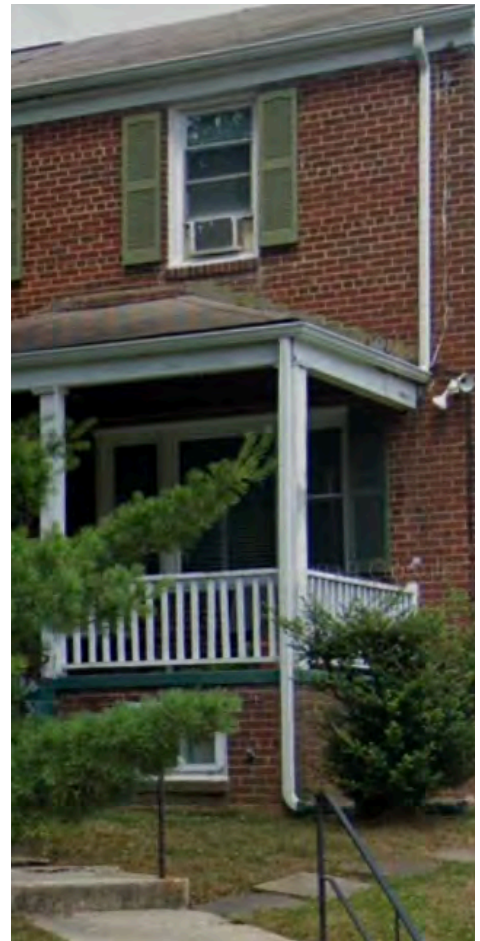
Number four. Disorganized but organized with
reality. Suppressed love. Love
languages.

Number five. Quiet not silent, small talk but smaller
words. Biggest love and bigger hugs Sacrifices for
love, and security. Happiness is near. Here.

Numbers changed my life.

7.

summer dawns were the family favorite
different shades of sky and slivers
of sunshine caressed my skin



i never wanted to leave the porch
my throne.

i watched the neighborhood as my townspeople glided up and down Lyons St.
mama said i was a Queen

humidity so moist, the air turned my straight hair ponytail
into an indigenous fro
you can't run from home not even if you try.

8.

The dream she had in 1963,
is the same dream she had in 1972.

Dances of black folk up and down the street, Say my death wasn't in vain.

Bump of the bass in the basement from the
Midnight boxing match singing that black is crack

Spending most evenings and nights crying with the piano, and singing to the walls.

Underneath me
Melodies she made up with the spirits that emit from the family pictures.

9.

The next morning,
my eyes opened,
I felt my neck.

Warm and smooth
after sleeping with the fan on.
Not warm from body heat.

My temperature rises at night.
I stand up to be idle in the other spot in grandma's room that moans when you stand
there too long.

I hear the emergency room call when my right to move my neck still rested in the hands
of someone else; the pain comes back sometimes.



10.

Every piece of my 4109, adored me
4109 saved my life.

11.

What I thought was a breeze from the cars, was a breeze from the trees.
And my hair happily haphazardly flowed:

From the throne, the view is mystical.

The coconut shaped clouds
You can see them when you sit in the rocking chair, on the right side of grandma's
room.

From the royal tower, the view is never ending.
From the palace,
the greetings are warm.

12.

Hands can untie many knots:

The one in my necklace that I call mine, but really is my grandmother's. The one in the links of the cuffs around mama's wrists.

Reasons to go to bed at night,

My heart and thoughts felt darker than the sky behind the moon.

Leaving the room still reminds of the time my rage turned red, Because I only had one colored pencil.

I have three now.

13.

The yellow lines that were on Lyons St. came off the ground one time.

They slowly flew towards my neck.

Grasping and twisting my shirt

The yellow lines look more yellow in retrospect,

when I'm dreaming. when I'm dreaming on a street with white lines that

Come together. Right now. Over me.



Photos by C. Smith ('18)

JAZMINE WASHINGTON

Athletes and Activism: Ending Police Brutality

Police brutality has been *the* trending topic on many social media outlets. With a range of heartbreaking incidents between the police and black citizens, the people, including professional athletes, are out-raged. The revolving question is, how do we put an end to police brutality and begin to practice equal protection under the law for all?

Unfortunately, there is no definite answer. For now, the outraged people and professional athletes can only use their voices and platforms to fight against police brutality. One voice can broadcast a message, but many voices can make sure that the message is heard and received. While professional athletes utilize their platforms to voice their emotions, opinions, and concerns, they are putting a dent in the vast problem one action at a time. We could look at LeBron's infamous shoe stamp, Raptors' point guard Fred VanVleet expressing himself, and WNBA attributing its season to a victim of police brutality. Although the problem of police violence and social injustice feels overwhelming, athlete activists and the people are doing what it takes to achieve change.

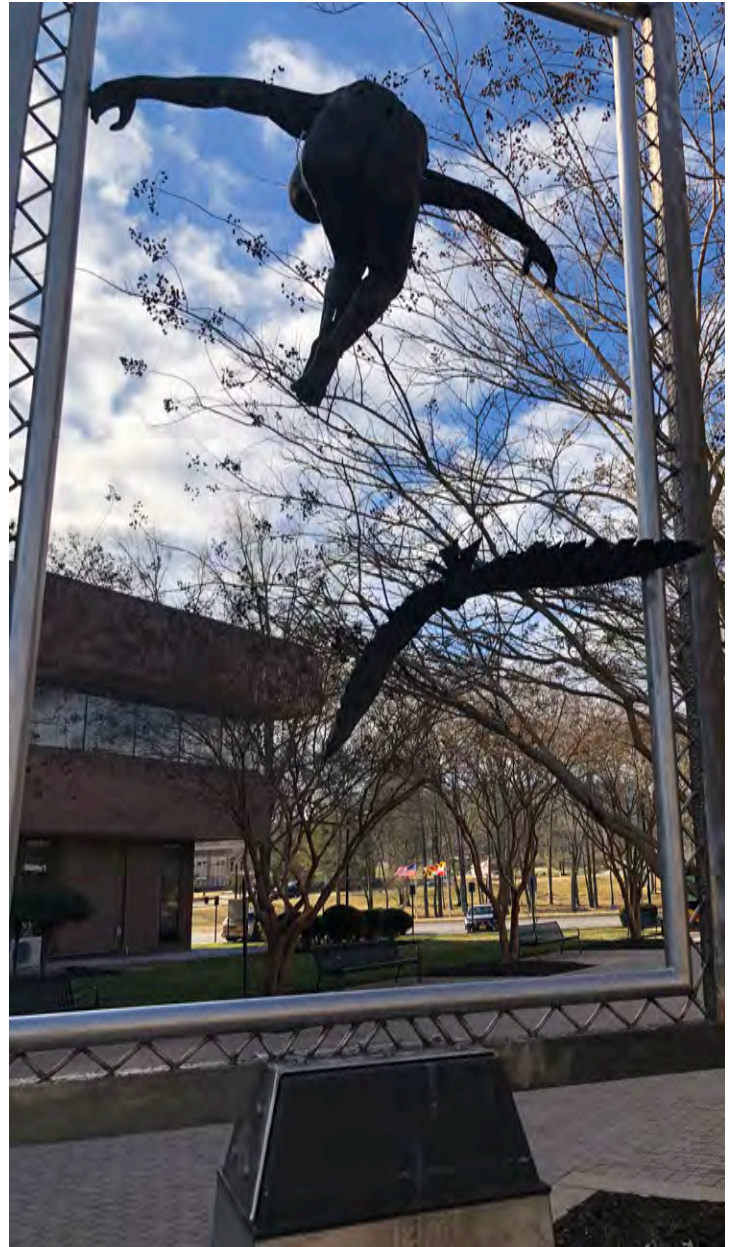
You do not have to be famous or well known to participate in social activism. Nor do you have to be 'important' to wish for change. Modern-day activism consists of protests, petitions, and advocacy. Demonstrations take place all over the world now in response to police violence and social injustice. The aim is to achieve equity. Equal protection under the law means that no matter the color of your skin or your occupation, you have the same right as the person next to you or the person who lives in a better neighborhood than you. Everyone deserves the same treatment. Athletes can work with non-athletes to achieve this common goal.

Arguably, one of the world's best professional basketball players, LeBron James, has also made it his goal to defeat police brutality. *The Undefeated* published an article titled, *The most notable sneaker scribbles in the NBA bubble*. LeBron James uses his sneakers as a 'canvas' to raise awareness; scribbled near the sole of one pair is, "Justice for George Floyd + Breonna Taylor." Due to his stature, individuals all around the world were able to view his shoes. According to Sportscasting.com, "James total earnings in 2019 came to a whopping 89 million, and according to Forbes Magazine, 'Over 1/3 of the total – 32 million, to be specific – stem from James shoe deal with Nike.'" With these incredible numbers, one can only imagine the number of people

that own a pair of LeBron James. It was strategic to scribble on the shoes. It makes sneakerheads pay attention, and it speaks to young and old. Every time the camera covers the ball in his possession, people see the message on his shoes. This strategy shows how James thinks like a corporate athlete and positions himself as an activist. The shoes may seem small, but small victories add up. Although the new LeBron James shoes by Nike do not feature social justice messages, it seems like only a matter of time before they do, if his graffiti shoe is an indication.

Fred VanVleet is the starting point guard for the Toronto Raptors. He lost his father when he was five years old. He is very familiar with trauma and death. In *Fred VanVleet's Diary*, he briefly discusses his father's passing and the shooting of Jacob Blake, the Wisconsin man who was shot several times in the back at close range as his two children witnessed the event. When I listened to VanVleet's talk, I could hear the frustration behind his words. He knows what it feels like to be reared without a father. While leading his fellow teammates on the court, he is also leading change off the court. VanVleet does not address change solely for athletes. He does it for the people. The end of police brutality and equal protection under the law for all is his goal.

Breonna Taylor, 26-year-old African American woman, was fatally shot by police officers in her home on March 13, 2020. Due to the incident and many other instances of police violence against women, the WNBA decided to dedicate its season to the *Say Her Name* campaign. The players' goal is to spread awareness by committing to saying the names of victims, fighting for justice, and being the voice for black women that do not have people marching in the streets for them.



WNBA 2020, New York Liberty's Layshia Clarendon called the names of "Sandra Bland, Dominique Remi, and Breonna Taylor" at the Liberty's opener. All the women were victims of police brutality or social injustice. Clarendon also said, "We will be a voice for the voiceless."

My mother always says, "What you don't know can't hurt you but, what you do know that does hurt you, will. You have to navigate through situations and find a way to come out on top." We know that black women and men are being slaughtered on the streets of America. We also know that our voices and utilizing various platforms can aid in change. The many things the people and professional athletes are doing today are putting a dent in the problem. If we continue to navigate through this horrible situation by each of us using the platforms we have, we will find the will and the way to curtail police violence and come out on top.



Still from *The Next Floor* by Reese Harrison ('21).

MAHUWENA GOITO

The Blackest Magic

Fat beads of sweat roll down my back. The liquid mingles with the fabric of my dress. Is anyone sweating as much as I am? Probably not. They have no reason to be. At this crowded bus stop in the middle of the city, these people are probably heading to work. Or school, like I should be. But I'm not. My left hand is jammed in the pocket of my jeans where a newspaper cutout sits crumpled. I pull it out and gingerly unfold it. I've read this thing about a hundred times by now, but I never get sick of the story. I can see the bus chugging toward the stop, so I only scan the headline:

“Concerned Bell State Citizens Boycott Restaurant Holding Pagan Rituals”

“Concerned” is an understatement. But that isn't my main focus. The restaurant, *Republique*, is what compels me. As soon as I read the article three days ago, I decided I would go. The “pagan rituals” are held every Thursday morning. At first I resigned myself to never being able to attend. Thaddeus watches me get on the bus every morning, and he is there lounging on the front porch when I return at 3:45 every weekday. But today, he'd been called in for an urgent meeting, so when the bus pulls up to my house, I don't get on. Instead I run to the bus stop two blocks over, and board a bus heading from the suburbs into the city.

The dingy, blue and orange city bus pulls up to the curb. Bits of gravel shower the sidewalk and ricochet off of the bus shelter's Plexiglas. I, along with everyone else at the bus stop, board the vehicle single file. I tap my mom's fare card against the terminal and avoid the scrutinizing eyes of the driver. Will he ask me why I'm boarding a city bus at nine in the morning? But he doesn't. The terminal accepts my payment and I sit down at the very back of the bus next to a slumbering old lady.

The snores of the old woman is a soundtrack as the bus chugs along, stopping frequently to pick up additional passengers. I keep my eyes fixed on the digital display that reads the stops. 4th Street. Singers Avenue. Bell State Mall. 49th & Verde Place. I tug the orange cord and the bus's robotic voice announces: “Stop Requested.” The driver pulls to the side at a graffitied bus stop on a barren sidewalk. I hop off and nervously observe my surroundings. I stand in front of a large red brick building with huge picture windows. Graffiti covers first window with a crudely designed middle finger. The sign outside of the building reads “*Republique*” in scarlet, cursive lettering, but when I peek inside, I see nothing but empty tables and an unmanned bar. I pull the newspaper article out of my pocket and re-read it.

“Concerned Bell State citizens have decided to boycott *Republique*, a restaurant known for frequent pagan patronization. Weekly meetings are held on Thursday. An

anonymous tip to the police attests that the meetings involve animal sacrifice and egregious magic use.”

Well it's Thursday, so what was going on—

Suddenly the door swings open and a tall man with dark, almost blue, toned skin and cobalt dreadlocks steps out. He wears a shiny black tuxedo with tails, the kind you see conductors wear at symphonies. I catch a glimpse of a group of people crowded behind him. People with gorgeous and vibrant outfits. Women and men with afros adorned with silver and gold circlets and--.

“We’re closed, miss.” The man steps out and pulls the door shut behind himself. He stares at me expectantly.

“But I’m here for the gathering!”

“You must be mistaken. There’s no gathering here, see?” He gestures at the windows that show an empty restaurant. I frown at him and point at the door behind him.

“I just saw a bunch of people behind you. You must have used m—”

“You’re mistaken. Now get lost isn’t today a school day?” He turns on his heel and reaches for the knob.

“No, wait!” This isn’t how things are supposed to go! I lunge at him and grab the tails of his jacket. As soon as my hands touch the fabric, the coat’s color switches from black to purple.

“Hey! Get off!” He twists around and shoves me away from him. I stumble backward and trip over my own feet. My knee hits the ground and the rough sidewalk tears a hole through my stockings and the skin on my knee. The man winces and scratches the back of his neck. “Ah, shit. I didn’t mean to—”

“Look!” I yell and display my knee which bleeds black before knitting together and closing the wound.

The man brings a hand to his mouth and stares at me with wide brown eyes. “I am so, so very sorry. We’ve been getting all sorts of shady characters trying to get in and cause trouble. I thought you were one of them. Aw, I am so sorry. You know you don’t look like one of us.” He points at my shaved head, then my gray hoodie, Peter Pan collared dress, stockings, and Mary-Janes. “How ‘bout I give you hot chocolate and croissants on the house? For a week--no, a year! As long as you promise not to tell your parents I threw you on the ground.”

“Deal.” He doesn’t have to know that my parents will literally kill me if they find out I came here. Free hot chocolate and croissants for a year? Yes, please!

“I’m Tière by the way let me introduce you to the others.” Tière extends a hand to me and I take it.

I follow him through the door and the bold smell of freshly baked pastries and coffee envelopes me immediately. A group of people stand in a throng in front of us, and

most of them smile at me warmly. Some glance at me once and turn back to their conversations. Nearly everyone is dressed extravagantly. Colorful dashikis, huge earrings with glittering gemstones. A man with real butterflies perched on his epaulettes sits sprawled in a chair at a table with a woman wearing a kimono that shifts from green to yellow and back.

The restaurant is as wondrous as its patrons. Intricately carved chairs toddle about, offering themselves to anyone standing. Plates of pastries and breakfast dishes float through the airs and place themselves gently on tables. The bar that looks unmanned from outside is occupied by a man who looks exactly like Tière, except his dreadlocks are red and he wears purple tinted glasses.

“That’s my brother, Sahn. Uh, don’t go over there seeing as you’re a kid. Also, try to avoid speaking to him.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to be held responsible if you pick up his bad habits or learn about something strange.”

I frown and steal another glance in Sahn’s direction. I am surprised to find him staring at me with a massive grin spreading from cheek to cheek. The hairs on the back of my neck rise and I avert my eyes.

Creepy...

A woman with flowers in her hair, a silk green blouse, and high waisted blue slacks approaches us and smacks Tière on the shoulder. “Tière, you dog! I didn’t know you had a child!” Her voice is rich and husky. And her dark, nearly black eyes glimmer with mirth as she speaks.

Tière rubs his shoulder and glares at the woman. “Okay, first off, Makandal, ow. Second, this isn’t my kid.” The woman, Makandal, turns to me and holds out her hand.

Her gel nails are filed into points so sharp I fear they will cut my skin, so I take her hand gingerly. As soon as she grips my hand to shake it, her nails recede into a blunt almond shape.

“Whoa. Transformation magic?” I ask. I’ve never seen transformation magic before. Even mom-- before she met Thaddeus--was never able to perform such magic. Of all the magical disciplines, transformation magic was the hardest because you have to be completely comfortable and in tune with your body to be able to manipulate your appearance properly. I’d read about instances where novices had tried transformation and ended up losing limbs or gaining them.

“Yes, transformation magic is my specialty. What’s yours?” Makandal replies. I scuff my shoe against the shiny hardwood floor and fiddle with the hem of my dress. I knew before attending this gathering that this question would come up. Every magical person has a specialty. Some people were best at charming objects, or telling the future,

but I don't have a specialty. I should, I know that. But specialties are taught, usually by parents to children, but my mom is...

"I don't have one my mom won't teach me." I mumble.

"She won't teach you?" Tière gasps, and presses a manicured hand to his chest. His outburst causes every group nearby to halt their conversations and fix their gaze on us. I shrink under their scrutiny and grip the bottom of my dress more tightly.

"Tière! Tact? Do you possess it?" Makandal snaps and swats his arm again.

"Ah, sorry, I was just surprised. As a mage, you have a right to know how to use your magic! It's a damned disgrace when a parent fails—

"It's not like she didn't teach me any magic! I know basic spells! She just hasn't shared her specialty with me" I argue. Who does he think he is calling my mom a disgrace and a failure? My face feels hot with embarrassment because of all the people staring at us, but also because of Tière's words. It isn't my mom's fault. She's just...stifled. When she realizes Thaddeus is a dickhead, she'll get us out of there and we'll go back to our hometown and she'll teach me her specialty and then some! Makandal places her hand on my shoulder and pulls me toward her. She is so tall that I have to crane my neck to look into her eyes.

"Let's have a chat." Before I can respond, she herds me to an empty table by the far wall. My heart jitters in my chest. Why does she suddenly want to talk to me? We sit down across from one another and now that we are eye level with each other, I can see that the flowers in her tightly coiled hair aren't decorations, but real. Some of them are closed, while others gently uncurl themselves and bloom.

Makandal folds her hands under her chin and stares at me. I squirm under her gaze and find that it's hard to meet her eyes. She is amazing and intimidating all at once.

"What's your name?"

"Toussaint Columbus."

"Well that's certainly an oxymoron!"

I sigh and shrug. "Columbus is my stepfather's last name. He's um,"

Makandal interrupts and places her hand over mine. "You don't have to explain. I understand. Mixed families are unfortunately increasing and in the worst way. But I want to know about you." She leans forward and grips my hand in hers. "Are you alright? Are you safe?"

I open my mouth to reply, then close it. A rush of unpleasant feelings drain from my ears to my face, and to my horror, my eyes begin to water.

Makandal squeezes my hand. "Come with me. I've been looking for an apprentice for some time now.

I'll teach you everything I know, and my specialty. I can protect you, and teach you to protect yourself."



Detail, *Angelou* by Kyle Everett Reynolds (2021).

Dumbfounded, I stare at her then shake my head. “I’m sorry, I can’t. My mom-- She’s going to realize that my stepfather isn’t good for her, and I need to be there for her when that time comes. I’m sorry.”

A look of something I can’t discern flashes in her eyes. Was that sadness?

“Don’t apologize. I understand completely. But, I can’t let you leave without helping you a bit.” She removes her hand from mine, and her nails lengthen again. She reaches into her hair and plucks a flower and a chunk of hair. She places them on the table side by side and then drags the claw of her index finger down her palm, drawing blood in a single stroke. She holds her hand above the flower and the hair and lets a few drops of blood fall onto the flower. The flower, which is white, allows the blood to paint its petals until it is completely black. She picks up the hair and stuffs it into the center of the flower then places it back on the table and presses her palm against it. She begins to chant, but I cannot understand the words. They don’t sound like any language I’ve heard before.

“O cul’an vaat’noso. Cy’i’tolos.” She removes her hand and in place of the hair and black flower is a black tinted glass flower. “This is a protection charm. If you ever feel like you’re in danger. Break it, and I’ll help you.”

I hold the flower carefully in my hands, marveling at its intricate construction. It feels cool in my hands as if it’s been refrigerated.

“What was that language you spoke? I’ve never heard it before. It’s not Latin is it?”

“No, it’s the old language. The language of magic. Not many know of it anymore. When you speak it while casting spells, the effect is more powerful than when you speak English.”

“Thank you, Ms--”

“Call me Makandal, and I will call you Toussaint.”

I smile at her because I haven’t heard my name fall from the right tongue in months. My mother stopped calling me by my name because Thaddeus wants to change it to Mary. But I won’t let them, so they started calling me “you.” I think that if they called me by my name suddenly, I wouldn’t like it. But I like when Makandal says it. The gathering ends after two hours Tière tells me later that he extended it for me as an apology for his earlier outburst. He gives me a warm croissant wrapped in parchment paper and tells me that he will have a mug of hot chocolate ready for me next time. I follow the stream of patrons filtering out of the restaurant, and I’m surprised to see a couple of them conjure disguises before they exit. Extravagantly dressed men and women become mundane in the blink of an eye.

“For protection,” Tière explains when he sees me gawking.

That makes sense, I suppose. Bell State isn’t known for being friendly to mages. I hang back for a moment, wanting to see if Makandal will do the same, but she strides out the door in her natural glory and disappears into the night.

“Wow,” I whisper. I started to follow her out, but Tière snags the hood of my jacket.

“Let me call you a cab. It’s pretty dark and I don’t know how I feel about you riding the bus this late.”

His protective tone warms my cheeks, but I shake my head. “If I take a cab home, my parents--my stepfather will wonder why.”

“Hm, then how about I teleport you near your house? Teleportation magic is my specialty.”

His brother calls from behind the bar. “You know what’s also his specialty? Teleportation dismemberment.” I glance his way to see him grinning in my direction, I avert my eyes again and he burst out laughing. Tière glares in his direction.

“Will you shut up?” Then he turns to me. “I have never dismembered anyone. “On purpose!” Sahn interrupts.

“Shut up!”

Even though they are essentially yelling at each other, I can tell there is no meanness behind their words. Sometimes I wish I had a sibling. Then other times I imagine what life would be like for them, and I stop wishing.

“I believe you Tière, please, teleport me.”

“Alright, stand perfectly still, close your eyes, and think of a spot near your house.”

I do as he says and think of the kiddie park down the street from where I live. It should be devoid of people now, which makes it a good place for me to pop into existence without giving someone a heart attack.

“Go.”

I feel a warmth in my stomach, and suddenly the background noise of the restaurant fades away and is replaced by crickets. I feel a cool breeze on my skin, and when I open my eyes I am in the park. I unwrap my croissant and eat it on the way home because Thaddeus will definitely ask how I got it since I don’t get an allowance. When I get to my house Thaddeus is sitting on the porch and when I unlock the gate and step into the yard, he charges toward me and grabs my arm, nearly wrenching it out of its socket.

“Where have you been?”

“You’re hurting me!” I shriek, as he wrenches my arm above my head. He doesn’t say a word as he pulls me up the steps and into the house. My mom is sitting on the couch with her hands clasped in her lap. She doesn’t say a word as Thaddeus releases my arm and points at the chair across from the couch.

“Sit.” He snaps. He waits until I obey his order, before going to sit next to my mother. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and places it on the table. A recording starts to play.



Lost by Tyliah Dixon ('21).

“Good morning, Mr. Columbus, this is Principal Leopold Jr.. I want to inform you that your daughter, Toussaint did not attend school today. If her absence is due to illness, I understand but in the future I would appreciate if you would give us a call to excuse her.”

Crap.

“How dare you!” I yelp as Thaddeus slams his hand against the table. The pretty paper weights decorating the tabletop, tremble. “Do you know how much I pay for you to go to that school? Children more grateful than you would give an arm and a leg to go to St. Aloysius.”

He says that like it’s some treat to go to that stuffy school full of judgmental hypocrites! As if I love wearing a skirt in thirty degree weather, because “young ladies must remain poised and elegant”.

“Then pay for them to go. I didn’t ask you to enroll me at that stupid school!”

A hard look flashes in his eyes as he stares at me. His nostrils flare like a bulls and he clenches his hands into fists. I grip the edge of my chair, and try to stop myself from trembling. Despite my fear, I do not avert my gaze and instead stare at him head on. Finally after what seems like hours of silence, Thaddeus points in the direction of the stairs. “Go to bed.”

I look at the analog clock on the coffee table then stare at Thaddeus in disbelief. “It’s 6:30. I haven’t even had dinner yet.”

“Go. To. Bed.” His dry cracked lips press together to enunciate each word and a fleck of spit lands on the table after the last word. I gaze at it for a moment, then get to my feet, and stomp up the steps. I fling open the door to my room, prepared to slam it with as much force as possible, then decide against it. Thaddeus is already pissed, no need to set him off further.

I fish Makandal’s black flower from my hoodie pocket and place it gently under the bed. I pull a sheet off of my bed and place it around the flower to obscure its location in case Thaddeus tries to snoop. I flop onto my bed to glare at the ceiling. My stomach grumbles and I roll over. I should have asked Tière for another croissant before I left, because I should have known that the evening was going to end up like this. This isn’t the first time I’ve been sent to bed without dinner. The first time was on the third day of school, six months ago. I’d been called into the school counselor’s office where I was handed a code of conduct book, with the “Appropriate Attire” page bookmarked. Neat, short or shoulder-length hair. Apparently afros didn’t fit into that criteria. When I got home that day and told my mom, she got a flat iron that I didn’t even know we had. But I guess she must have killed her ‘fro somehow. I recoiled when she got a thick towel, and set hair wax on the table. I shielded my thick afro with my hands and ran out the door. I took the bus to the strip mall and walked straight into the barbershop where I begged the first barber I saw to shave my head. I didn’t have money but I promised to pay them back. They took pity on me, probably because they thought I

was crying because of my wild mane. But I was crying because my hair was me. The more natural a mage is, the stronger their magic is. I could feel my magic being leached from my veins as chunks of inky black hair pelted the ground. Tears mixed with snot to coat my chin. It took less than thirty minutes to kill it all.

When I came home with my shaved head, Thaddeus punched a hole into the wall and mom cried. Even though I lost some magic, I held my head high, and I smiled, and I smiled, and I smiled, because I didn't let them win. Then, just like this evening. They sent me to bed without dinner. Now, I do as I had back then. I burrow under my covers and go to sleep.

The wicked and booming crack of thunder wrenches me out of my dreams. I shoot up in my bed, my skin is coated in a thick sheen of sweat. I look to my left where my bedroom window—a circle in a room of squares, is. There are no raindrops streaming down the glass. The branches of the willow tree outside my window do not scratch and slap the siding of the house. The willow leaves do not hang heavy with rainwater. I shove the cumbersome covers off of my legs and I creep to the window. I flinch as I walk because I know approaching a window in a thunderstorm is never a smart thing. But when I inspect the view from my window, I can't find the storm. There are no discontent gray clouds. There is no rain. And yet, something has thrown me from my slumber.

I hear a crash--then a yelp, like a wounded animal. It's coming from outside of my room--in the house. My legs tremble as I leave my room and enter the dark hallway.

"Nightlight," I murmur. A tiny ball of twinkling light appears before me and guides my path with soft luminescent light. My fingers trail along the smooth wall as I walk toward the stairs. A dim glow stretches from downstairs, caressing but not overtaking the hall. As I near the light, the twinkling ball dims until it fades into nothingness.

I tiptoe halfway down the steps and crouch so I can peek through the balusters. The kitchen light is on and I see two shadows, one bigger than the other. The smaller shadow kneels, while the bigger one looms. I scoot on my butt, down the steps, stopping every few minutes to minimize the amount of noise I'm making. Thaddeus's breathy and monotonous growl floods the living room from the kitchen.

Tavia!"

"This is your fault. If you had listened to me, she wouldn't be acting like this. I'm through with her Oc-

"She just needs time to adjust. It's been less than a year--"

I hear something that sounds like glass break, and the sound I heard before--the yelp echoes through the house again. But now that I'm closer, I hear the undertones of my mother's modulated voice. Rage charges through me and I feel the hairs on the back of

my neck stand up. Without having to see myself, I know my dark brown pupils have expanded to cover the whites of my eyes. That son of a bitch!

I scramble to my feet, but my slippers catch on the stairs and I trip. My knee thuds against the wooden steps and I curse at the pain. The shadows jolt and my step-father, Thaddeus rounds the corner.

“Why are you up? Go back to your room!” He crosses the living room as he speaks, and I freeze on the stairs. My mother darts in front of him, and that’s when I see it. The bloody gaping wound stretching across her forehead. The shards of glass caught in her sweater. I regain my strength and ignore the pain in my knee. I dash down the last few steps towards my mother, but at the last minute I changed course and plow right into Thaddeus. My petite thirteen year old frame barely moves him as I try to shove him backward.

“You fucker! You Jesuit piece of shit!” I scream. My hands curl into fists and I beat them against his chest. His iron and gold cross slaps against his chest with every strike. Anger clouds my senses and I wrap my right hand around the necklace. Black smoke billows from my hand, as the iron sears my palm, but I don’t let go. Even though the cross is hotter than a stove top, I keep yanking it and yanking it. The chain pulls taut against Thaddeus’s fat neck. If it was thicker, I could use it to strangle him. He deserves it, this pile of horse shit!

“Enhance!” I shriek. The chain thickens under my arm, increasing in size until it look like what my neighbor uses to tie up his Rottweiler. Thaddeus’s eyes grow wide with what I hope is terror.

Yes, fear me.

My hand is alight with pain, but that only incenses me to pull harder and twist. Thaddeus’s face is red and he’s gasping and his stubby fingers are scrabbling at the metal.

“Let him go!” my mother screams.

Her demand catches me off guard, my grip loosens, and my spell breaks. The chain reverts to its original size, providing Thaddeus with an opportunity. He grabs both of my arms, and I shriek as the skin on my palm tears. He pins my arms to my side and brings my forearms together as if he is ready to shackle me. His calloused fingers dig into the sensitive skin on my wrists. Thick black blood courses down my right hand, and burnt skin wraps tight around Thaddeus’s cross. It doesn’t look right--my skin touching something so offensive. I want to grab the flakes, even if they’ll crumble in my palm.

“You little shit!” Thaddeus snarls. His steely blue eyes are bright and shiny and beads of sweat dot his brow. Frothy spittle coats his reptilian lips, dripping into his uncombed brown and gray streaked beard.

I glare at him without blinking as he screams at me. “How dare you use devil craft against me? I’ve been nothing but good to you! Despite everything, I opened my home to you--”

Sometime during this altercation, my mother has sidled up to Thaddeus. She rests a trembling hand on his upper arm. I don't miss the way he flinches when she touches him.

"Please, darling. Let me speak to her. Please."

Everything goes silent for a moment, as Thaddeus stares at my mother. For a second, I think he is going to hit her, but instead Thaddeus moves toward the steps, then stops. He pointed a shaking finger in my direction.

"She is getting baptized tomorrow morning, and that name, that horrible name, will be changed. Her revolting hair will be covered by a wig or whatever until it grows long enough to be pressed. She will become a normal, civilized young lady."

My chest feels hollow as Thaddeus spoke. I can hear my heart thudding in my chest. I'm going to be baptized? No! That would...That could--! I stare at my mother with wide, fearful eyes. She won't let him do that to me! She can't! She knows what that vat of "holy" water and feverish chanting will do to a mage's body!

My mother turns to me and I see the skin on her forehead has begun to knit together. It should have healed instantaneously, but nowadays mom has even less magic than I do. She shakes the tiny shards from her sweater. They fall to the ground like frozen rain. I watch their descent for a moment, then drag my gaze up to meet my mother's. Her normally soft brown eyes are hard, her lips are pressed together.

"No matter what happens, you should never strike your father, or use magic against him. Exodus 20:12 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God—"

I step forward and grasp my mom's arms but I don't dig my fingers into her skin like Thaddeus had with me. I can feel the cords of muscle underneath her clothes. When did she start hiding her strength?

"He *hit* you, mom. And you're quoting from some book? Mom! He hit you! "Not 'some' book. Our book. The lord's book—"

"His lord! Not ours! This isn't our life! Straight hair, Baptism, praying! None of that is ours!" I feel fat tears bubbling behind my eyelids. One blink and they'll fall, and I'll become a hysterical sobbing teenage girl. She won't take me seriously. So I don't blink. I keep my eyes stretched wide, fixed on hers.

"We've been through this before. Thaddeus is good for us. The life we used to live, it wasn't a life at all! We were sinners! Heathens! We walked cloaked in darkness, hand in hand with sin!"

"So that gives him the right to hurt you? That gives him the right to wash away our magic with holy water?"

"You're too young to understand this right now, but when you get older you'll realize that mages are not supposed to be. We are an affront to God. If we don't repent now, we won't be able to enter heaven when we pass on."

“Who gives a flying fuck about heaven? Don’t you get it? He’s brainwashed you! He—”

SLAP! My head whips to the side as her hand connects with my cheek. I release her arms, letting mine drop to my sides. A splotch of black blood remains on her sweater, where I touched her with my injured hand.

“I am your mother, and I know what’s best for you. Now you’re going to walk upstairs, get back in bed, and in the morning, you are going to apologize to your father. Then we will go to church and you are going to be baptized, without complaint.” I press my hand against my cheek and take a step back. Two steps, three steps, until my heels hit the bottom step. My mother stands in the living room, her flaccid black-brown hair, sticking to her face like a wet towel. She used to sport an afro. She used to wear dashikis. She used to wear vibrant makeup. Now her hair is straight, and she’s wearing a beige blouse with an ankle-length black skirt, and flats, and no makeup. And I can’t recognize her.

“You’re not my mother. And he will never be my father,” I whisper. I turn on my heel and run up the stairs, down the hall, and toward my room. But I stop before I enter it. Thaddeus’s study sits at the end of the hallway, protected by a simple wooden door. I approach it, and lay my hand on the bronze knob. Copper. That was stupid of him.

“Unlock.” I whisper, and turn the knob. I slip inside and close the door behind me. The study is barely decorated and houses only a big wooden desk, and a plain wooden book podium. A thick book with crispy yellow pages, sits atop the podium. A thin reddish leather strap rest on the page it was opened to. I walk up to it, but I don’t read the words. Instead I stare at it, and I let my frustration, and feelings of betrayal bubble inside of me.

“Burn.” I murmur. A small flame appears at the tip of my index finger, and I place it against the book like an oven lighter. The page smolders for a second, then the flame disappears. I grit my teeth and concentrate.

“Burn. Burn. BURN!” I shout, and the book erupts into flames. A sharp beeping screeches in the room and I look up to see a smoke detector on the ceiling. I tear open the door and run into my bedroom. I slam the door so hard a snow globe falls off of my dresser and shatters, spilling translucent liquid on the hardwood floor. I hear heavy footsteps approaching, and my mother screaming my name.

“Lock!” I yell at the door, but nothing happens. Shit. How many spells have I used in the past hour? Nightlight, enhance, unlock, burn, damn it! I’ve used too much magic in too little time! I manually lock the door, just as someone starts to turn the knob.

“Open this door!” Thaddeus voice penetrates the air in my room, and I cower against my bed. “You Incurable little heathen!” A bang follows every shout, and I notice too late, that he is kicking the door. I hear the thin wood crack, and I press myself against my bed even further.

“Open!” *Kick*. “This!” *Kick* “Door!” *Crack!* I scream as a huge black boot exploded through the door, sending a shower of splintered wood in my direction. I hear Thaddeus’s gasp of pain as a wooden shard tears through his khaki pants, but the pain only seems to incite him. He yanks his foot back, then drops to his knees and stares at me through the hole.

“Unlock. The fucking door.” His nostrils flare and his blue eyes bore into me. I shake my head vigorously and scramble under my bed. Just as I was almost fully under, I felt my foot strike something, and I hear a sound like glass shattering. Then, something grabs my ankle and pulls.

I gasp and my eyes meet Thaddeus’s equally surprised ones as the thing pulls me further under the bed. My bedroom floor seems to stretch until it looks like Thaddeus peering through the hole in my door, is at the end of a long tunnel, and I am getting further and further away. My injured hand leaves a streak of black blood as I am dragged, and my terrified screams echo down the tunnel. My screams start to deafen me until they’re everything I hear. Then suddenly I am being jostled and squeezed, and a voice breaks through my terror. “*Toussaint!* Calm down!”

My jaw snaps closed and I open my eyes to see that I’m looking up at Makandal. Her dark eyes stare into mine, and they look creased with worry. Her onyx black curls tickle my face and I screw up my nose to scratch a sudden itch. Makandal puts her hands on my upper arms and pulls me to my feet.

“You broke the flower.” “Yes.”

“You were in danger?” “Not at first, but...”

Makandal holds up a hand. “Let’s talk somewhere more comfortable. I was just on my way home.”

It’s only then that I notice our surroundings. We stand almost ankle deep in moist fall leaves, surrounded by trees that reached endlessly toward a silver-amethyst sky. A smattering of stars beam down on our heads. I notice leaves stuck to my clothing and a dampness on my back from when I lay on the ground. I follow her down a dirt path that turns into a path of cobblestones framed with lush emerald moss. The cobblestones begin to vary in color as we progress. The ones behind us look like regular gray stones, but as we approach a large candy red wooden door with a lavender crystal knob, they shift to clear crystal. The door is attached to a massive tree standing taller than even my school renovated from an old cathedral. I crane my neck to look at the branches that seem high enough to caress the stars.

Makandal steps on the stones closest to the door and they light up with a hazy buttercup glow. The door swings open and a descending spiral staircase made of thick tree branches and speckled with small gemstones, faces us. I follow Makandal down, down, deep down into a furnished cavern. Translucent stalactites hang like wolves’ teeth from the high ceiling. All the furniture is either wood or crystal and covered with a layer of moss. The chairs are smooth oak with wads of soft moss for cushions. A narrow

stream winds through the cavern, splitting it almost in half. Petite silver fish wriggle through the gentle current. I stop to marvel at their lithe bodies, crouching so I can see them better.

“Come along, Toussaint.” Makandal’s call echoes through the cavern. She brings me to the edge of the cavern where the stream plunges into a waterfall which births a pool of shimmering cerulean water. Another door—rose colored—stands next to the waterfall, attached to nothing. My mouth forms an ‘o’ when Makandal lightly raps on the door and it opens to reveal a cave. Massive book- shelves carved from the thick stone walls of the cave stretch from the floor to the ceiling. Their shelves teem with parchment and books. My fingers ache to devour their knowledge. Makandal leads me to a small oak table in the middle of the room with four chairs around it. She gestures at one of the chairs, then sits across from me. “Now, tell me everything.”

I take a deep shuddering breath and hurriedly tell Makandal everything. From the principal’s call to the bible burning to Thaddeus’s reenactment of *The Shining*. When I’m finished, I peer at Makandal, trying to gauge her reaction to all of this. She looks the same way she had at *Republique*, pensive and sage-like. The room stays quiet for a time, until finally, she speaks.

“I’m sorry about your mother, but I’m happy you had the strength to leave. Sometimes, the ones we love hinder us the most. My earlier offer still stands Toussaint. Become my apprentice, and I will teach you everything I know. I will tell you now, that I am not trying to become your mother, but will be your teacher and guardian. Even so, your life with me won’t be easy. This cavern is my home, but I rarely stay here. Traveling will have to become second nature to you, and not simply travel in the human realm. There will be danger, and you will meet frightening people. You’ll need to learn quickly, and listen to my every word. What do you say?”

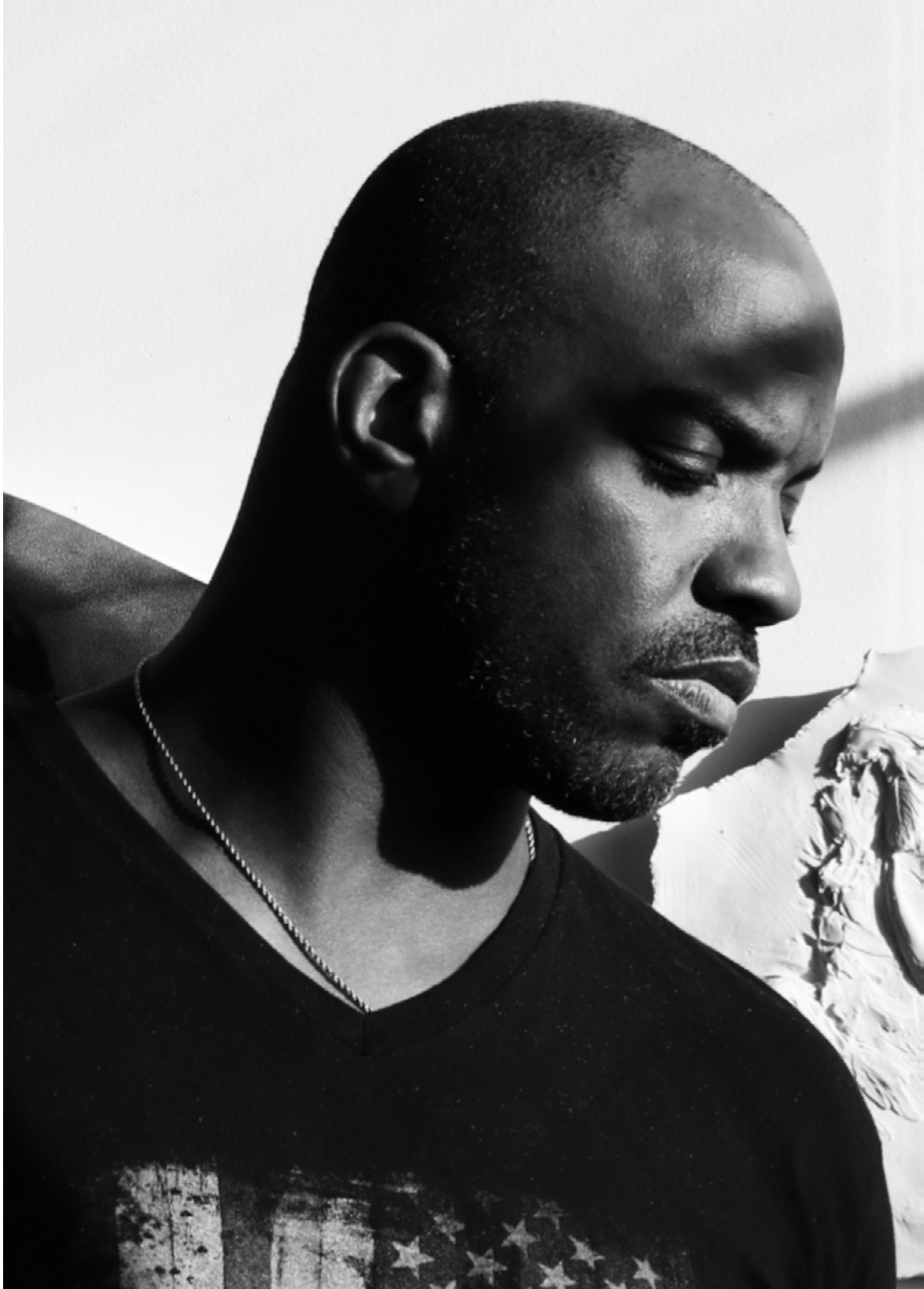
Two hours ago, I would have rejected her again. But there’s nothing left for me in my past. My mother is gone. Thaddeus took her. She may want to forget her life as a mage, but I won’t.

“I will be your apprentice, Makandal.”

CHAQUINA JONES

Daddy

You died at 44 but, before then,
You said I'm too blessed To be stressed
And if it don't apply Let it fly
You wiped cold from my eyes And ash from my mouth
I remember you used your
Donald Duck voice
To make young children smile And gave us mint candies During church
You made my drawings The backdrop
Of the fish tank you loved
I remember how it felt
When we walked through cold hawks
Or watched you and granddaddy
Fish on the dock
The gin rummy and poker games You preaching with your siblings Something about
Moses
And the burning bush
Cooked crabs, fried fish, potatoes and pork chops You always knew
Just the right amount of seasoning
When you fell on hard times—
I packed groceries at my mom's house And ate oodles of noodles
Or boiled potatoes when they ran out—anything to be with you
You were gentleness and firm words
Palm Sunday services and birthday celebrations
Eating soul food and dancing til' I couldn't breathe I am proud of you, you said
Then you'd say—do more I remember too those times When you didn't show
Did you know that
I waited at the window for you? As my mom watched silently In the background
I remember our conversation too When you were in the hospital And you said your
chest hurt
I rubbed it as
You asked me to read
John 14:
“In my Father's house are many mansions:
If it were not so,
I would have told you” Daddy, I am forty-three now And I am just beginning
To live.



by Tariq Ibrahim ('21)

DES'REE MCCRAW

When I Was Younger

When I was younger
my beauty wasn't apparent to me.
She would hide
in the crevices of my insecurities
waiting for the perfect moment to make
her grand entrance waiting
for the right thing to adorn her
and make her presentable. Like,
maybe if my skin was a few shades
lighter and my hair touched my bra strap
then maybe she could come
out of the shadows. Like,
if my closet was fuller and
my wallet way heavier then,
I could dress her up and make her
exactly into who she wanted to be.
or at least
who she thought she should be.



from *Sunkissed* by Blaze Squirewell ('22)



from *Sun-Kissed* by Blaze Squirewell ('22)

PAUL BYRD II

Chaos Control

It was the third Monday of November. The wind was blowing, the dead leaves were falling one by one, and the temperature was dropping along with them. The sun finally decided to reveal itself to the quiet communities of Middletown around 7:50 AM. The star rose to the sky and lit up the entire town as its weak rays barely provided enough heat for the citizens to enjoy. Slowly, yet peacefully, the sun finally reported to work. Fortunately for the star, it only had to work half of a shift, considering it didn't have much of a quota to fill during the fall season. Even with these shortened hours, the sun still received the same amount of income and remained the CEO of the sky. But, unfortunately for the citizens of Middletown, they were the ones who truly paid a costly price during the sun's off season!

Life in Middletown could be described as taking up residence in the head of a bipolar person. Civilians never knew what to expect from this unique society. Were they going to wake up at the ravishing sight of a Picasso-painted blue sky? Or would it be the dreary sheet of gray clouds that would hide the artwork from viewers? Were the colorful trees and flowers going to have a magnificent hair day as the leaves and petals flowed elegantly in the wind? Or would that same wind selfishly strip these plants and expose their many flaws and imperfections? Would this be a good day to let the warm atmosphere kiss every inch of their needy skin? Or would tear drops from the heavens come crashing down on them all? You never knew what to expect from this town, especially during these trying times!

Every year during the month of November, a life-long pandemic surges throughout the streets and tortures the human beings of the small town; seasonal depression. Many innocent people fell prey to the disease, while others had their souls claimed by it. But, no matter what, they were all soldiers in a war, longing for it to end by springtime.

One of this year's victims of the pandemic, Mason Corpse, was no stranger to seasonal depression. For the past three years, he suffered at the evil clutches of the disease. With no cure in sight, Mason was in a daily battle with this pandemic to simply maintain a smile on his face.

But, something was particularly different about his symptoms this year. Usually, Mason's symptoms would include isolation in his bedroom, slight mood swings, and a severe lack of energy. But this time was different. His clothing got baggier, attitude was much worse, his voice got quieter, and distance grew further from him and his loved ones. His life felt like pure Hell both externally and internally, and he no longer had a soul for the disease to claim. He was lost inside, with no trace of his

spirit around. He wasn't concerned with school, work, or anything else at the time. All he truly wanted was to win the war bestowed upon him.

As father time struck 8 AM, the alarm on his phone blared like a siren, scaring Mason out of his sleep. The 21-year-old shot his eyes open in pain, processing his surroundings and whereabouts. Out of habit, Mason quickly grabbed his phone and shut the alarm off. He couldn't stand the noise it made every morning. Not only did its sound irritate him, it was a representation that his much needed rest is officially over and it was time for him to prepare for another battle. Mason finally sat up in his bed and rubbed his eyes in exhaustion. All he wanted to do is lay in his bed all day, but that wasn't an option for him. He had things he had to take care of today and tasks to complete.

"MASON! It's time to get up! You don't want to miss your class!" he heard his mom say from downstairs.

"Girl, screw them classes," Mason murmured to himself. But he knew his mother was right. He had a long day ahead of him, and now it was time for it to begin!

As Mason got out of bed in his baggy t-shirt and pajamas, he slowly made his way downstairs to grab something to eat to start of this day. He dreaded this, not because he didn't want to eat, but because of who he had to interact with just to get something to bite.

Mason is many things, and a morning person is not one of them. His family were complete opposites. They all liked to make conversation with him in the early hours of the day, and he couldn't stand it one bit. A family consisting of a mother, father, and a younger brother is one thing to try and handle. But a family consisting of a nagging mother, critical father, and a demon spawn brother? That is truly a war to wage.

Slowly making his way downstairs with a stiff feeling in his legs, Mason entered the living room and saw his entire family was already downstairs. First, he noticed his younger brother, Daniel, sitting in front of the TV with a bowl of cereal in his lap, watching one of his favorite cartoons; Sonic X. His 19-year-old brother was too invested into the cartoon to even notice that Mason had just walked by him, so Mason did not even bother speaking to his sibling. As the sound of Sonic battling the evil Doctor Eggman became white noise to him in the background, Mason then noticed his father at the kitchen table with his suit on and a cup of coffee in his left hand.

"Hey dad," Mason mumbled to him.

"Hey son! How are you?" his chipper father asked him as he took his eyes off the newspaper he was reading. As his father looked at his son, he noticed Mason's messy curly hair, wrinkled up clothing, and the exhausted bags under his eyes.

“I’m fine,” Mason said as he made his way towards the pantry. As Mason turned around, his father Marcus noticed that he was wearing pajama pants that were designed with Tom and Jerry characters covering the entire fabric.

“Now son, why are you twenty one years old and wearing pajamas with cartoon characters on them?

You need to grow out of that. It looks ridiculous!” his judgmental father stated.

Mason, who was looking for the box of Cinnamon Puffs in the pantry, decided to respond to his father’s question. “The same reason you’re a straight guy that watches the Real Housewives of Atlanta every Sunday night,” Mason said to his dad.

His father grew silent at the remark as Mason finally found the cereal box he was looking for. The college senior was in no mood for anyone’s criticisms or ignorant behavior today, so it was in everyone’s best interest to simply leave him alone. But, when it came to his mother, that would never be the case!

She saw Mason and greeted him pleasantly. “Hi honey! How are you?” she said, repeating the same question her husband already asked him. Mason looked at his mom in her stylish black pants suit and gave her a sarcastic answer.

“I’m great,” he replied with no emotion in his voice whatsoever.

His mother Barbara watched as her son reached for a bowl out of the kitchen cabinet. She noticed he was getting ready to eat the same old cereal he eats every morning.

“Oh honey, why don’t you eat something different this morning? You’re always eating the same old thing! We have yogurt in the fridge...”

“I’m fine, mom,” Mason said.

“We have bananas right here on the counter...” she continued.

“I’m fine, mom,” Mason said.

“We have granola bars in the back of the pantry...” she continued. “I’m fine, mom,” Mason said, now suffering from a migraine. “We have oatmeal next to the granola bars,” Barbara continued.

“Dammit Babs, the boy said he was fine!” Marcus said to his wife as he grew tired of her constant rambling.

“Well, excuse me, but if I want my son to get all of his proper nutrients, I am going to make sure he’s eating properly,” she responded to her husband. “I’m concerned about Mason’s eating. I don’t think he’s getting the proper amount of consumption from all of the food groups,” Barbara discussed with Marcus, talking about her son as if Mason wasn’t right there in the kitchen.

“I think a cup of bleach will make me feel better,” Mason mumbled under his breath.

“What was that, sweetheart?” Barbara asked, unable to comprehend what Mason had just said. “

Oh, it was nothing, mom,” Mason replied, doing his best to avoid any further conversation. He then poured his cereal into the bowl.

“Oh, would you look at the time!” Barbara said as she observed the clock on the stove. “I’m going to be late for work!” Mason and his dad watched as she quickly scurried throughout the house and grabbed her purse that contained the files she needed for today’s meetings at the law firm. “See you all tonight!” she said as she quickly ran out of the house and into her car.

“Later,” Mason said as his mom made a hasty exit.

“I should be going, too,” Marcus said as he got up from the kitchen table. “I’ll see you boys later!” he said to his sons as he grabbed his book bag and headed out for his job at the local computer software company.

“Bye dad,” Mason grunted as his father was the next person to leave the house. As Marcus left the house for his job, Mason made his way over to the refrigerator to grab the milk for his cereal. Opening the fridge, he noticed the milk was missing.

“Hey, where’s the milk?” Mason asked his brother. “There isn’t any left,” Daniel claimed.

Mason groaned after hearing this news. “So what am I gonna eat with my cereal?”

“Put some water in it. It’ll do you good, fatty!” Daniel rudely suggested. At that moment, Mason

looked over at his brother in the living room and noticed something that infuriated him; Daniel had a full glass of milk along with the cereal he was eating!

“Daniel, why the hell are you drinking a glass of milk with a bowl of cereal?” he questioned his brother. “I had a big craving for dairy when I woke up today,” his brother replied.

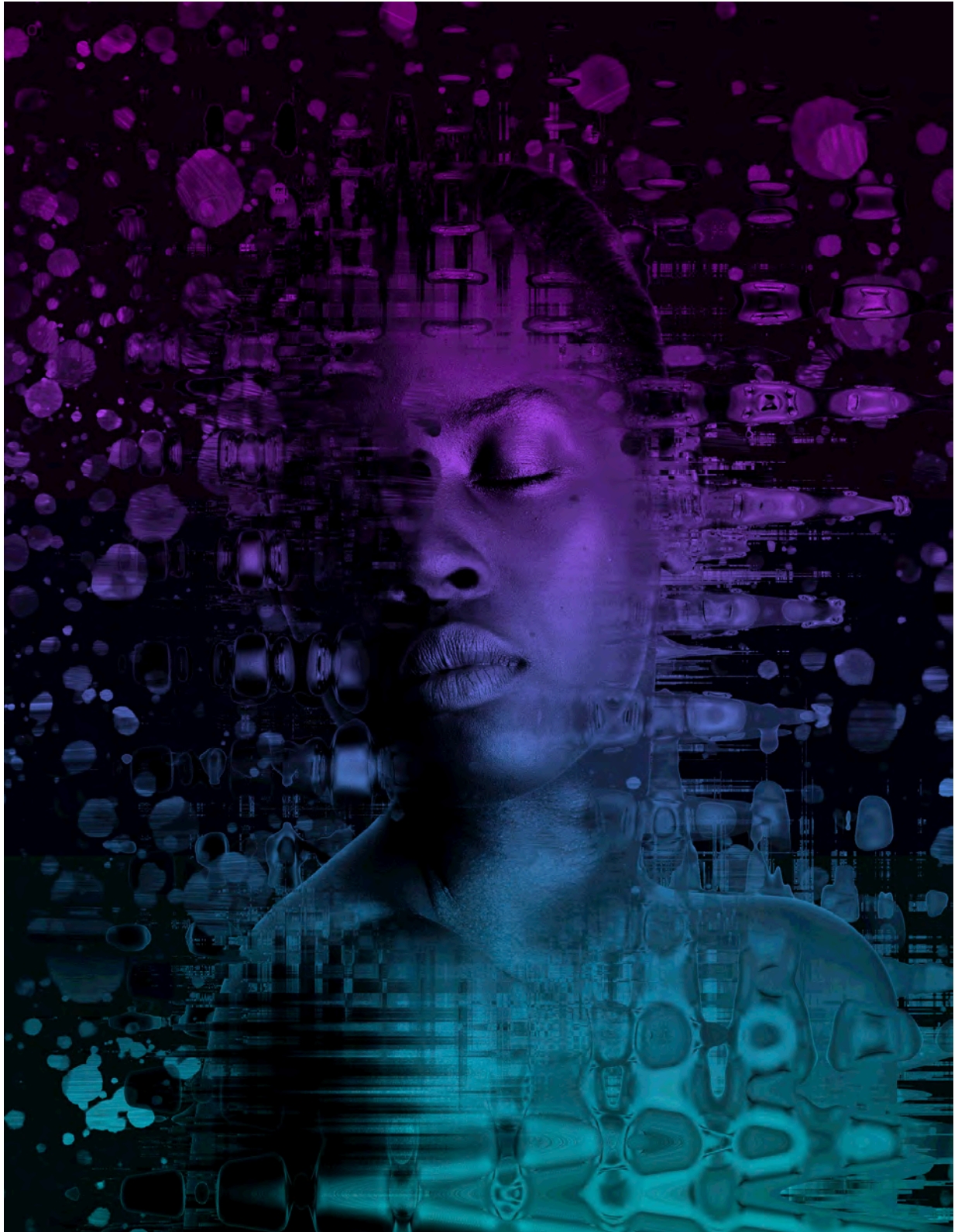
“You idiot! You should’ve saved that glass of milk for me. And who drinks milk with cereal? That’s serial killer behavior!” Mason spat at his brother, who ignored him. “Now what am I gonna eat?” he said to himself.

“You heard mom,” Daniel said. “There’s yogurt in the fridge, bananas on the counter...”

Mason instantly picked up a banana and launched it at the back of Daniel’s head. After it connected to

Daniel’s skull, Mason made the decision to skip breakfast and made his way upstairs. “Be ready in 10 minutes so I can drive us to the university!” he instructed his brother.

Quickly heading towards the bathroom, Mason instantly pulled out a bottle of aspirin from the cabinet and swallowed two of the pills to cure his headache. He then looked at himself in the mirror as he digested aspirin and took a brief look at his face.



by Damon Fox ('22)

He looked purely inhumane, like a defeated caged animal. He couldn't bear to continue looking at the demon facing him in the mirror, so he turned his focus on getting to class on time.

Rushing to get ready, Mason managed to brush his teeth, wash his face, and decently brush his hair in 5 minutes. Getting dressed was even easier for Mason, considering he always wore the same clothing. Putting on the same baggy gray sweatpants and black hoodie, Mason finished up his morning routine by slipping into his black crocs and grabbing his phone, wallet, and car keys. Mason checked the time on his phone and saw that it was now 8:30.

"Daniel, time to go!" he announced to his brother.

The two brothers locked up the house and made their way to Mason's 2006 Honda Civic in the drive-way. As the two young men climbed inside, Mason started up the vehicle. Daniel, who was freezing to death, could not take the cold climate in the Middletown air. "Turn on the heat already!" he demanded.

"Oh shut up!" Mason yelled at his brother. "If I can't get some lousy cereal today, you can't get any heat!" Mason roared as he pulled off.

On the way to Middletown University, Mason was flustered by the amount of traffic there was on the streets today.

"MOOOOOOOOVE you idiot," he shouted at the top of his lungs at a driver who had just cut him off. While he was screaming, Daniel noticed that Mason's phone in the cup holder of the car as someone was calling it. The ID read 'Jacob' at the top of the screen.

"Jacob's calling," Daniel informed his brother.

"Let it ring," Mason should with a dull tone in his voice, not wanting to hold a conversation with his best friend at the moment.

"I haven't seen Jacob around in weeks. Are y'all still cool?" a curious Daniel asked.

"We're cool but I just don't really want to see him or anyone from our group for a while. I need to focus on me," Mason claimed.

"Is that another one of your therapy exercises?" Daniel asked.

"Kind of. Right now, we're working on my anger problems and how to cope with them..." Mason in-

formed his brother as he was suddenly cut off by someone who didn't even use their turn signal!

"USE YOUR FREAKING SIGNAL YOU MORON!" Mason shouted at the elderly man in the car in front of him while blaring his horn.

Daniel was taken aback by his brother's outburst. "So, I'm guessing you're not doing so well with your anger..." he stated as they finally pulled into the school parking lot.

Mason pulled up next to the sidewalk and put the car in park. “Go to class, Danny,” an annoyed Mason demanded. “Fine, see you later,” Daniel uttered as he grabbed his bag from the backseat and got out of the vehicle. As he shut the door and made his way towards his class, Mason drove off and parked the car. Struggling to reverse park in between two vehicles, he suddenly realized something crucial.

“Oh crap, I left my parking pass at the house!” he whined to himself, realizing he left his pass inside the garage at home from when he cleaned out his car over the weekend.

“Screw it, it’s not like they’re gonna care,” he said as he got out of the car and made his way to his 9 am Biology class.

After unsuccessfully securing a morning meal and successfully escaping the wolf pack, aka the Corpse family, Mason’s next task in the war against his mental health was to complete his weekly chapter test in his science class. As he sat down at his usual desk in the corner, Mason eventually started his exam.

Serving as his weakest subject, Mason completely struggled to get through the exam. He looked around the room to see if anyone else was struggling the same way he was. But, everyone else seemed to be ripping through the test with ease. He watched as some students made it to the second page of the test. Some were already on the final page. One girl was finished after a mere 10 minutes! Meanwhile, Mason didn’t even spell his name correctly at the top of the paper. All he could do is let his mind roam freely as he attempted to answer each question.

‘What did she say an enzyme was last week?’ ‘How am I supposed to construct this gene?’ ‘Wait, who is Masin Corpsa?’

The senior had no hope in successfully getting through this test based on prior knowledge. All he could do is try and guess the correct answers on the exam. After randomly selecting the answers on the multiple choice questions and doing his best to construct brief responses to the rest of the exam, Mason ended up as the last person to finish the exam, as he noticed he was the only person left in the class with the teacher. He got up and turned in his paper to Mrs. Johnson in hesitant fashion.

“Have a good day, Mr. Corpse!” the instructor said to him.

“Thank you,” he responded as he left the classroom with his head held low. He couldn’t afford another bad grade in this course, but it looks like he just received one!

Heading back to his car, Mason saw a piece of paper placed underneath his windshield wiper. Picking it up and entering the vehicle, Mason glanced at the paper and realized it was a parking ticket from his school! As luck would have it, the one day he doesn’t have his parking pass is the day the administration decided to fine him \$115 for “illegal parking”.

It was the final straw that broke his back in two. He put his head in his hands and felt pure shame. It wasn’t even noon yet, and he already felt like a complete failure for the day. He exhaled as he thought about the consequences of what just went down in

his Bio class and how he has to sacrifice his money for a parking ticket. He felt it in his spirit that his grade was going to drop along with his bank account, and it all worried him to no end. He didn't want to fail a class in his senior year of college, nor did he want to waste his hard earned money he makes working at a grocery store. But, hope seems to be lost on him being able to turn things in his favor. Every time he turned around, something else came up to pile onto his misery. His life was in shambles, distress, and pure disappointment. How are things ever going to get better? He continued to shake his head in disbelief, wishing that it all came to an end.

"I can't do this anymore..." he muttered to himself. Tears flowed out of his eyes as he felt pure pain and aggravation coursing through his veins. He felt hopeless, like nothing could save him from the constant agony and troubles he faced every day.

In that moment, Mason received another notification on his phone. It was a text from someone named Irene, and it read 'meeting starts in 15 minutes.' It was the therapist that managed his support group.

He realized that it was now 10:45, and the next thing on his schedule was his therapy session. It then dawned on him; help is only a walk away!



from *Sunkissed* by Blaze Squirewell ('22).

SHAYLA HERRON

Therapy with My Third Therapist

Now, what do you remember, the therapist asked. Each question a person asked me became a game. In this game, my therapist became my client. Ignoring her as I sat on the probing couch, I asked myself, How long can I go without muttering the truth? I did not want to lie. I remained silent. With a notebook and pen in hand, I began her session. Her nails are painted a hydrangea purple. The paint fell off the sides of her cuticles as if a child had painted them. She had a burn mark on the left side of her face, which resembled a quilt patch. Judging from its healed state, it was a childhood incident with a hot comb that her mother laid against her cheek because she accused mommy's boyfriend of stealing her Skittles. The walls were covered with paintings by the reincarnates of Dali, Picasso, and Van Gogh. Her hair, dripping from this morning's wash, suggested she was late. It was probably Picasso's fault. On the ring finger of her left hand was a ring print. Was she recently separated or widowed? Did she take her ring off at work because she was secretly having an affair with someone she worked with? It could be one of her clients. I'd rather her be a deceiving rule breaker than a helping hand with good intentions. The dead leaves in the soil of her tree made me weary. But as I raised my eyes to the branches, I could see why it was named Phoenix.

The sound of rain drifted my focus the more away from her question. I began to hear the conversation of her previous session. The chair I sat in smelled of cigarettes and a strawberry car freshener. I leaned over, and the trash can to the right of the chair was full of used tissues. Her client is a woman who's been lying to her son about quitting. Tissues drenched in remnants of her fears being revealed. Maybe the son found out, cut off communications with her, and that is why she wept. It seemed the strawberry hero was too weak to continue battling with its opponent. The prize if you win? It was the woman's will. If you take the will, they are nothing. Through her crying like a baby, whose only means was to cry, I hear her say, I give up. The vibration of my therapist's phone on the wooden desk brought me back to her. My next option was to remain silent and stare as something else began to brew in my mind.

I preferred to worry myself with other people and imaginative observations. My therapist found out my secret. A variation of Pandora's box had been hidden in my mind, the box my therapist believed she could open with the tricks of Mesmer. She only wanted one thing. It was a memory.

Fortunately for me, the box only held memories: a layered box, each layer hiding the memory she wanted. Breaking a seal released a mist that held a memory. They were all evil, all traumatizing. But the memory in the center was the first to go in. It had its time to fester. Its mist, if released, would paralyze my ability to hide the truth. I did not trust her but holding the memories grew to be impossible.

I decided to open it myself to save her and me the effort. Now, what do you remember? Without hesitation, I stood at the podium and began to recite the memory. I started a fire. Despite its radical state, the fire nurtured me like a mother to her child. When you are so cold and central heat cannot warm you—start a fire. I wanted to die, but they died instead.

Who died? My mother, father, and sister. They were taken by fire's wrath. Do you know where you are? In an office of a therapist who loves her children and is recently divorced. No, you're at a police station. You're sitting with your body against a cold metal chair. You have been arrested for arson and the murder of your family. It was not my fault. It was the fire. The fire took them.

A fire is yours once you light the match, but after the fire belongs to nature, to its own nature. I only wanted to get warm. Suddenly, the interrogation room began to warm up. What did you do? Answer me. What did you do?

Here the memory becomes cloudy, forgetting the trauma it carries. Closing the box, waking up in a chill, gasping for air after almost drowning, mid panic attack, running around the house to check that my family was not dead, turning up the temperature on the thermostat by three degrees, plopping down on a not probing couch, coming back to myself, and realizing it was all a dream and my body's attempt to tell my mind it was cold.



Detail from *Mixed* by Oladia Menchaca (’22).

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