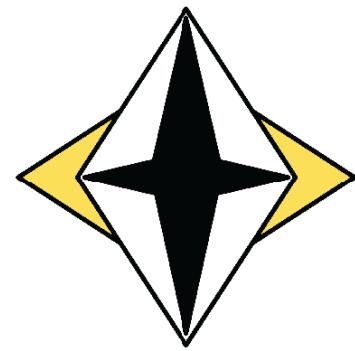


The Black Star



Journal

The Chrysalis Issue

Issue #09

October 25, 2024

From Us To You

As you prepare to reunite with our work, we advise you to take five deep breaths, each one to center yourself on the experiences and stories featured in this issue. Each page represents an intimate step into the minds and reflections of our brave writers, with each piece reflecting on growth, transformation, and introspection—journeys we all share. Let these pieces become part of your reflection.

Fall semester, a period synonymous with new beginnings, has prompted our staff to consider the *Black Star Journal's* impact beyond College Hill, but as a vessel through which we can extend our reach into the Rhode Island community. As you engage with our writers' words, we hope your experience doesn't end here. We implore you to continue reflecting on their work in your communities and ours through upcoming events and initiatives.

With this, we present the Chrysalis Issue, a collection of pieces characterized by personal, national, and seasonal transitions. Thank you for your enduring support throughout the *Journal's* growth.

From us to you,
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The Tree in You

Words by Kevin Carter

It

starts
with a
seed that
is planted
in the soil
Rich and
fertile, the soil
envelops the seed
like a thick layer of
skin, brown like our
skin, brown like our
melanin
It's elongated roots
stretch deep into the earth,
Grounding it to the land that
gives it birth

From sprout to sapling, flimsy and
fragile
Who would've thought that the world
would harden us like bark?
Or better yet, harvest us for our hearts
No one yells timber until after they cut the
tree
There is no warning the last second you get to
be free
Hack after hack, the tree gets detached by way of
axe
And transported downstream
How many hacks occurred before Africans were sent
How many hacks occurred before Africans were sent
across seas?

Chained and trained now we're the ones hacking,
What good are these hands that bleed trees and feed greed
What good is the oxygen that comes from leaves
If the branches caused black people to no longer breathe
Still flinching from headlines of lynchings,
Rest in Peace Javion Magee

What do I make of family trees, my amputated ancestry
They say we came from royalty but slavery obscures the proof
From evil roots you grow a money tree that bears forbidden fruit
A mustard seed of faith is all it takes to make a mountain move
So plant it now and God will help you see a tree exists in you

The Black Star Journal

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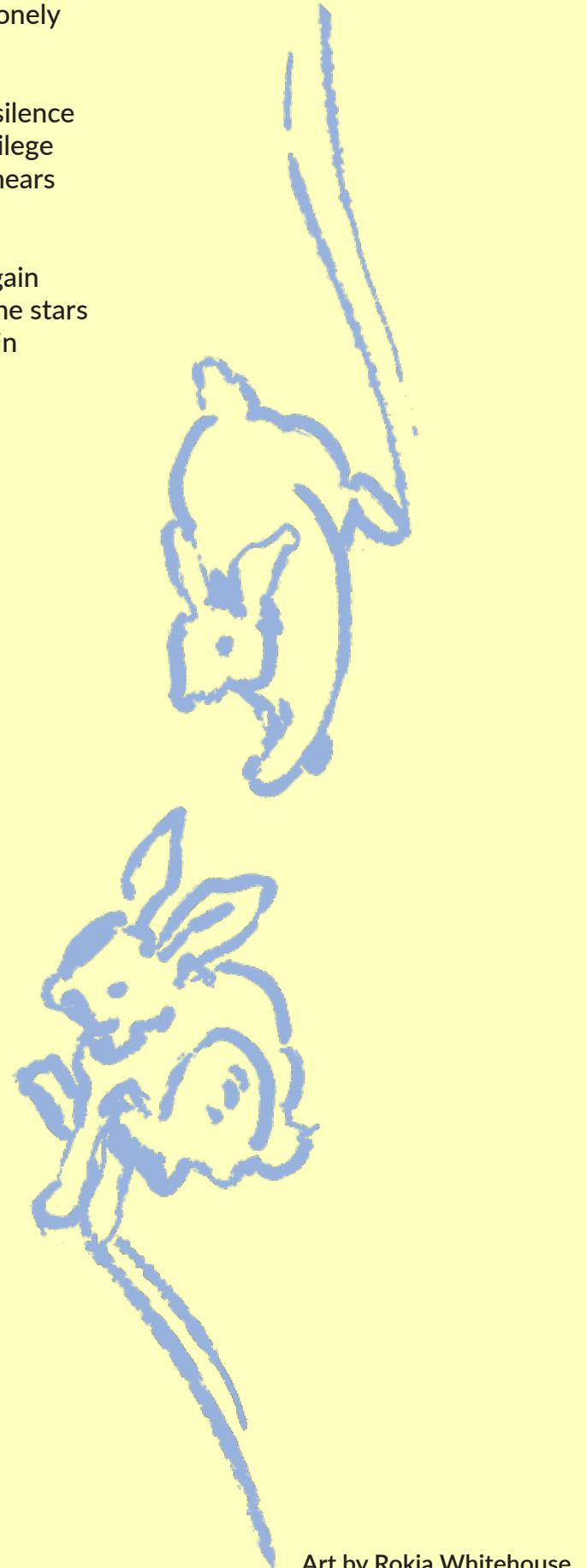
Metamorphosis

Words by Nelsa Tiemtoré

reader: "i have no words..."

i entered the world a caterpillar
 the chrysalis of life suffocated me with darkness and fright
 it's here in the absence of light, that you find your luminescence,
 that you learn to understand the weight of being alone but not lonely
 to watch wholeness slip through your fingers the way sand does
 to let the waves carry your soul away with your ancestors
 to know the music of pridefulness and the deafening scream of silence
 to question the square root of worthiness and who has that privilege
 to water your dreams with your tears and cut fears down with shears
 to repair yourself even though nothing was ever broken
 to remember that happiness is a journey and not a destination
 to learn to rebuild, renew, regenerate, and revive — to believe again
 to remember that you are as eternal as the sun, the moon, and the stars
 to see your light as a healing orb that guides you through the pain
 to recognize the beauty in the wounds, the sweet in the bitter,
 the love in the hurt, and the fight in the defeat
 to know that the heart is not dying, it's really the soul flying
 to find tears as pillars of strength and not cracks in the wall
 to find your true self behind the expectations you hide behind
 to lather yourself in love like lotion because love never lied

for the plot, here's to another metamorphosis



Art by Rokia Whitehouse

dear reader,
you find yourself in the learning and unlearning, and the planning and unplanning, the side characters and side quests,
and the stumbles, humbling moments, and small victories! while change is hard, it's a part of life and there's beauty
even in the struggle. embrace each and every version of you — they are all equally deserving of love :)

Ironing the Future

Words by Jazlyn White

7:15 a.m. on Monday, July 22nd:

They're all gonna know that I don't have an iron — that I'm trying to save up this summer and thought it was stupid to buy an iron that I can only use for three months, she thought. The sliding white doors to

“I’m all the way across the country, chasing someone’s dreams. Maybe my own. Maybe after today, I’ll know.”

the closet were pushed all the way left, and she ran her fingers along the line of hung clothes: one long-sleeved white blouse, one short-sleeved white blouse, and another linen blouse. She saw her favorite gray tweed vest from the corner of her eye. It was her mother's, and now she wears it for good luck at job interviews and first days. She reflected on the beginning of June when she paired the vest with black slacks and patent leather ballet flats. Her boss said she “looked cute” as they chatted over coffee, and shortly after, the girl tugged at the bottom of the vest while waiting in line for her new intern badge. In front and behind her were men wearing t-shirts with laptops strapped to their sides, sitting on their

hips like babies.

Today was just another Monday; it wasn't the right day for her even though the company's motto is “Every Day is Day One.” Today, she entered her fourth week as a Communications intern at a big tech company where she—an English student—wrote coverage reports about GenAI products. *I should've laid out an outfit last night. I'll just do my makeup and throw something on; everything's wrinkled anyway.*

The bathroom light flickered on. Then, the water ran for a few seconds, warming up and rolling over her fingers. She lathered her face wash and scrubbed her skin, removing the remnants of last night's mascara. She dried her face with a towel and quickly applied a few dollops of moisturizer. She noticed her round cheeks and fading acne scars; she noticed how close she felt to the ground, how tired she felt, how fatigued she was from a life that's barely begun. *Okay, I'll do my edges.* Her co-workers complimented her on her braids, surprisingly. Nice for people from Seattle. *They really liked it when I wore my hair in two braids. I got like two compliments before 10 a.m. Okay, shit, stop getting distracted. It's 7:30 — I have to do my makeup.* Concealer first: under the eyes, on her acne, the redness and hyperpigmentation on her face. The shade had become slightly too olive. Next, blush, then a shimmery blush on top. Then, mascara — she was careful not to layer on too much. And finally, her

lip combo. *I'll wear something muted, even though that means I'll have to touch it up after my lunch break.* She grabbed her brown lip liner from the beauty supply and a brown gloss. She thought of her mom again — the red lipstick and black lip liner she'd see her apply in the car rearview mirror.

Okay, time to return to the dreaded closet. This isn't that difficult; I don't have anything crazy today — no one-on-ones or shadowing sessions. I'll just be sitting at my desk. I guess I can just wear a white tank top and cardigan. Those can't be wrinkly. And, maybe my navy slacks would look cute? They're comfy but maybe a little baggy, plus I'll have to wear heels so they don't drag on the floor.

She slipped on her shirt and pants, buttoning and looping a black leather belt through them. Her bare feet ran over the cold wood floor, leading into the living room where a full-length mirror from Target rested against the wall. The pleats are a little crinkly. She ran her fingers over the front of the slacks, trying to fold each pleat back together. The soft morning light spilled onto the floor behind her. *I'm all the way across the country, chasing someone's dreams. Maybe my own. Maybe after today, I'll know.*

On Blackness

Words by Naomi Nesmith

There are words, buried
deep inside pigment
Holding memory

In our skin; I press down and watch the outline of
my fingers disappear.
Each pore implores me to record.

To bear witness. So I try to write in
every missing word, hastily; for there is
fear in forgetting.

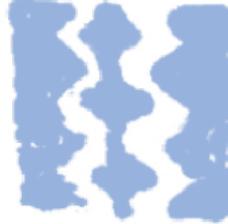
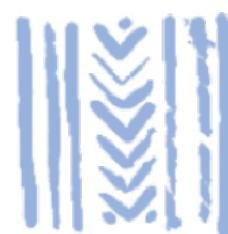
My mind's eye extrmits light
Like a lit candle, gentle but ever determined
To search ancient wrongs, to set peace to legacy

Bend the fabric of time backwards,
into glass, eviscerated sand,
But these words reject the page

They reject form.
Stubborn, they dance off paper
and latch onto tongue-

Too much has been left unsaid already.
So I gather courage
and I choose to speak.

Some thoughts on blackness:
I see the colors of sun in every face
Even throughout the night.



Rich and militant, the crowns
of our heads given free
access to reach heaven.

Each strand an ode, grasping nothing
but each other, taking shape

Like water, but always possessing memory.

Our noses curve a full rhythm for breathing
Our smiles are wide and proud.

Worn in defense,

In defiance of all that seeks to destroy.
That seeks to separate and conquer;
But they cannot contain our joy

Nor the ridges that sprout atop our hairs,
Nor the rebellion of our thoughts
Nor the strength of our stances

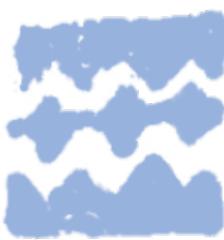
Nor the curves of our face and the hue
That hugs our skin. Each word carries
Weight and depth and meter;

Each syllable the utterance
Of a holy virtue.
We cry and the heaven shakes,

We laugh and the ground trembles with
us. The sky has stars that could not
outshine us. Could not replace us. They
could not

Conceive the lengths we will go to
reclaim our forefather's wildest dreams.
We stand and the floor uplifts us.

Because it could never hold us back.
Oh what a wonder it is, To be born
young, gifted, and black.



Art by Rokia Whitehouse

Brown Sista Fire

Words by Ava Carter

I, like many other Black women, find the news and daily life to be a constant attack on our lives. I watch clips and TikToks of Donald Trump's racist and sexist comments pumped out every day. Unfortunately, his flagrancies have increased in this year's presidential race. His remarks, and the rampant support they acquire, reflect the ever-present systemic issues that hurt the psyches of Black women. However, being in a community with other women of color, especially Black women, has eased the impact of his insistent patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies.

As a Black woman from Brooklyn, I have spent my life surrounded by Black and brown faces. As an attendant of predominantly white institutions (PWIs), I have embodied the visual impact of my physical differences, grappling with the impact of both racism and sexism. In moving to College Hill, I have found that my desire and need for Black sisterhood has become overwhelming. I have been welcomed and homed into the Brown Center for Students of Color (BCSC) safe spaces, the Undocumented, First Generation College and Low-Income Student Center (U-FLI), and Black student-led spaces. Still, for me, a community cannot only exist on campus. The wider Providence community has been an untapped resource.

In my search for a community made up of people of color (POC) in Rhode Island, I sat down with Reina Thomas, the Manager of Public Education Outreach and Initiatives at the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice to discuss the POC community in the Providence area. She recommended Sista Fire to me. As she expressed, "It was Sista Fire that made me feel rooted within the Providence community... I've always been someone who has longed for a home—a place to belong and people to do life with and the members of SISTA Fire have been instrumental in my discovery of such a home." Her testimony calmed my nerves about the community of intergenerational organizations of women and non-binary folk across Rhode Island, especially because of Sister Fire's focus on community engagement and activism.

Their concerns and activism campaigns are global, local, and relevant to systemic issues in the Rhode Island POC community and beyond. One of their key campaigns involves the issue of Black maternal healthcare where SISTA Fire members have taken on the responsibility of improving the jarring phenomenon of Black maternal death. According to 2023 statistics from the Centers for Disease Control, Black women are 2.6 times more likely to die due to pregnancy. Sista Fire focuses its help on the conditions of care at the Women and Infants Hospital in Rhode Island. They have engaged and gathered testimonials from 300 women and non-binary individuals about insufficient care at the institution. Not only have they collected testimonies, but according to their website, they have developed and presented a list of demands dedicated to

"secur[ing] clear commitments and a signed agreement from Women and Infants Hospital." The dedication and time exemplified by the effort of SISTA Fire illustrate the security and strength of the organization. If you are someone looking for a community organization dedicated to addressing, and taking action against issues that hurt Black and WOC individuals, then SISTA Fire may be for you. Thomas went on, "It's one, if not the only group of people where my mask can be removed and I can just breathe, laugh, and organize around issues that impact women and nonbinary folks of color. In this space of BIPOC intergenerational people, my experiences are centered and validated. SISTA Fire is home for me."

For those interested in joining SISTA Fire, there are 3 levels of membership with varying commitments and inclusion. The highest level of commitment only costs 15 dollars annually, which allows you to contribute 10 hours in a month, attend monthly meetings, and assume leadership roles. The lowest level of commitment allows members to attend monthly meetings only 5 dollars annually.

SISTA Fire was founded by Ditra Edwards and Chanravy Proeung, two women with established careers in social justice work: Edwards, with 20 years of experience fighting for racial, and economic justice, and Proeung with racial, immigration, and criminal justice work. The founders have been well-recognized for their research. Edwards earned the Rhode Island Foundation Innovation Fellowship while Proeung was a Soros Justice Fellow. These women have dedicated their lives to a people-focused approach, bettering the lives of racialized bodies throughout the United States, and now focusing their talents on the state in which they were raised. Providence is more than just College Hill, and the issues that students of color are worried about and face are not just localized. In the current political climate, the repeal of Affirmative Action has led to a 40% drop in Black undergrad admits to Brown University's Class of 2028. This demographic shift, coupled with the current election climate has made feeling secure as a Black woman has felt increasingly dim. However, equipped with the knowledge of reliable organizations like SISTA Fire, I have hope that there is a stable community of color thriving in Providence. Further, I hope that anyone reading this considers participating in SISTA Fire and similar organizations of color.

Bulldog Bullshit (from a Haitian Perspective)

Words by Sonam Shulman

Breaking news: “Haitian immigrants were killing and eating household pets in Springfield, Ohio.”

Should childless cat ladies also fear being eaten by Haitian immigrants?

According to nativist Ohioan JD Vance, Haitian immigrants have acquired a taste for household pets in his home state. *Why would Yale-trained lawyer JD Vance promote debunked, racist rumors of pet-eating Haitians?*

Vance’s disparaging remarks are yet another in a long line of attempts by the Trump-Vance campaign to find immigrant scapegoats for America’s hardship. As a Haitian American myself, I knew it was only a matter of time before my people were thrown under the bus; yet, I was still stunned when I saw the newest nakedly racist attack on my people and culture.

The Trump-Vance campaign promoted claims about Haitian immigrants stealing and eating neighbors’ pets in Springfield, Ohio — a claim that is believed to have originated on social media and was subsequently picked up by MAGA supporters and news outlets. Sensing their fear-mongering potential, Vance grabbed these lies and ran with them. Never missing an opportunity to heighten hysteria, he warned MAGA devotees on the campaign trail, “it’s coming to your city next.”

While we have come to expect such disinformation, lies, and hatred from Trump, it appears that his mini-me, Vance, is not the lesser evil on the Republican campaign trail, but rather the “more effective evil.” Vance weaponizes his Ivy League credentials to lend legitimacy to his deceptions and evade responsibility in ways Trump never could.

As Ohio’s junior senator, Vance has repeatedly disparaged Springfield’s growing Haitian population as “illegal migrants” who are “draining social services” and “generally causing chaos.” *But wait, Vance is well aware that the vast majority of Springfield’s Haitian population are, in fact, legal*

immigrants. Yes, he knows this! Yet, Vance employs legalistic rhetoric to evade accountability and foment demagoguery.

As a Yale-trained lawyer, Vance knows that Haitian immigrants in Ohio hold official legal status allowing them to remain and work in the United States. Yet, he purports to label them as “illegal” with a specious claim that their status is somehow invalid because it was granted by the Biden-Harris administration. Disingenuously defending his lies, Vance

But wait, Vance is well aware that the vast majority of Springfield’s Haitian population are, in fact, legal immigrants. Yes, he knows this.

theorizes, “That does not magically make them legal because Kamala Harris waved the amnesty wand. That makes her border policy a disgrace, and I’m still going to call people illegal aliens.”

By contrast, elected officials dealing with the real-world fallout of Vance’s demagoguery were not impressed. When confronted with these rabid, racist claims, Leann Castillo, Executive Director of a district in Springfield, made clear that there is “absolutely no evidence of this happening.” Undeterred by the truth, Vance claimed his lies were merely expressing the perspectives of his constituents. Donning a Trump-like hood of grievance, he declared, “All that I’ve done is surface the complaints of my constituents, people who are suffering because of Kamala Harris’ policies.” Vance further claimed he had “verifiable and confirmable concerns”

from constituents about pet-eating Haitians. While the concerns may have been verifiable, the claims are not — a distinction Senator Vance can surely detect.

Vance may try to use his Yale pedigree as a weapon and a shield as he spreads baseless lies with unmatched efficiency. Still, it is self-evident that his remarks are nothing more than racist dog whistles that reinforce long-standing stereotypes of Haitian people as blood-thirsty voodoo practitioners. And make no mistake,

Vance’s rhetoric poses real-life dangers to Haitian immigrants and others.

Already, “conservative culture warrior” Christopher Rufo has advertised a \$5,000 bounty for anyone with proof of Haitians eating pets. Spurred to manufacture “evidence” of Haitians’ supposed “crimes,” many Springfield residents are coming out of the shadows to air grievances over Haitians “invading” the city. As Lydia Polgreen of *The New York Times* noted, it is not a stretch to suggest these claims could inspire vigilante violence against Haitian immigrants. Indeed, Springfield’s city hall, hospitals, and elementary schools have already received bomb threats that necessitated evacuations.

So yes, there are very real consequences to Vance’s words. While we may expect such blunt demagoguery from Trump, Vance’s shameless use of legalistic justifications for spreading hateful lies renders him in some ways the more effective evil. His use of an Ivy League education and credentials to curate and justify hate speech poses a danger to us all. And it certainly makes one wonder whether the rot (or “pouri,” as we say in Haitian Creole) at Yale Law School that produced Vance, Brett Kavanaugh, and Clarence Thomas can ever be exorcized.

The Psychic's Husband

Words by Yenee Berta

I
don't know if I believe.

We moved into a narrow one bedroom one bathroom apartment in Sapphire Springs on the fourth floor of a Victorian style building. Stained carpet lined the floors as the sun gleamed through a small window that the landlord insisted had a spectacular view. The view did not so much as sweep over spectacular, but instead hovered over something of acceptable. You said we would have to make our own view. Create a true living room of life. For weeks we rifled through Goodwill and Salvation Armys, climbed up winding steps of antique shops. Me behind and you in front. Your sundress hugged your silhouette so tightly I lost myself in the curve of your hips walking up the spiral staircase. Your body and the handrails became one in the same. I could no longer tell the difference between an edge of a step and the whirlwind of forever.

Within the week, an emerald green chair had found kinship within our space and your first client had emerged. You sauntered in with your salmon colored shorts and my white shirt. I confess, I have never had my palm read. You said to let each spirit relinquish a bit of control. Pull the knot to disentangle the ribbon of vitality until it floats. For a minute I wanted to laugh at the utter ridiculousness of extracting a soul. Although I loved you, I had the upper hand on your antics. My job downtown and my insistence on the unwavering viability of sight excluded matters of the unknown. But on this day, I had left my glasses and a bit of my pride down the street, sitting in my office, next to a picture of you. I kept a keen eye searching for a moment I had only heard about. Just as I turned away, a gentle soul wandered into your hand to see what they could make of the past. I stood there watching our spectacular souls orbit one another, entangled once more, as spirits emerged from the bodies occupying the emerald chair. I didn't know that a hand could hold so much of someone until that moment. Words of wisdom, love, loss, pain and perseverance engulfed my doubts in our slender apartment. The prophecy was both fulfilled and vanquished in a moment. As our souls slipped through the emerald city. I see you, my wife, you, The Wizard of Oz in a tower of beautiful deceit. You and your dress the color of fresh sunshine and clean windows. The fragile balance between the known and unknown, the reality and illusion we lived in together. I watched as your hands slowly released the invisible tether you had spun so skillfully, and I believe.

Art by Leslie Mateus



Mamá

Words by Mara Durán Clark

Mamá is a mother to all

The smell
of moro de guandules hits me
with a delicious wave of flavor the second I step foot
inside her apartment. “The food’s almost ready!” Mamá announces as she kisses my cheek, a spoonful of seasoning in hand. “Set the table!” she adds, swiftly making her way back to the chicken sizzling on the stove. Mamá loves to cook, and she loves to give.

When I was younger, I would go over to her apartment each day after school and walk into at least a dozen people hovering over the stove, each trying to get their own plate of food—from the old ladies that live on her floor, to her countless nieces and nephews, to the pastor who has never once failed to show up for lunch at Mamás. Once they all got their food, they would stand in a circle and pray, with the pastor making sure to thank the generous (and talented) hands that made the food before him. I used to think Mamá was a famous chef in our city, renowned for her ability to make meals so nourishing that they make you forget your every worry. What I learned over time, however, is that what truly drives people to Mamá’s apartment each day is her kindness and compassion. As they eat, Mamá listens to their stories, taking every bit in and exuding constant love and understanding. They tell her stories of their lives growing up in the Dominican Republic (DR); they tell her the latest gossip from their jobs, and with tears in their eyes, they grasp her hands while praying for their loved ones in the hospital. Mamá listens, but most importantly she hears and understands them. She never offers disappointment or dismay, but rather comforts and affirms that everything will work out the way it is intended to. Mamá gives her food to all that enter her apartment, but more importantly, she gives her love.

Mamá. That is what everyone calls my grandmother, regardless of whether you are her child or someone she met at the park five minutes ago. Calling her anything different feels wrong because fundamentally that is who she is; the role of a mother is what she embodies. Mamá is the epitome of Black maternal love, evident through the distinct comfort found only in her embrace, the magical cure—all that is her food, and the endless compassion and understanding she extends to all who surround her.

Mamá is a mother to all. If asked, she would say she has hundreds of sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, grandsons, and granddaughters. Honestly, not a single person would refute this claim, because if you think about it, it is true. She raised us all. She raised me and my sisters, taking care of us each day after we finished school before my mom could pick us up after work. She raised all of my cousins—she is the one who gave all of us our first piece of solid food (snuck in earlier than our parents wanted because she knew in her heart that we, at five months of age, needed to chew on a drumstick), she is the one who helped us learn to walk, tie our shoes, and braid our hair. She also raised the kids in the neighborhood back in the DR and all of the friends that we made over the years. Mamá’s motherly touch is never gone from your life. The kids in the DR still wait eagerly each month for the 150-pound box she sends full of clothes, candies, and money. Black maternal love is eternal—once you are her ‘child,’ she will extend that love to you for as long as she is able.

There is a unique comfort found in Black maternal love—it embraces the soul, the heart, and the spirit in a word, hug, or meal. It is a love that heals and restores. When I had a raging case of the flu, Mamá came over every day, ready to spread Vick’s VapoRub across my chest and make my favorite sick meal—chicken noodle soup with dumplings. Funny enough, what I really needed was not the Vick’s or the soup. The second I felt Mamá walk into the house, I felt my temperature lower and my sinuses clear, knowing that my grandmother, the mother to all, was here to take care of me.

All I need to do is see Mamá to know that all will be well and I will be loved. In her smile, I see the happiness she spreads to everyone she meets, and through her tiny 4’10” frame, I see the most loving woman the world has ever known. When I look at the weathering in her hands, I see the countless years of grueling work she endured so that we all would be blessed with the opportunities she never had. Through the cut on her right pointer finger, I see the countless hours spent in the kitchen ensuring we were all fed. As she wraps those hands around me in an embrace, I am cocooned in the love of my grandmother, our mother, in Black love, and I feel a comfort unlike any other.



A Losing Game

Words by Afrozina Abaraonye
Art by El Boveda

I begin in a disservice to my mother. The stories are too familiar, too convenient; I simplify her and she melts into the corps with all the other maltreated ballerinas.

Plural bodies move collectively through a space and tell a single story, but I don't see her well enough.

She grew up in Soviet Bulgaria and was twenty-one when it collapsed. One of her teachers was fond of throwing inanimate objects, another preferred a stick, and they all liked shouting—a lot. They were all Russian, but that didn't seem fair. At this point, the Russian teacher is folklore and pervades a range of sports, but let me be optimistic and say that this is just Vaganova and not an entire cultural problem. I'm sure there are gentle Russian ballet teachers somewhere, even if I haven't personally met any. I hope so.

I began ballet at three. The minimum age at my school was four, but my mother assured them I was well-behaved. I was a quiet child, terribly shy. I loved pink. Ballet makes you feel weightless and beautiful, perpetually floating. You learn how to feel everything gently and to move through life lightly; my parents don't hear me when I enter a room, and I am no match for my brother in a fight.

You're six years old in a ballet studio. You wear a pink leotard and tights, your hair is styled in a bun, and you look adorable. Then, you're nine years old in a ballet studio. You wear a pink leotard and tights and your hair is in a bun. Ballet asks for intimacy between you, the mind, and everyone else in that studio—*plural minds*; everyone else in that studio, *plural bodies*, and you, the body. In the room, you are simultaneously doubled and halved. You are dehumanized and exacerbated. Amelioration to a fault. There is me, the dancer. I am moving and I see myself moving back at me. We are one, but she is more and less than me because she is seen by more than me, but that sight is all she is. We should be one, but we are not. Balletic mechanisms find you in distorting arrangements. Beautiful and jagged and unnatural and riveting. You are twelve and you can see yourself very clearly.

Leotards and tights are designed pink to blend in with pale skin and give an elongated, rosy (not naked) look. On darker skin, the colour meshes into a jauned beige. Incohesive. You've interrupted the bright leotard on top and the bright shoes on the bottom. Bitty and mismatched, uncoordinated; something looks off.

Dancers are very in tune with their bodies; we know how everything should feel and look. You don't watch yourself, but rather, some machination of you in the mirror in ways exposing, unfamiliar, and more precise than even you should see. I was fifteen when I realised that the average person does not regularly see me in a leotard and therefore would not know where my body holds pockets of fat, that my knees slightly curve

inward, how my stomach looks at different times of the day depending on what tights I wear underneath, my arms in cambré, my legs en croisé. It was so underwhelming to have a decade of body dysmorphia diminished in half a conversation. And so annoying, oh my god! I've plagued every waking minute of my life just for you to nonchalantly cure me with logic and simplicity, Yara you fucking bitch!

My old friend Yara at the end of a maths lesson:

"You doing anything nice this weekend?"

"Dance on Saturday and then gym on Sunday, I'm trying to lose a bit of weight."

"Why?"

Do I call it a slap in the face or a wake-up call for dummies? When you're done feeling like a parasite worming through your skin, you begin to feel incredibly stupid instead. It's the better alternative, easily, but it's just so laughable it's almost embarrassing. I remember explaining that I had those 'problem areas,' but they were invisible unless I wore a leotard. She was confused and also didn't really care.

I haven't spoken to Yara since that year which makes her changing the course of my life all the more hilarious. I've thought about telling her about her impact on my life if we ever reconnected, but figured that might be a bit much for a three-year catch-up. In my damage control, I think I lied about some gym journey I was on that definitely wasn't obsessed with weight loss — god no, could never be about that!

A half lie I thought about the whole walk home. When did I begin this gym journey? Memories in my brain are butterflies I reach for and flies I swat away. They shift behind blurry screens and gain and lose in substance, morphing into something vague and far away. You protect yourself by forgetting your painful memories entirely or thinking about them so little that they're left empty: titles without chapters, books without ink.

I remember waking up at six every morning to exercise an hour before school; I was twelve.

I remember the one time we were allowed to use the gym in year seven and I stayed on the treadmill for the entire lesson to burn as many calories as possible.

I remember being on a beach in 2016 and thinking I would look disgusting in photos my mother took of me. It was years before I ever looked at those pictures. When I did, I saw a ten-year-old child about to cry before a camera.

I don't remember when I started hating leggings and skinny jeans, but I know that when I bought my first pair in year four, it had been years.

In year one, I was told that some girls naturally

have smaller waists than others. There's nothing you can do about this, but it's better to have a smaller waist anyway. I remember wanting a flat stomach that same year. I was four years old.

The problem is that the end goal is inextricably wedded to the obstacle. I see ballet as the closest you can get to mathematising dance, and in that pursuit, beauty. This becomes a losing game when the end goal — being a good ballerina, a graceful ballerina, a beautiful ballerina — is melded with a single, unattainably unhealthy standard of what can constitute that beauty. When you begin, you're either explicitly or implicitly told to make your body beautiful in two ways: through your appearance and your movements. If you fail at one you've failed at the other. All or nothing. Sink or swim. Do or die. The body on stage under floodlight in the feathered tutu preparing for adage has achieved both goals to her delight and detriment. Backstage, you play a losing game.

There's a concept of the *ballet body* that we learned as children before we were ever told: petite ribcage, narrow hips, narrow shoulders, minimal breasts, minimal backsides, no visible fat (but you're in a leotard so modify this to no fat at all), and a popular optional clause to favour the legs that blush rather than jaune in the tights — those are more delicate after all, more beautiful.

Slow poison, once you've realised it's too late. You're asked for intimacy due to the natural criticality that arises from training your body in a methodical way — the visual clarity gained from the heart of the sport. When you begin at four or five or six or seventeen, your body becomes a point of comparison to the mark scheme and the model answer which never changes, even as your body does. Growing past pubescence and losing your desirability in the sport is an inevitable failure.

I've had a wonderful ballet experience. I've never had a bad teacher, in fact, I've never disliked any of my teachers or class environments. Five years ago, I stopped wanting to be a ballerina, not because I was done being at war with my body but because I knew I'd lose. In this loss, I let go and try to take care of the reflection in the mirror. I look less closely and I try to see less clearly.



Twisted: Twisty Me

Words by Olivia Bendich

Beauty is not a luxury, nor should we treat it as such. It is a mode of existence, an attitude, a proclamation of defiance and radicalness and the desire for more, for everything.

There is beauty in the ordinary, in pure unadulterated will, in the way you say yes and no; the way she wears her natural hair, the way he strides, the way the sky looks tonight. When we consider the mantras, “Black is beautiful,” or “Black joy,” the beauty of our ordinariness and everyday-ness sometimes becomes negated. I grew up hating my Blackness but I hid my repulsion in diaries, damp pillowcases, and imaginary friends. Attending predominantly white institutions my entire life has not helped, and did not pacify my self-hatred, but it has taught me how to unearth and create community.

Reflecting on my time at Brown as a senior, I am reminded of how I despised my mixedness when I was little; my ambiguity and lighter skin may provide certain protections, but I would still pinch the bridge of my nose until it was pink and blistering—skinny and petite. I begged my parents to get my hair straightened, to burn away the Blackness, the kinkiness, the wrongness. By the age of twelve, I was already a woman: developed, bleeding, curvy, and suddenly utterly capable of sexualization. I derived my self-worth from how readily boys could fetishize and exoticize me. It was never “you’re so beautiful,” but always “you’re so beautiful, where are you from?” or “you’re so beautiful, what are you? I love your twisty hair, twisty body, the way I can’t figure you out, it twists me,” they would repeat.

Little do they know how twisted they would feel if they actually had me, if they actually knew me. To be with me, platonically and romantically, is to secondarily experience microaggressions, blatant aggressions, ignorance, and above all, my infallible desire, my absolute need to dissect such interactions and cry about such interactions and process them as fully as I can. They don’t want that.

White audiences can superficially engage in Blackness without feeling the impacts of representation. White individuals can ostensibly consume Blackness, desire Blackness (or marginality), and produce Blackness whilst never internalizing the consequences of Blackness. My close friend freshman year of college didn’t understand the beauty that resides in my ordinariness and humanness—the way I snort when I laugh, my inability to remember song lyrics, how I dance and sweat and love—and instead derived my value from my “mixedness.” To them, I was “beautiful, mixed skin.” I was bewitching and interesting and fascinating and this was devastating because I was also Black. They could never achieve such levels of allure; they could never surpass their “fixed” status and this was, of course, my fault and they were the victim. White friends, who you naively think will not objectify you, can internalize jealousy and

envy as something comparable to a lack, an insufficiency of intrigue.

The night I held their heels in my hand, wrapped around my pinky like a noose while they stated plainly that our tumultuous year of fighting and conflict “was all happening because I was Black.” When they tore away from me. When I swallowed their tears and wiped them like my own, or when they forgot we were neighbors and called home sobbing, or when I kept apologizing and apologizing and apologizing, or when I heard them refer to me as their beautiful mixed friend for the third time in a row.

They felt beneath me in some way, stuck in my shadow—but that had nothing to do with my Blackness, nor their whiteness and everything to do with their insecurity. It did become about my Blackness and their whiteness and I was in turn disgustingly fetishized and exoticized. It is on that unforgiving, frigid concrete floor of my sophomore dorm room that I cursed this wretched existence—that I really, truly internalized what it is to be a colored girl. For I am a Black girl, a plaything, an object for projection, for fetishization; I bow to you, I bend to you, I am everything you cannot be. I am your desire. I am undesirable.

Writing this now hurts; remembering burns. I grieve all the time—and memorializing everything on paper grants permanence I prefer to avoid—but this is permanent, this is everlasting damage. This is the not-so-unique story of my life as a Black woman occupying and navigating predominantly white spaces. I am so much more than my external appearance, than my mixed skin and curly hair. I am beautiful because I am ordinary.

*For I am a Black girl, a plaything,
an object for projection*

of

too watered down to

pick myself back up

too tired to blink

carry me to bed

lay me on the couch

let us sit

for

just a second

let me catch my breath

and figure out

why i miss you

brkdwon

Funeral Food

Words by Sienna Amenumey

"Ugh, why is this door not working?" Toni weakly tugs and pulls at the door.

"Toni, oh my God, it's left then right," Michelle, frustrated, takes the keys from her sister.

"Patience is an important trait to have," Toni says sarcastically as she enters the room behind her sister.

The moment they walk through the door into the cinnamon-scented and purple-accented house, they are snapped back to the reality of why they are there. Michelle stands in the doorway, teary-eyed as she is met with the photos that line the hall. Photos that once brought up playful conversations and questions about life and now part of a memorial of what was once their grandmother's life. Toni glances at the photos unwilling to greet them and she rushes past her sister toward the kitchen.

"I am hungry, do you want something to eat?" Toni yells as she stomps to the kitchen.

Michelle doesn't respond. Grief has stolen her words. If she had opened her mouth, only wails of sorrow would have escaped.

"Hello!! Michelle!" Toni bellowed as she hid the frog in her throat.

Michelle turns her gaze to the floor and scurries to the kitchen.

"I hear you, you can stop yelling! And I am not hungry, can't keep much down, and don't we have the wake in an hour," she says meekly.

"How can you not be hungry right now? I am so hungry I could eat an entire rotisserie chicken." Toni replies.

Toni busts open the fridge, swinging the doors to the side and rattling the contents inside. She sticks her head in, peering at all that was left behind. She picks up a leftover orange juice carton, pouring the remains down her mouth and then tossing the carton into the trash, completely missing.

"Can you act with some sense, please? Grandma would have hated that," Michelle scoffs.

"Yeah she would, but I guess she will never get the chance to tell me," Toni says seriously.

She was quickly whipping her head back to the fridge, trying to contain her emotions from further revealing themselves. She opens the pantry above the fridge, spotting some graham crackers, and begins to engulf them, bur her feelings deep below.

Michelle looks down at her hands and begins to analyze them. Looking at every line and wrinkle, trying to distract herself and soothe her troubled mind. She looks out the window and recalls what it was like to have her grandma call her and Toni inside to eat. They would sit at the kitchen counter, chugging juice, leaving behind a mess.

Toni continues to rummage through the fridge for what's next. Pushing past expired condiments older than she was and spoiled vegetables that had morphed into something extraterrestrial. Taking bites of leftovers along the way. Towards the back of the fridge, a beautiful piercing green shines through the rest of the clutter.

"I know you said you weren't very hungry, but there are green grapes—your favorite," she says as she shoves a handful of grapes into her mouth.

She shakes the container in Michelle's face like a baby with a rattle, afterward turning to Michelle, her cheeks filled with grapes trying to chew them all down. She slides the box over to her sister to offer her some.

"I am really not hungry, the thought of eating right now makes me want to throw up," Michelle says as she swallows down that feeling.

"Michelle it's grapes, not a ribeye—relax. God, I could go for a ribeye with a little mash on the side," Toni says as she slobbers over her words.

Michelle begrudgingly snatches up the grapes and rolls them between her fingers.

"Squishy," she whispers to herself.

She pinches the grapes and it is unable to hold its form.

"What?" Toni says as crumbs fly from her mouth.

"This day is already one of the worst of my life, and you hand me squishy grapes! I can't even have a firm goddamn grape!" Michelle says between her angry sobs.

"I told you I wasn't even hungry and you pushed me to eat and give me this. I can't do this, I can't be in this house. I can't go about my day knowing I will never get another call from her again. I can't believe we will never sit around this table and laugh and share food. So, no, I am not hungry."

Tears began to slip from Toni's eyes, painting her cheeks with sadness. She looks to the ground and mutters.

"I am going to miss her too, you know. I am going to miss her telling me that everything will be okay. I will miss her saying I don't eat enough. I know, funny," Toni says through her tears.

Michelle goes back to looking at her hands, analyzing the lines and the wrinkles that form. Toni sits beside her, grabbing her hand and clasping it with her own. They sit in silence for a while. Michelle clears her throat.

"We have each other," she says softly.

Before Toni can interject, Michelle continues.

"Grandma would always remind us that we have each other, even though we are different. Maybe we just keep doing that. Just keep being there for each other and doing it together," Michelle says like a weight has been lifted off her chest.

"We laugh and cry, and eat together. It's all we can do," Toni says with a smirk.

The sisters hug, holding each other with hope and sorrow.

"We got to start heading to the wake. I want to get there early. I love funeral food and I'm in the mood for a meat pie," Michelle says facetiously.



Art by Rokia Whitehouse

What's My Favorite Food?

Words by Favour Akpokiere

What's my favorite food?

When I think of a singular favorite food that makes my stomach rumble and my mood perk up....

.....I realize I don't have one. And I'm not sure why.

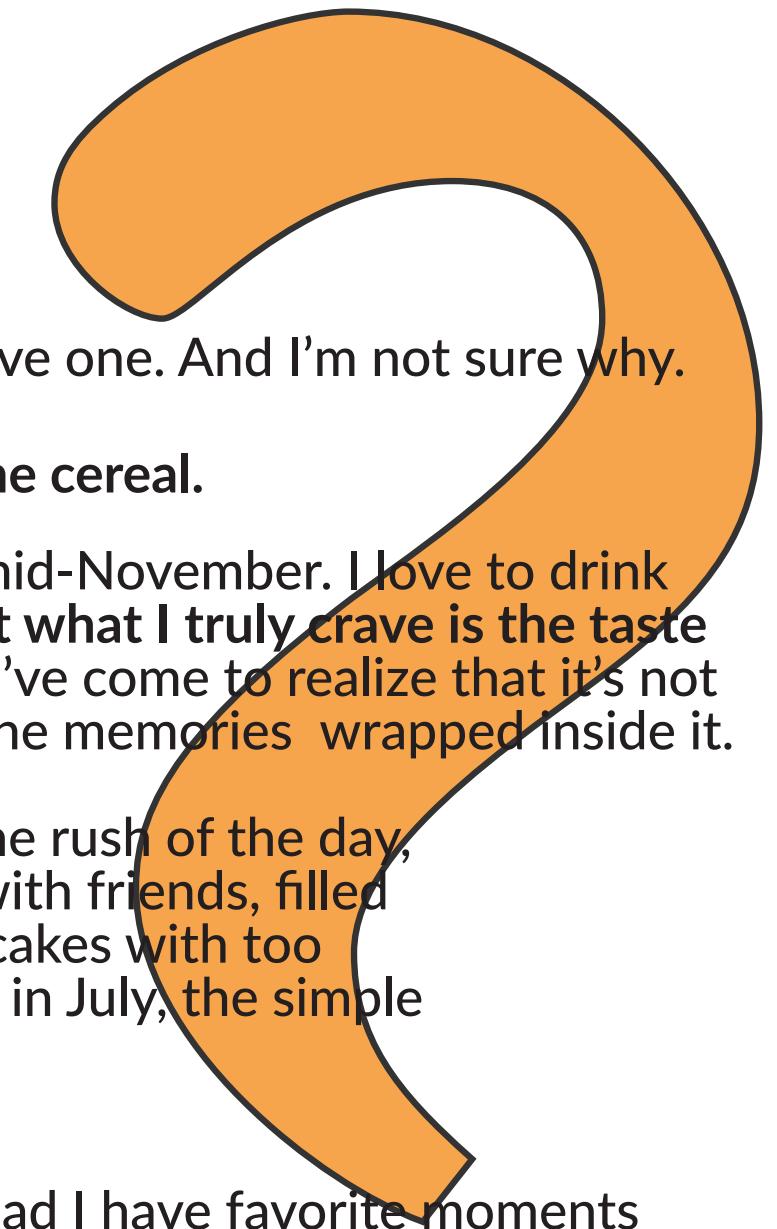
But what I do know is this:

My favorite food is life—no, not the cereal.

I love the taste of the crisp autumn air in mid-November. I love to drink the sun on a beaming hot summer day. **But what I truly crave is the taste of memories, the ones life pours into me.** I've come to realize that it's not the food itself that fills me up, but rather the memories wrapped inside it.

Vanilla coffee on a quiet morning before the rush of the day, a warm slice of pizza on a Saturday night with friends, filled with endless laughs. I remember birthday cakes with too many candles, ice cream on the boardwalk in July, the simple joy of toast with butter after a long day.

But still, I don't have a favorite food—instead I have favorite moments that are bottled up into the food that I enjoy. The food is like a photograph, capturing the moment and serving it back to me with each bite.



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