

CHAOTIC MERGE

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Find works from 24
different creatives from
around the world ranging
from art, fiction, poetry,
nonfiction, and
plays.

Issue 10 | The Final Issue

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ADDITIONAL CONTENT

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WORDS FROM OUR EDITORS

Hi Readers,

This might be the last time I address you through the magazine, and it truly feels like the end of a chapter.

I started this magazine when all I wanted was community and a place in the book world. This magazine has given me friendships with people around the globe, and it has given me the opportunity to dream. I am honored to have done this for six years alongside so many incredible people.

Today, we say goodbye, but we will remain pillars of the writing and book community. We all share a connection to it that we simply can't let go of.

I'm not sure where you'll see us next, but I imagine it will be something amazing. I hope you all keep chasing your dreams, and I can't wait to be on the lookout for your names out there in the world.

Best,
Jasmine Ferruffino
Editor in Chief

Hi Readers,

I love you all, I'm so grateful for my time here, and I'll miss you very much!!!

Best,
Lassiter Jamison
Fiction Managing Editor

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three summers

by Riley G. Johnston

i.
we meet in god's country
at a sleepaway camp for girls empty-
bellied and seeking. in the thick
of night we flock; folding in
on one another, they feed us gospel
music til we're fat
with saltwater. hysterical,
we gorge on hurt; beg jesus
to love us like our mother did

ii.
we become
like sisters. you need me too
much and i let you. touching
foreheads, you confess
you dreamt yourself
a lamb. you will leave me soon
and i will promise
to write you a letter

iii.
when they pull
you from independence creek,
your chest murmurs
with indifference, a duet
with the hum in your head. elsewhere,
i press my face into the glass
of my bathroom mirror and will
my skin to remember
the cool of the night

Portrait of Some Young Woman

by Kirry Kaufer

She looks away from her painter.
He strokes his brush. He signs
his work on the band of her arm.
No one really knows who she is—
just some young woman. Fornarina.

He paints a conical tree from his imagination
while she's abandoned ashore. *Whore*. Maybe
The conical tree is a young woman, too.
Feeling young and unknown
is accepting crumbs fed to the birds,
& claiming the tummies are full.

It is now November and she has come back.
Weathering her next coat off, bound to the pile
of leaves and feathers, so she can be nude.
She is blown out like birthday candles, celebratory
wax dripping down her eyes from sun-slicked ripples.
He finally finishes and the room goes quiet.

No one really knew who she was,
but people still came to immortalize her.
Though even when she visits the gallery, she stares
off to the side. Unrecognized. Never growing
tired of looking away.



Aging Love

by Noah Berlatsky

Infatuation is in
what you don't know.

I hated being
infatuated.

Now I'm married
and know

my wife would like
this poem.

Though, sure,
I'm not *completely* sure.

A little infatuation
even at this late date.

to feel used, abused,
battered, and broken
like you're putting
another token in the
slot of a pinball machine
to bounce me off the
walls again and again
and again.

Thought I knew better,
and I do, but why do I
feel too paralyzed to do
anything?

Have I learned
my lesson?

@JAMIEZEPEDART



How to Disappear Without Leaving

by Pravy Jha

i practice absence in small ways
stop answering texts mid-sentence
leave cups sweating on the counter
walk out of rooms without the door closing

the first boy who ever told me
you are too much
said it like he was offering water
as if i had been burning him alive

i learned to hold myself like contraband
smuggle my laughter past checkpoints
apologize before speaking
lower my voice until it sounded borrowed

there is a particular kind of hunger
that arrives when you are almost loved
it stands behind you
breathing against the back of your neck
not touching
never touching

i remember lying beside someone
who traced constellations on my thigh
as if my body were sky
as if he could rename me
and keep me

i wanted to believe him
i wanted to believe the body
could be mapped and not invaded

sometimes i wake up certain
i have misplaced something essential
a pulse
a country
the version of myself that was not afraid

i am tired of being the shoreline
where other people practice leaving

if i disappear
it will not be dramatic
no broken plates
no slammed doors

just a slow dimming
like a television left on overnight
until the screen forgets its own light

and in the morning
someone will say
i thought she was still here

The Speculum

by Nivara Lune

They tell you to undress from the waist down. You fold your jeans. You fold your underwear inside the jeans so no one will see them when the nurse re-enters.

The paper gown does not close in the back. You try anyway.

The table is cold through the paper. You think about heat. Not the heat of the room or the heat of embarrassment, but the other kind—the one you used to feel easily, before your body became a series of reports. Before perimenopause became a word you said aloud to strangers with clipboards. You think about the last time you wanted something without apologizing for the wanting.

The last time you wanted something, you were in a hotel bar in a city where no one knew your name. A man looked at you the way men used to look, before you learned to dress like you were already sorry. You didn't go upstairs with him. You went back to your room and stood at the window with your hand between your legs and thought about being the kind of woman who said yes to strangers.

That was three years ago. Your husband was at a conference two floors down.

The nurse knocks but enters before you answer. This is also something you have learned: the knock is a formality, not a question. She is young and efficient and does not look at your face. She looks at the computer screen mounted to the wall, types something, leaves.

You are alone again with the fluorescent lights and the smell of hand sanitizer and the particular silence of a room designed for waiting.

There is a poster on the wall. The female reproductive system in cross-section. Fallopian tubes. Ovaries. Uterus. Cervix. You have carried these parts your whole life but learned their names here, in rooms like this, on posters like this. Your body explained to you by strangers.

You were pregnant once. Twenty years ago. Your body built bones without asking your opinion. Built lungs, a heart, ten fingers, a working brain. Your cervix knew when to soften. Your blood knew how to make more blood. No one had to tell your body what to do. It was smarter than any doctor. It was sovereign.

Then the baby came and your body was congratulated for doing exactly what bodies do. Then the bleeding stopped and your body became a problem waiting to happen. Something to watch. Something that might turn on you.

You have been watched ever since.

The doctor enters without knocking. She is kind. You can tell she is kind because she makes eye contact for exactly three seconds before turning to wash her hands. She asks how you are. You say fine. This is the script. She does not expect revision.

She tells you to scoot down. She tells you to relax. She does not mean relax. She means comply. You scoot down. You let your knees fall open the way you were taught in childbirth classes twenty years ago, when opening yourself felt like a beginning and not an inspection.

The metal is cold when it enters you. You knew it would be cold. It is always cold.

She is talking. You hear the words *tissue* and *irregular* and *biopsy* but they do not attach to anything. They float above you like the ceiling tiles, white and numbered and interchangeable. You think about the hotel room. You think about standing at the window with

the city lights below and your hand moving and the feeling that you were still, somehow, yours.

"You'll feel some pressure," she says.

You do not feel pressure. You feel your body becoming information. Flesh into data. Desire into symptom. The private fact of you into something that will be typed into a chart and discussed at a staff meeting and billed to your insurance.

Your body built a spine once. Your body built a skull. Your body made a person from two cells and some time. And now it needs permission to exist. Now it is tissue. Now it is irregular. Now it requires a second opinion.

Your husband will ask how it went when you get home. You will say fine. He will nod. He will not ask what you were thinking about on the table. He will not know that you were thinking about a stranger in a hotel bar, about a hand between your legs, about the version of yourself that still knows how to want things without filling out forms in triplicate.

She is finished. She tells you to get dressed. She leaves the room. The nurse will be back with instructions, with a follow-up appointment card, with a pamphlet about next steps.

You sit up slowly. Your body feels like it belongs to someone else. Like it has been borrowed and returned with minor adjustments. You put on your underwear. You put on your jeans.

Outside, in the waiting room, there are other women. They are reading magazines. They are filling out forms. They are folding their desire into their jeans and leaving it in small examination rooms where nurses will throw it away with the paper gowns at the end of the day.

You take the appointment card from the nurse. You say thank you.

You walk to your car. You sit in the driver's seat with your hands on the wheel and you think: *I am still here. I am still here. I am still here.*

Who are you talking to?

nebula inferno

by Eunice-Grace Domingo

there is a blackhole,
underneath this ship.
it is a tinny black hole,
no bigger than a pip.

there is a black hole
above us, and around:
it is a scary black(h)ole,
it growls but makes no sound.

there is a **black hole**
eating up our eyes,
it is a hungry black hole,
taking up our lives.

there is a B L A C K H O L E
telling us we are wrong
it is a haughty black-hole:
it's stolen all our songs.

there is a blackhole,
just above the tide
it is an ugly black hole :
there is whiteness inside



How could you tell if you were dreaming

by Eilidh Keane

A whale might've beached itself that morning. Years later, she'd wonder if she'd seen it at all. A beached whale. Unlikely, not impossible. Did anyone else remember? She couldn't ask. She grew too old to talk about it.

She couldn't ask, but she'd always remember. Bloated and stinking and dead as dead could be, she would always remember the look of a whale on the shore.

If it really happened, she would've been about twelve that morning. Her father had a house perched on the cliffs above the water and, as an adult, she'd tell people how she'd seen whales breaching from her childhood bedroom. That was one thing she was fairly certain she'd imagined.

A dream, then, maybe. All of it. Beached whales and breaching whales and — ah, what did she know about cetaceans?

What did she know about dreams? Her mother asked her, once when she was very small, *you know dreams can't hurt you, right?* And she knew. Or thought so, at least.

If she put her mind to it, she could remember the feeling of pushing the curtains to the side. From her watchful bedroom, she must've seen a fat whale laying belly-up on the pebbles.

When she was older, well-adjusted, lonelier, she'd stay up at night, walking through the steps. If it felt true, if she *remembered* — did that make it real? Wake up. Open the curtains. Look at it and really see it. Dad's off to work. Sit for breakfast.

She didn't eat.

Besides the whale, the day couldn't have been special. She lived mostly ordinary days and two special things never happened at the same time.

She'd walked to school because it hadn't been cold enough to ask Dad for a ride. She'd worn a jacket because it hadn't been warm enough to go without. The sky had been a sharp blue. It must've been spring.

There were cars on the road. More than usual? Well, she'd never counted cars.

At uni, they taught her eyewitnesses were weak. *Archives*, they said, and *corroboration* and *records*. She'd learn newspapers kept old stories in

easily accessible databases.

Her town was small, their newspaper was small. No archives; too insignificant. There was, however, a record that a whale beached itself in a town a half-hour up the way. That was over a hundred years ago. Did that mean anything?

One sleepless night, she read a nice big book on cetaceans. The book said there may have been whales. The North Atlantic was, after all, a hub. There were blue whales and sperm whales and right whales and killer whales — which, really, aren't whales at all.

That day, she wore the jacket because the wind rolled in off the water — so, then, the smell of the whale must've too.

Everybody walked to school on days when they couldn't ask Dad for a ride. If she stood on the squat building's roof, she could've seen a straight-shot to the sea. She hadn't stood on the roof. She walked through the doors like everyone else.

The air had been different. Her classmates were quiet. Maybe they were holding their breath against the stench of rot. Or was it only they didn't want to speak with her?

She wished she talked more. She wished it often. If she had friends, she could've spoken to them as they hung up their coats.

Did you see a whale on the beach? she would've asked.

And they would've said *yes* or *no*.

When she used to live with her mother, she'd often hear of how *quiet* a baby she was. Not easy or good, but quiet. Sleeping through the days, watchful at night, never ever crying.

If she'd been better, she would've grown into a chatty child. She would've reached out or, at least, not pulled back.

All to say, she didn't ask anyone anything that morning.

Brian sat in front of her in class. He lived down the way from Dad and she'd always hated him, but could never remember why.

Not that Brian *knew* there was hate between them. He was always twisting around in his seat, smiling back at her like he knew her. Like they were mates sharing private jokes.

She was *certain* she had no private jokes with Brian.

The teacher spoke, Brian smiled back at her, she didn't listen. She was exhausted. Most probably, she'd spent the night before awake. Besides, at that time, lessons seemed rather small. She hadn't yet understood that she was learning the foundations of bigger things.

It would've been Mrs. Harris teaching. Or else Mrs. Keoghan or Ms. McGee. She didn't face front, where Brian would be in her eyeline. She stared out the window and imagined whales swimming across the clean sky. Then,

she imagined them throwing their rotund bodies onto the playset to die.

There was a maths test that day. Mrs. Harris/Keoghan/McGee was always waffling on about tests. They announced them days before in slippery voices that leaked out of her ears.

She used to think her teacher's composite face was disappointed in her. Later, she'd realise disappointment required expectations.

Homework went undone. Her mother used to be cross about that.

She remembered — and she remembered this with shame, so she knew it was real — always thinking school was easy. She always thought — stupid, she knew — she could simply *get it* when she saw it.

She didn't.

She didn't understand a single question.

Her teacher — all her teachers, said *if you don't know, just try*. Trying guaranteed *some* marks and *partial* marks. She didn't want partial marks, she wanted full marks or else no marks at all. She refused to even sign her name at the top.

There was a prick at the backs of her eyes when she handed back the empty paper. She thought the teacher might notice. Might wonder. Pull her aside and gently ask *what's wrong?* and, to which she'd scoff and say *nothing* and the teacher would say *you're better than this* and she might self-righteously roll her eyes and leave. Then, the teacher might think about her when she wasn't there.

None of that happened. Her teacher took back the paper with a frown.

She hated eating lunch. Lunchtime was awful. She didn't make a packed lunch and she refused to speak with the dinner ladies.

And she didn't like eating alone.

She didn't *have* to eat alone. If she asked, her classmates would've said *sure, you can eat with us*, but it would sound like pity and her voice would warble when she spoke.

The air was brisk and the ground was mud, so nobody went outside during lunch. She breathed thick spring air and drew patterns in the earth with the end of a stick. Swirls, then spirals, then waves, then whales, then flies.

If anybody else had seen the whale that morning, it was down-the-way Brian. Probably, he wanted to know if she'd seen it, too. That's probably why he came outside during lunch. He was probably going to ask her about it.

But he probably noticed her uneven breathing and that's probably why he asked, "Are you okay?"

And she shrugged.

And he said, "I seen you were all alone..."

In a sticky voice, she asked, "So?"

He said, "You're always alone."

She said, "Well, I *like* being alone. I *don't* like pretending to be friendly."

When she thought about it, that was the last conversation she ever had with Brian and he never turned around in his seat again.

That day was weird, she thought, because of the whale. Nothing else. Conversations washed over her. Her classmates might've been speaking about the whale. She laid her head down and ignored the burble. In her mind, all she saw was a fat, disgusting, ready-to-burst whale that suicided itself just below her bedroom window.

A memory? A dream?

God, she wished she'd asked.

She walked home alone, but sometimes Brian would walk next to her or behind her or in her general vicinity. Not because they were friends, but because they were heading in the same direction.

Brian had a voice that echoed off the pavements, off the insides of her skull. Sometimes, when she was falling asleep, she'd hear it. It startled her awake.

There were cars on the lane when she returned home, but not so many, she thought. She didn't count.

She couldn't help but notice an odd scene before her. On the cliff's edge, there was a man, looking down silently. He could've been looking at the whale.

She didn't pause to stand by the man or to look with the man or even call out to ask what he was doing. She stomped up the steps to her father's home. The door was unlocked. She threw her jacket aside, kicked off her shoes. They went *thunk! thunk!* against the baseboards. Dad hated when she did that. He said she was going to dent the walls.

She went straight to her bedroom, where the light glimmered off the sea and everything was bright. The curtains slammed shut. She bundled herself up in bed. She hadn't looked down. Didn't check the shore for a moment.

She slept and didn't look and she'd never forget not looking. If she'd looked...

Well, she wouldn't have forgotten seeing a whale *twice*.



Out of the Box

by Marquese Kese

Characters

Aleson Female 20's/30's

Morie Male 20's/30's

Setting:

On the stage a collection of index cards are thrown all over the floor around a busted opened card box.

Story:

A card box that housed the written confessions of a young couple's dark secrets are exposed before them after a burglary at their home.

MORIE and ALESON are transfixed while they each read a handwritten index card silently to themselves.

ALESON

I thought you said you were out of town for work that weekend?

MORIE

I thought you said he was just a friend?

ALESON

He was...

MORIE

And then?

ALESON

And then he wasn't..

Aleson finally looks up from her card. Morie follows suit.

MORIE

So what now?

ALESON

You tell me?



Morie paces doing a 360 returning back to within Aleson's area.

MORIE

Let's just put everything back in the box.

ALESON

And act like it never happened?

MORIE

That was always the deal wasn't it? Just write it down and pretend it never existed?

ALESON

Except it's all out now. We can't go back to being ignorant. That bliss is over with. Now we know the truth.

Morie goes quiet as he calculates the situation.

MORIE

But do we?

ALESON

What do you mean?

MORIE

I only read one card.

ALESON

And?

MORIE

And so did you. Let's just put everything back.

ALESON

So we just deal with this one sin and forget about everything else?

MORIE

Do you really want to find about anything else?

Aleson struts up to within inches of Morie's face.

ALESON

How much have you done?

MORIE

According to the handwriting on those cards babe, just as much as you.

ALESON

Not everything on those cards are what you think they are.

MORIE

So you say.

ALESON

So let's go through them then.

Aleson bends down to go through more cards when Morie grabs her shoulders.

MORIE

No!

Aleson stands back up.

ALESON

What are you so afraid of?

MORIE

What do you think? What's on those cards I wouldn't have written if they were easy to confess.

(then)

Isn't that the same for you?

ALESON

That's for you to decide. That's why I think we should go through them. If you love me, then it really won't matter.

(then)

Right?

Morie turns away

ALESON.

Right?

Morie turns back.

MORIE

I just think we've been good up until now. Why rock the boat by changing the system?

ALESON

You say it like what's on those cards is going to change that.

MORIE

So after we read our confessions we're just going to go right back to putting things back in the box?

ALESON

Sure.

MORIE

Right...

ALESON

Why don't you believe me?

MORIE

Because you don't know what I've done.

ALESON

And I won't ever know if you don't let me read them.

Morie pauses.

MORIE

Look, let's just deal with this one card.

ALESON

Just one card. And put everything else back?

MORIE

Just for right now. We can talk about what we're going to do another time.

Aleson ponders the notion.

MORIE

Please?

ALESON

I'll just go first.

Morie takes a step back in frustration in a manner as if his favorite sports team just made a bad play.

ALESON

So are you ready?

Aleson waits for Morie to read off from her confession card.

ALESON

When I say I'll go first I mean for you to read my card out loud.

Morie looks down at the card in his hand almost as if she's asking him to sacrifice their first born they've never had.

MORIE

I can't...why don't we just --

ALESON

Fine I'll just recite mine from memory. When Jacob and I used to --

MORIE

Do we have to use names?

ALESON

But you already know who he is?

MORIE

I just don't think they're important.

ALESON

So you wanna use pronouns?

MORIE

I just --

ALESON

So when Jacob and I used to see each other for work it turned into a thing. We would have lunch together. Sometimes when you were with your friends -- at least that's where you said you were -- we would meet for dinner.

(then)

And then we started meeting in places more private like cheap motels and what not.

MORIE

Could you spare me the details?

ALESON

We would lie in bed, face to face --

Morie looks like someone is driving a screw driver through his chest.

MORIE

Babe --

ALESON

And we would stare into each others eyes --

MORIE

Aleson please!

ALESON

And we would talk...

MORIE

What?

ALESON

We would talk. We would lie in bed and talk.

MORIE

You expect me to believe that?

ALESON

No. It sounds absurd.

MORIE

Then why would you confess if that's all you did?

ALESON

Because it's still cheating. Albeit emotionally.

MORIE

You're trying to tell me that the only thing you and Jacob did was eat food and have conversations?

ALESON

Intimate conversations.

MORIE

Fine, intimate conversations.

ALESON

Yes.

MORIE

You could have done that with me?!

ALESON

No, I couldn't. Because you don't know how to. You see, what he gave me was soul penetrating intimacy.

(then)

The first time I was with him was like nothing I've ever experienced. I was like a spiritual virgin. It's a place you've never reached. I'm not even sure you could.

MORIE

So you're saying his spiritual penis is longer than mines?

ALESON

(sighs)

If that's the only way you can understand this Morie, then yes. He entered me with his oblong spiritual penis.

MORIE
That's a load of crap.

ALESON
(segues)
So let's talk about your card.
(reading)

I met her again. It was different this time. Still the same passion and connection but she seemed to regret it this go around. I wonder if this time was the last.

(to Morie)
So was it?

MORIE
What?

ALESON
The last time Morie.

He doesn't answer right away.

MORIE
Turn the card over.

She flips the card over.

ALESON
(reading)
July 14, 2021.

MORIE
No. We met a few more times after that.

ALESON
(sighs)
So it's over with?

MORIE
As far as I know.

ALESON
I noticed you didn't say her name.
(then)
It's someone I know isn't it?

MORIE
Aleson...

ALESON
It is...

MORIE
Look, why don't we just stop here and pick this up another day? We haven't even called the cops yet.

ALESON
Okay. That's fine. We'll take care of that first.

Morie starts gathering up the cards.

ALESON
What are you doing?

MORIE
I'm putting everything back.

ALESON
Morie, this is evidence. A crime has been committed here.

MORIE
Are you talking about the burglary? Or our marriage?

ALESON
Both...



On Shame

by Annabelle Oberst

Shame is a strange sort of substance that sticks to the skin like sap. The emotion seeps into every crevice, fusing skin with the flesh and bone underneath, stripping the body and mind to their barest compositions. Shame lives in my teeth, my tongue, the lining of my stomach. Both on my skin and burrowed inside. The substance has coated my brain. Memories of my youth and childhood are stuck in sap, fossilized in amber hues that, when broken, unveil years of decay.

At six weeks old, I was baptized in the church where my parents married, adorned in an oversized white dress that was worn by almost all of my maternal relatives. The priest cupped water from the baptismal font with strong, cautious hands and poured it over my head as he uttered a blessing. My family members watched as droplets trickled from my skin into the pool below, rippling against the water. In the Catholic Church, Baptism is the first sacrament, undergone to cleanse a person of their original sin—an innate condition, thought to be shared by all humans, passed down from when Adam and Eve first betrayed God. After the water touches your soul, you are innocent. No evil deed can touch you unless you let it.

When I would lie, my mom would fix me with a look, square her shoulders, and frown in disappointment. *You've embarrassed me*, her eyes said. Ever the stubborn child, I would stare back indignantly, hip cocked and arms crossed, doubling down on whatever lie I had told. It was never very serious, those lies about brushing my teeth or going to bed early, but she treated them like they were symptoms of sin. Our staring contest of equal stubbornness wouldn't end until my mother produced the single greatest weapon in her arsenal. *Tell the truth and shame the devil*, she'd tell me.

In Sunday School, I sat criss-crossed on the itchy gray carpet as the teacher recited verses from her leather-bound Bible. Adam and Eve, Moses and the Ten Commandments, the Passion of Christ. I cannot remember the name of the teacher, or even what she looked like, but the content of her lessons sparked both knowledge and fear in me. Particularly, the Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,”

which was simplified to “You shall not lie” for the children’s understanding. By that standard, I was already a sinner. I hadn’t used the Lord’s name in vain or coveted my neighbor’s wife or chosen sleep over Church on a Sunday morning, but I had lied, often and easily. Soon, I would use “god” as an expletive, stare at girls in class, and not attend church for years.

My father smelled of cigarettes. The familiar stench took root in my lungs, in cotton clothes and pillows, in the holes in his shorts from where he stubbed the cigarette butts out. As a child, I thought his shorts had been moth-eaten, and so I disliked the way swarms of small insects would crowd the outside light. When we returned home late, I would slam the door quickly in fear they’d follow me in. I became scared of them, the nighttime butterflies outside my window. Back then, I didn’t know it was him, heavy-footfall and smoky lungs, I would come to be afraid of.

Years ago, I was kneeling in a confessional, speaking through perforated wood to a priest I could only see the outline of. I uttered my sin, which, at the time, was probably some mix of not brushing my teeth, eating my vegetables, or going to bed early, and the priest asked me to pray five Hail Marys to be forgiven. I didn’t go to confession again until six years later, when I was fifteen and angry. Then, when the priest asked about my sins, I cried. I felt more exposed in that wooden room than at home or school. I told him about my Dad and how I carried his sins as my own. When I finished, the priest said: *You have nothing to be ashamed of*. It didn’t help. My shame was something God didn’t have the power to expunge.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.¹

The Lord was not with me. My early adolescence had stripped His existence from my heart, and by my teenage years, each observation was evidence of his non-existence. My father was dead, and I could not believe there was a better place for him. Or, if his crimes were to be weighed, a hell below. Those years, I found solace not in God, but in Grace. Not the biblical kind, the girlish. 5’2 with dark brown hair, freckled cheeks, and purple glasses. I memorized her features between scenes in Drama class, and then became engrossed by her wit when we sat together in Theology. I begged my heart to be quiet, for the queer part of me to stay caged, but my heart has always been at war with my head. I fell in love.

¹ 2 Timothy 4:22

~

Sexual hunger is a deity I do not know. I was always fascinated with sex, intrigued by my indifference, by how little of it sparked anything. Its absence felt like a lack I had inflicted. Teens all begging to be consumed by one another like wild animals, while the only hunger I had was to press my head against my beloved's chest and listen to her heart thump in tandem with mine. That was enough to satiate me, but not my beloved. So, when she could not have the meat on my bones, starvation struck.

~

When I was seven, I ate a frozen pizza off our kitchen floor. Hunger was a common occurrence in my father's house. Dad was usually too drunk to make or buy dinner. My brother John and I made do with mac and cheese and hot dogs or deli meat from the fridge. When there was nothing in the house, I'd eat hot chocolate straight from the packet, pouring its innards into my mouth while trying not to choke on dust. I devoured the pizza on the floor, sitting criss-cross, shoving the half-frozen disk into my mouth and biting. The cold burned when it hit my molars, but I chewed through the ice and pain, and once I finished a bite, I would take another, then another, stuffing myself until all of it was gone.

~

Before Jesus was crucified, the Romans shamed him. They forced Jesus to carry the cross to his execution, then, once they arrived, they stole his clothes and shoved a crown of thorns on his head. *He can save others!* taunted the Roman soldiers. *But he cannot save himself.*

Yet it is a choice not to save yourself, one I have made tenfold. I've let others thrust a crown of thorns onto my head, passively accepting my fate, and sometimes, I have crowned myself. No matter the culprit, shame stabs holes into my hands and feet so that I am pinned to the cross, to my shame, to the very thing that taught me the feeling. I cry in agony for hours. The pain lingers long after I am dragged off the cross.

~

Grace and I shared a chemistry class. We sat in the back, catty-corner to each other, our bodies stuffed into too-small wooden desks decorated with chewed gum and mindless Sharpie doodles. I spent most of the fifty-five-minute class period admiring how Grace's hair looked tucked behind her ears or how her hands scribbled notes with pointed interest. After class, she'd relay the information we learned, and I'd nod along as if I had paid attention. She loved the question of science and the pull of chemistry, intrigued by chemical compounds and bonds and how combinations of elements produced specific reactions. I didn't care for the science, but I cared for her. My affection curtailed any distance between us.

~

On tiptoes, my girlish feet slid downstairs softly, though there was no need for my feet to be soft. Dad was asleep on the couch, like he always was, and the TV was still on. It hummed with *Futurama*. My child's mind equated the ambient television noise to music; I fell into a rhythm. When I got to the living room, I moved like a dancer—sweeping in and out of the space with tendus and arabesques, pulling with me the glass bottles that were discarded on the floor and the half-empty one swaddled in my father's arms like a baby. When I went to toss the remains down the sink, I thought about how my dad never held me like he held them.

~

After school, Grace and I would walk toward our cars, hands apart but itching to close the distance, before stopping near the start of our school's parking lot, next to an eight-foot cream statue of the Virgin Mary. We'd linger, our eyes speaking fondness when our mouths or hands could not, before parting to opposite sides of the street.

~

At 11:15 on Sunday mornings, I was at mass. I stood on my toes in the choir loft, hands grasping the mic and chest puffed like a peacock. When Ms. Diane gave me a solo, I reveled in the congregation's attention. Being in the choir was an escape from my parents. Dad sometimes wouldn't show up, or if we were with him that weekend, would drop us off late, hungover, and I wouldn't see it, but I was sure Mom yelled at him in the parking lot. One time, while I was in the choir loft blissfully unaware, Dad stormed in, still drunk and screaming. An usher had to escort him out. I sang my heart out that day, and when I met Mom in the lobby after church got out, I asked her where Dad went. *Honey, I'm sorry*, she told me. *But he left.*

~

There is fear and anticipation in sleeping beside someone else. Before we started dating, Grace built a wall of cushions between our bodies because she had once woken up in the middle of the night with her arms wrapped around me. That feeling pushed her to the edge of the bed, where it was certain we would not touch.

~

I watched sex scenes with a curious interest, rather than a sexual one. My favorite show was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which my mom had let me watch the entirety of by the time I was eight. We watched each season on DVDs bought from the local mall, and some episodes I would watch repeatedly until the disks were scratched. I would replay scenes of Xander and Cordelia making out in a closet or Spike and Buffy fucking so hard

that an entire house comes down around them. There was nothing sexual in the way I watched the episodes, in how my fingers grasped the remote and rewound. I questioned how bodies fit together, looking for answers in the dark of the TV screen. When I couldn't find them, I rewound and searched again.

~

My parents married in 1996 on the coldest day of the year. All the guests were frozen, sitting on their hands in the heated church, and the ceremony lasted almost three hours, officiated by a priest who spent forty-five minutes on a tangent about sumo wrestling. My parents stood on the altar, facing each other, and said I do with twin giddy smiles. Their vows would eventually crumble under the weight of my father's addiction, but that day in the cold, their mouths were warmly pressed together with the promise of forever.

~

I imagine lust to be carnivorous, carnal, bleeding, a deep burgundy. Everything, red. My body was overwhelmingly silent, even when Grace pressed her tongue to the seam of my mouth and slipped herself inside. I was in love; it was evident in my soft smile and desire to be beside her, entwined fingers and limbs. But not our tongues or hips rutting against each other like dogs. There was sweetness in our kisses, and love dripping from my lips like honey, but there was no heat in my body. It was cold inside me, and no fervent touch could make me warm.

~

In Grace's arms, I became something else. A muted little sort, slouched over to meet the height of her. When her lips marked nothing on me, I found other brandings. I wanted to be hers because if I was—if she wanted me—then I was more than my lack. I branded myself with inappetence, starving my stomach until it grew ravenous and turned on itself. The months of my non-eating were a tightly clutched secret, something I didn't admit even to myself. My beloved didn't notice, and neither did I, not until it was too late for any restitution. By then, all she had left me with was a worn-thin copy of her favorite book and an illness in my stomach I had contracted and kept.

~

The first time I drank wine, it was sweet. Its body was pure. I was seven in a white dress, and I had never felt prettier. I cupped the chalice the priest handed me, which was almost larger than my face. I tentatively drank. It didn't taste like *The Blood of Christ*, like the Priest said it was, but I had no reference. Neither did it taste like grapes, which I knew wine was made from. The drink was slightly fruity but heavy in a way no fruit could ever

be. After mass, Dad and I took a photo outside the Church dressed in our widest smiles. I kept the picture framed by my bedside. A year later, I would learn of my dad's affection for cheap boxed wine. Then, wine wouldn't be sweet; it would be bitter and painful and full of anger, but I would down the taste of it, hoping that next time, it would taste of the sweetness I remembered.

~

By the time Grace's love had dried up, mine was still a pool. I was lost in time, submerged in our lakewater summer when we floated in the swimming hole near her house, outstretched arms touching. I hadn't noticed that the water had sunk into the earth, drying it to dust, until Grace had fled the lake. I was swimming in dirt. In her absence, I begged for scraps and scoured the land for any trace of her. I dug towards the earth, hands fisted in the places she had once been, lapping up dirt like water and praying for sustenance.

~

After my parents divorced, my mom sent me to therapy. I sat in Dr. Myzenburg's office, whom I referred to in my head as Dr. Hamburger, and stared up at the quilted tapestry stuck to the wall above her desk. It was made by the family of one of her patients. I drew while she asked me questions, always answering with half-truths. While my mom had tried to explain that therapy was nothing to be ashamed of, and that I was only there to make sure I had someone to talk to, I stumbled through third grade thinking something was wrong with me. That there was something in me they could see, and it was my responsibility to force it out.

~

When I was ten, Dad, who was still drunk at ten in the morning, crashed into a median on his way to my parent-teacher conference. He was arrested and charged with a DWI. Mom dragged him to court—I was not there, but I was told later it was extremely ugly—and got primary custody of me and John. On a court order, a breathalyzer was installed in his gold Honda CR-V. On days when the car wouldn't start, he would call my mother screaming. Mom tried to hide it to keep the illusion of a perfect father alive, but I sometimes saw her crying in her room after hanging up. Dad was suspended from teaching, and at carpool, I would field questions from his curious middle school students about his whereabouts.

~

Grace hung above me like a rosary. When we kissed experimentally, trying to match each other's pace and fervor with deeper kisses and different angles, her roaming hands were sterile, not hot like she intended. My back should have been arching, my lips panting *more*, but my mind was

screaming *less*, and my body just wanted to be held. I searched for sexual passion in her mouth, hoping it was there, that this time we'd kiss and I'd catch fire. I was warm when she touched me and happy when she looked at me, but that heat in my body was a hearth, not a wildfire. I craved love and companionship. A house heated by unadulterated affection. I didn't crave sex. And maybe, in the end, that was the problem, the difference between us I couldn't fix. I was not burning, but I was still in love. Grace burned in a way I could not touch. But she did not love me.

~

Dad never received Last Rites, a catholic tradition where a priest anoints the dying by allowing them their final sacraments: confession, prayer, Eucharist. He didn't confess his sins to another human soul, but he may have to god, through sobs of babbled apologies. I will never know. No priest comforted him through death with the promise of heaven. My dad died alone. He was not found until days later, pale-skinned and close-eyed, strewn across the black leather couch he always slept on. I never saw the body. My father was ash the next time we met.

~

2

For from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

I was not full when I had Grace, nor was I after. I'd watch her eat, pink tongue swirled around a fork or an ice cream scoop with fascination. It was not lust, as I had mistakenly diagnosed the emotion, but rather a longing for her uncomplicated relationship with food. My presence did not disrupt her ability to eat, as hers did for me, which I falsely assigned as evidence of her superiority rather than what it was, evidence of our relationship's undoing.

~

Asexuality is rarely documented. It lacks any historical account. Even in history, we assume anyone not having sex with the opposite gender is engaging in sex with the same gender when it could, possibly, be that they did not engage in sex at all.

~

I should've said it, even if I hadn't meant it. The last time my father and I spoke was when I was fourteen, after Thanksgiving dinner on a thirty-second phone call where he told me he loved me, and I hung up. He was still drunk, slurring through his words, and after, Mom asked me if I wanted to invite him over for dessert. I told her no. He was found dead

four days later.

~

Days before his death, Dad forgot to pick me up from school. I begrudgingly asked for a ride home from Ms. Mallory, one of the teachers I occasionally babysat for. When we made it to my house, I thanked her and stepped out of the car. I walked to the porch and tried the front door. It was locked. I knocked. Waited. No one answered. I could hear the TV through the door, and Dad's car was still in the driveway, so I knew he was home. *Dad, let me in*, I called. *Go away*, he screamed back. As he yelled, I glanced back and forth at Ms. Mallory, who was still in the driveway, and the door. I hoped she couldn't hear him. When he wouldn't let me in, I walked back to the car and got in. *Can you drop me off at my mom's house instead?* I asked. Ms. Mallory agreed, and we didn't talk about what had happened on the drive.

~

After my dad's death, Mom and I drove to St. Michael's to plan the funeral. I stayed silent as we were drawn into a boardroom and the priest expressed his condolences. I was not consoled by his sorries, and I did not want to be there. I hadn't left my room in a week, gone to school, or choir practice. I wanted nothing to do with religion or God. I stayed in the dark, in my bed with curtains drawn, and didn't come out for the world. Mom must have been worried, which is why she dragged me there instead of letting me sleep. Ms. Diane came in and sat next to me. The last time I had seen her was at choir practice, two weeks before he died. When she noticed tears almost escaping my eyelids, Ms. Diane pulled me out of my seat and into the hall. We walked the outskirts of the chapel while I tried not to cry, but it didn't work. I sobbed, violent and ugly, as she watched.

~

When Grace destroyed my city, and hunger ravaged my land, I, like Lot's wife, became salt. The wife's name is never mentioned in the Bible, and she is referred to only by her relation to her husband, which makes her ending, as a pillar of salt in his wicked city, sad and unbecoming. Salt is a pure compound, so it cannot be broken down any further—an atom of salt cannot be split. I, too, could not be split. I was already the bones of myself. There was nothing left to rip out.

~

Two months after my Dad died, I returned to the choir. I stood in the back, hands red from how hard I was gripping the music binder, as the elementary school kids chirped happily to the piano's accompaniment. The lyrics and notes blurred in my vision, and my voice could not tell the difference between a C and an F. In the last twenty minutes, we began

² John 1:16.

rehearsing a new song. I didn't recognize it, but once they started singing, my stomach clenched, and my hands shook. They had played this at my father's funeral, which, on a good day, I had difficulty remembering. Ms. Diane noticed my distress. I watched her eyes as she realized. I walked out and hid in the church lobby until my mom came to pick me up. When I left, I never came back.

~

I've toiled over Melissa Febos' memoir, *Abandon Me*, with underlines and annotations. I read it with a distinct knot in my stomach that tightened on every page. Febos is a recovering drug addict grappling with a tumultuous, toxic queer relationship and a pained family situation. And, while our situations are not the same, something in her writing speaks to me like we are kin. When, in one of her essays, Febos writes, "Grace is not sweet, and mercy is not getting what you want," my stomach wants to rip out of me with familiarity. At our end, Grace was not sweet, and our relationship had soured from honey to rot. When she left, I cried and begged and pleaded. But leaving was the merciful outcome. I could not cut myself loose, so Grace had to. I blamed her for it. Had we stayed together, I would've rotted for years.

~

By the time I started high school, I was sick of pity. I didn't want to be the girl with the dead dad. I was so ashamed of my father, of who he was and how he had died, that I told all my new friends he was alive. I lost count of how many lies I told. Some of them were more innocent than others, referring to him using the present tense instead of the past. Other times, it was business trips. Or, I'd tell them he lived in a different state. When I finally came clean about his death, I still wasn't truthful. When they asked how he died, I told everyone something different. Heart-attack. Sleep Apnea. Organ Failure. I didn't want them to know the truth, that my father drank himself to death and that if I had forgiven him that night, he might not have.

~

I called myself a monster in the mirror. I pulled my hair out. I slapped myself. I picked my skin until it bled. Until I resembled Jesus in his crown of thorns. I would not let go of my shame. I could not. It was the only thing keeping me. Without it, what was I? I denounced god. It was easier than trying to fit religion into a life without my father. With god comes forgiveness, and I was not ready to forgive. Without a god to forgive me, I was the one who could not forgive myself. I had power, and it was exhilarating. I could hold my shame until it killed me.

~

In high school, all my friends were still virgins. Their lack of sexual experience and inability to talk about their secret horniness was great for me, who certainly did not want to talk about it, did not even want to think about it. When Grace and I were dating, she didn't pressure sex, but looking back, I know she wanted it. One time, she told me about how she was thinking of getting her nipples pierced. She wanted me to respond in a certain way, with my body, with *that's so hot*, with pulling her in for some heated entanglement. Instead, when she told me, I impulsively covered my chest, feeling the phantom pain of a needle. *Really?* I asked. *Wouldn't that hurt?* It wasn't the response she wanted. I didn't even notice.

~

America is simultaneously sex-obsessed and sex-repulsed. This ideology is confusing for most teens when media and education are overflowing with mixed messages regarding sexual shame, but especially for me, who, in early adolescence, realized I should've been horny and hiding it. I should've been ashamed of wanting sex. But I didn't want sex. That was shaming, too.

~

My name does not carry my mother's lineage in word or meaning. My first, middle, and last belong to him. My brother carries my mother's name where she once carried him—Collins rooted in his sternum. Part of me wishes to be hyphenated, sharing both their last names, and another part, the hurt part, desires to abandon my father's memory by leaving our last name on his headstone. As punishment, maybe, but I pretend it is respect for the woman who raised me.

~

Eight months after my father died, I met Grace. My attachment to her was genuine, or, as genuine as it could be, as a depressed fifteen-year-old looking for something to believe in. After class, we would sit in the school's lobby, on the floor facing each other, talking so fast that no one else could keep up. When she looked at me, I wasn't the girl with the dead dad. I wasn't an alcoholic's daughter. I was seen and known, and, for once, something other than ashamed.

~

Blame is the easiest defense. It was easy to blame Grace; she had done the breaking. I blamed her with words and sobs and poorly written poetry, with mutual friends and parents. I hungered for revenge, and I hungered for her affection, and mostly, I hungered to be something other than hungry. My illness did not waver as the months without her numbered, as I graduated from high school and began college. I skipped meals and swapped sandwiches for salads. I blamed her for that, too. It was easier

to blame Grace than admit what I had been running from: I was responsible. I let Grace slip inside me, and I allowed my sense of self to slip out, leaking from the places she had burrowed into. I did this to myself. And, in some ways, I begged her to do it.

~

Shame never really leaves. I've tried to abandon the emotion at my father's grave, in my knotted stomach, at my childhood church, or the nature preserve Grace and I broke up at. But still, it finds me there—encased amber memories, wounds subjected to reopening, feelings I run both to and from. Because what am I without my shame? When I've stripped myself back to my barest composition, to bone, my shame does not leave. I could bathe myself in light, and perhaps rid the emotion of its power. But the dark is damp and cool. I've grown reliant on concrete floors and little sunlight, on a shame that is comforting. I could leave the dark, abandon it in pursuit of something better. But I am not sure I ever would. There is comfort in staying miserable.



Things!!!

by Eunice-Grace Domingo

before i had marched
through all the black christmasses
that god and the measly grownups had allotted to me since my
ugly birth, i

wanted Things!!!

my smile was a smile then — not
a raincloud between my cheeks. it was
elastic, like sequoia sap and a
crane wife's ankles once they invite the saw's teeth.

i'd craft workshop lists of desires and
invest passion in touching and owning,
like a man with all the bellicose power of industry but
no one to fold his socks just right once
the clothes are warm in the machine.

i wanted kingdoms, citrus souls, and
incomprehensible, simple things
that i could touch and sell and never afford.

i want

to want to

want that

again. to take a cupcake-frosted
finger and say, this. that over there. you.
her. here. it

did not matter whether my wishes
were granted or filed for poolside safeguarding because
there was
always another great comet of 1812 to whisk the doubts away.

those things — those extra unordinary things — made up my candle wax girlhood dreams:
shutting my eyes now, i sing their material names to nonexistence; i am
never older, — no longer hallowed — with
receipts, regret, or remonstrance. before me, there is only
the gangrene ribbon tied plumply,
expectant and divine in how it does
not know better
to know better to
know best.



shedding: a burning haibun

by Amanda Conover

that little cheerleader in the air, twisting and turning,
contorting the body into pretzels of scorpionheat
and swollen ankle. the post-performance stomach mothpit
as you waited for the judges. they knocked points off
for anything less than perfect. what i did for fun was read
tween magazines, with their cutout posters of boys
from movies and tips for how to be something
or someone. what's wrong is that the new girl
from the farther gym took my spot at the top. to get rid
is to lessen how much you are. how too much, in all
the wrong areas. it started slowly and then became
everything at once. making the kids at school
ask what was going on, as if id never looked better.
beneath it all, what i thought i wanted: bumblebee breath
and lockets of bones. i thought i wanted this. to be free.

that [redacted] air [redacted]
contorting the body [redacted] scorpionheat
and swollen [redacted] mothpit
as you waited [redacted]
for anything less [redacted] what i did for fun was [redacted]
[redacted] cutout [redacted]
[redacted] something
or someone. [redacted]
[redacted] to get rid
is to lessen [redacted] all
the wrong areas. [redacted] slowly and then [redacted]
[redacted] at once. making [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] it all [redacted] i thought. [redacted]
[redacted] i wanted this. [redacted]

[redacted]
body swollen [redacted] i [redacted]
[redacted] cutout [redacted] the wrong [redacted] as if [redacted] that [redacted]
[redacted] is all [redacted] i wanted [redacted]
[redacted]



Ten Minutes To Five

by Richard Scorza

Two years to the day, the monitor flatlined. Glass under his palm. Nurses in gowns drifting like ghosts. Tubes, plastic, her mouth hidden by the mask. Her last breath heaving her upward, as if the body had to rise to let go.

He opens his eyes to snow.

The 13th-floor window rattles in the wind; his ankles sting from the cold. Cars below lay half-buried; the streets dragged in white. Somewhere, church bells. He holds the mug without tasting it.

Behind him: the kitchen table.

On it: the gun.

Beside it: the folded note.

The forced air kicks on. A low hum. Then the other sound comes back, louder:

Barking impact wrenches.

Rivet guns, ka-chunk, ka-chunk.

Compressed air in sharp bursts.

Back then the noise was the point. The factory line alive under his watch, eight hundred workers riding it like a promise—mortgages and groceries, orthodontia, gas. They called him Doc because he listened for trouble and heard it before it seized. Bearings, belts, anything metal that had decided it was done. “Doc,” they’d say, nodding when he passed.

At home, she’d pick the grit out of his hair and smile like he’d done something holy.

In 2011, they killed the line.

Lights off. Steel cooling. Men and women in a parking lot promising union fellowship forever. By spring they were numbers on each other’s phones that didn’t ring.

He tips the mug. Empty. His hands shakes when he sets it down. Whiskey into the coffee. Or just whiskey.

O’Gara’s was across from the plant—narrow, sticky, the kind of dark that didn’t care what time it was. For a while it held them: the laid-off, the retired-too-early, the ones who said they’d land on their feet and never quite did. Faces thinning in neon.

He ran into one of the men the plant left behind, Bill Tennyson, at Home Depot, bent over a cart of lumber.

“How you doin’ there, Doc?”

“Good, Bill. You?”

“Wife’s got me building a deck. Keeps me out of trouble.”

Frances nodded. “Yeah, I hear you.”

Bill scratched his cheek, half smiled. “Tell Margarete I miss her coffee cake.”

Nothing to work on at home. Nowhere to put his hands. So nights out came easier.

One of those nights, Margarete sent Morris—fifteen—to get him. The boy found his father in a booth: warm beer, a woman laughing too loud, too close; her hand on his arm, Frances leaning in. Morris stood in the doorway long enough to understand. He turned away. Walking home, shame settled between them, soft as dust, hard as stone.

“Frances, honey, layoffs happen,” Margarete said. “Five more years and you get your full benefits. Remember?”

“Who the hell is going to hire me?”

“We’ll find something.”

They did. Newgate School. Donated cars in various states of despair, students in coveralls leaning over open hoods. Single moms who got the keys when the engines finally held. He found a kind of worth in that. Different noise. Softer.

The ache of failure didn’t leave. It just learned where to sit.

Evenings, when they were good, were a couch and an old movie and her stockings tucked under her. The Twins game, some other silliness, sometimes the television sound turned down, the room filled with whatever she was saying instead. She’d talk through the credits, whispering about directors, bit players, everyone who’d passed through the frame.

“What was that last thing? Scorsese who?” he’d say.

She’d tilt her head, smile, lay a light hand on his knee.

She’d whisper *I love you* on her way into sleep, words slipping loose as her mouth went soft, TV light washing her face. He’d lie beside her, his breath settling into hers. This was the best of it—a life well lived. With her beside him, the world in proportion.

They had plans. A map in the kitchen drawer with circles on it: the Grand Canyon, diners off the interstate, the sorts of motels where the ice machine never works. They were going to follow the circles until they’d had their fill.

Then the world closed.

When it opened, she was gone.

After that, nothing held shape.

He wakes before dawn, stands in the kitchen without knowing why, leaves the TV on all day. The city moves through his window like water he’s

not allowed to drink.

Once a week he rides the elevator to the lobby. The concierge nods but doesn't use his name. Flyers for pizza pile up in his mailbox. He sometimes lingers near the coffee bar to watch younger couples head to brunch—coats open, talking too fast, their reflections layered over his in the glass.

Morris calls every Sunday at exactly five. The phone lies flat on the counter, humming, pulsing, offering him the thing he can't pick up. He sees not the man in Australia, the scholar, the oceanographer, but the boy at ten, waving a foam finger a beat too late, more interested in the Jumbotron than the field.

He'd tried to teach that boy football. Tried to show him how the rhythm of downs—the hit, the grind, the reset—was a sort of order in a world with none.

"It seems silly," the boy said. "Wanting to hurt someone over a ball."

Margarete agreed. Proud of his mind. Frances bit down on whatever he'd been about to say and swallowed it. It stuck.

The boy turned to books instead. Minnesota. UCLA. Australia. By twenty-four, an office at the Australian Institute of Marine Science. Oceans his father would only see on screens. Frances was proud. Of course he was proud. Pride just didn't help when the Sunday calls ended and the condo went back to silence. Each time, he told himself, *Next week I'll say something real*. He never did.

He wipes the counters every night until they shine. Drops half-eaten takeout down the chute. Squares the remote with the edge of the table.

After Covid, he tried the VFW. Too many young guys, the desert still in their eyes. He felt like a counterfeit there—too old, too soft, too late to everything. He tried the coffee shop downstairs. The baristas were bright, efficient, polite in a way that said *we see you and we are not going to know you*.

He brought a dozen doughnuts once, left them by the espresso machine. "For the staff," he said. No one asked his name. The box was gone the next day. He told himself they could've said thank you, then felt small for needing it.

In the elevator, he started nodding too long at people, hoping someone would say his name. After a while, it was easier to stay upstairs.

Through the walls: laughter, arguing, a baby, a dog, pipes. Once, a red rubber ball rolled down the hallway and bumped his door. He stared at it until it seemed like part of the building, then nudged it back with his foot.

He makes the bed tight every morning. His pillow dented, hers smooth. A suggestion of her head, nothing more.

Down the hall, framed pictures: wedding, Morris at ten with a foam

finger, Morris at graduation, his arm around Margarete. He dusts them weekly. He doesn't look at them. The only foolish thing he allows to fall out of order is the cake stand on top of the fridge—the glass dome grown cloudy with dust.

It had been a wedding gift, heavy and foolish and perfect. A wide porcelain base with fading violets painted around the lip, the glass cloche that came down over the cake like a spell. She'd kept it high in the cupboard except on special days: birthdays, holidays, any night that needed a little ceremony. Chocolate with buttercream, lemon with poppy seeds, the one red velvet she swore she'd never make again. The glass fogged with sweetness when the candles burned, Frances leaning forward to blow them out while she counted softly: One to grow on.

Later, when Morris left for California and then Australia, the stand came down less often. After she died, Frances lifted it onto the top of the fridge. Out of reach. Out of mind. Dust settled.

He looks at it now and feels his throat constrict. Everything has stopped except him. Snow sticks to the corners of the window. A plow scrapes the street below, orange light sliding along the building as if nothing is wrong anywhere.

Two bananas sag on the counter, brown-spotted and leaking sweetness into the air. *Bananas won't keep, Frances. You always buy too many.*

He pulls the chair in and sits at the table again. Lifts the gun. The barrel is colder than he expects. He presses it beneath his chin. His hand trembles. He lowers it, sets it down flat, then snatches it back up, startled by his own movement. The scrape of metal against formica cracks the quiet.

"Coward," he says.

He'd bought the gun after George Floyd's murder. Margarete, one of the only times she seemed truly angry with him, planted herself in the doorway, arms folded.

"A gun, Frances? Really?"

"The world's changing," he'd said. "Streets aren't safe."

"Fine," she'd answered eventually. "But I don't want to see it. And you'll take a safety course."

Quarter to five now. Fifteen minutes until Morris's Sunday call. He's thought about this so long it barely feels like a decision. More like something the day has for him, the way the plant had shifts and Newgate had classes.

If he doesn't answer, Morris will call back. If he still doesn't answer, Morris will call the police. Better that than rotting here for days.

He puts the gun down and reaches for the note. The paper is softened at the folds where his thumbs have worked it.

Dear Morris,

Please don't be angry. I know I've had a good life and been lucky in a lot of ways. But since your mom passed, it's been hard. I've felt more and more like I'm just taking up space. Days go by and I barely say a word. I didn't expect the quiet to get so loud.

Your mom used to say we kept each other grounded, and I think she was right. Since she's been gone, I haven't been the same. I've thought a lot about this, and I'm just tired.

I want you to understand it's not about you or Amelia. I love you both, and I'm proud of you—you turned out to be steady, decent man. A good man. I just don't know how to do this part. This part after.

I've left everything with my attorney. He knows what to do.

Take care of each other.

Love, Dad

It's ten minutes to five

The last word blurs. He waits for another sentence to arrive, something small and merciful. It doesn't. He folds the note and sets it beside the gun.

Nine minutes.

He scrolls through photos of Morris and Amelia in Sydney: beach light on their faces, water behind them, their bodies tanned and easy. They belong to a world he cannot imagine himself entering. He feels, suddenly, the grit of sand under his own toes, years earlier, Jersey Shore, Morris laughing, squinting into the sun, a kite string tugging at his hand.

Eight minutes.

He lifts the gun again. The metal under his chin is weightless and

absolute. He whispers Margarete's name. Sets it down. Funeral flowers swelling in vases, browning at the edges by the second day. Morris standing in the doorway of the bar, eyes hard.

Seven minutes.

He pours the last finger of whiskey and swallows. The burn is so faint it might as well be water. He thinks of her at the library, explaining how the place worked to people who thought it was just shelves and dust. Her mind full of books, ideas, small joys. The way her hand settled on his shoulder when she wanted to anchor him.

"Would you?" he asks the air. "Would you understand?"

Six minutes.

He wipes his palms on his thighs, takes the gun in both hands now, holds it like evidence. He imagines the scene as the police will see it: the body, the note, the gun, the tidy kitchen. The squeak of a zipper. Boots on linoleum.

"Would you?" he asks again.

Five minutes.

The hospital monitor's last single beep. Then nothing.

Four minutes.

Cake. Frosting. Her humming as she counted candles. The sharp heat of wax when he held one too long. The taste of frosting from her finger. The dome fogging over with sugar fog as Morris leaned in, cheeks puffed.

Three minutes.

He rests the gun in his lap. Breathes once, twice. Somewhere in his head: the hard click of a rotary phone, the laughter of Amelia's baby—his grandchild—skittering down a line from the other side of the world.

Two minutes.

The phone rings.

He jumps. The gun slips, hits the floor with a sound that seems too loud for the room. He stares at it, heart hammering, sweat cooling on his temples. He bends, picks it up carefully by the muzzle, and sets it back on the table, the grip turned toward his hand.

It rings again.

He doesn't move.

It rings a third time, muffled, as if the air has thickened.

He lifts the gun.

The barrel finds the soft spot beneath his chin.

The wrong angle and he'll wake up ruined.

It has to go straight up.

He opens his mouth.

The trigger jerks his finger.

A burst.

A tilt.

Light. Sand in his toes. Morris shrieking with laughter by the water.

The kite string slackening, snapping taut in his hand.

His chest aching with some mix of sun and joy and the fear it won't last.

Lilies. The chemical rasp of sanitizer.

The flare of a match in a dark church basement.

Shadows jumping.

Her hands on his face the day they married.

Morris, small again, in the lake, reaching for him.

A candle guttering, wax trailing down the side,

Margarete whispering, "One to grow on."

The phone still ringing.

Dead Countrymen

Cento Of Commentary on Alex Jeffrey Pretti

by Abbie Langmead

all i see are my dead countrymen now.

they did it. they did it. what does that mean?
you know what this is about. you know what this is.

there is a caveat to being protected
and we are past the point of no return.
the mounting pressure to force a feeling
that "they're the enemy"

if you think that it will stop, if you think that it will quit,
what was it? was it the desire to feel superior through violence.

a man is dead.
he probably left some stuff out this morning,
and thought "oh, i'll get to that when i get home."
i suspect that when he woke up this morning,
alex pretti didn't expect to be written into the history books.
i bet he would have preferred not to have been.

we think of someone's life
in their totality, but not in the banality of it.
we have the numbers, we have the principles,
we have humanity and the ultimate goals of self-determination.
he was just trying to help a woman get up.
he was just trying to help.
his last thought and act was to protect a woman.

Hands, Feet, Breasts

by Jacqueline Kaufman

The twins, my two Roses, text me while I drive to work, each complaining about the other.

Call your father, I text back. *Let him do some of the work.*

I was young once. I have a sister, too. Her name is Mickey.

When we fought, my mother used to say, “Kill each other for all I care.” That was my mother in one sentence. I’m supposed to be the improved version.

My shift at the hospital starts slowly, like the onset of a headache. I’m more tired than usual. My feet already hurt – there’s a pad of swollen skin forming a layer over the top of my sneakers – cankles, my girls call it. My fingers are stiff too. The medical name for swollen extremities is dactylitis, which I always associate with pterodactyls. They died from being big. Too big to fly efficiently. They clouded the sky before they left the earth. A million years ago you could look up and see giant soon-to-be carcasses, hear their frenzied caws. They flew, but flight did not save them.

Medically minded people like me always search for an explanation. Could it be the heat? The swelling feels like a natural extension of everything else, a forced pairing in my mind of miserable things. Morning is sluggish, and the light rain overnight adds to the humidity. Way too hot for New York at this time of year, but then New York is changing, weather is changing, everything is changing, isn’t it?

“We’re running short again,” says Lee, the nurse administrator, during the shift changeover, addressing the day staff. “Margo, you’ve got Unit twenty-two to handle on your own today.”

Ortho is my bid, but usually I have another nurse with me to help out with the twenty-four patients. Mostly it’s post-surgical patients clamoring for attention after surgery for fractures or joint replacements. They’ve been medicinally sawed in pieces, stuffed with titanium parts, medicinal pins hammered into bones, and then stitched together again – sinew, tendon, ligament, muscle, and finally skin. This is the unit of the ringing bells, of pain and tears.

“What the...?” I say and shake my head, copying my teen daughters. “How?”

“That’s why they call you the magician, right?”

“And only one aide, right?” I said.

“You got the picture,” she says.

She’s petite, mouse-like, ducking out of the hall when I need any help. She sets me on my assignment, scampers to her office, and shuts the door.

When I get to my crash cart, I grip it so hard I see the outline of each of my knuckles, the long ridge of each metacarpal bone, the shorter bones of the wrist. I’m not angry enough to make a scene, but still. It’s not fair.

Margo the Magician. Odd name for a nurse. I specialize in the old, undernourished, weak and down-hearted. The ones who don’t want to try, who won’t get out of bed even to use the toilet, and ring the bell non-stop. PT is supposed to rouse them, not nursing, and other nurses claim they don’t have time to get them up, too much effort with one aide to every twenty-four patients. What if they fall? Not worth the effort. One mistake, one misstep, and you can get sued for being a Good Samaritan. *Don’t care,* I say. Why’d I get into this business anyway? Not exactly a cash cow, being a nurse.

They say I cast a spell, use magic words, get the ones who refuse everyone else to take their meds, to sit up, eat a meal, and even, most amazingly, walk. Complainers are my specialty. I surprise them by agreeing with them. “No one knows your pain except you,” I tell them. “It’s real.” Then I whisper something in their ear. That’s my trick.

“What’s your favorite thing?” I ask.

You’d never guess who’d say mashed potatoes and who’d say black satin nighties, who’d say lighthouses and who’d say blackjack. Then I urge them to do the thing they least want to do: eat a spoonful, sit up, maybe even go for a walk to the bathroom. One step, two steps, and then “you can do it,” and I repeat their word to them.

I approach room two twenty one and take a deep breath. Mr. Peterson is still here. Thought he’d been discharged to wound care, but they must be full. I read what’s new on the progress notes stuffed into the holder outside his door. Advanced dementia was his chronic state, but he was here because of multiple fractures in his left leg. Fell in the nursing home. The times for re-bandaging are listed on the card. The young nurses complain about him, the things he says. I’ve been warned.

Today there’s something else. You can smell when someone approaches the end zone. It’s like soil, pungent and foul, like fried fish or rotten milk.

Peterson looks up when I walk in —sky blue eyes, wet, lashes so white and sparse they barely cover the edges of his eyes, like a flower

whose petals have started to fall off. He gazes at the clock on his nightstand, the digital numbers turning. He looks at me with a gaze I have no words for except sincere.

He stares at my outfit, to the top section, as if he could see underneath the scrubs to my breasts, and holds his gaze there.

“It’s four thirty, Mrs. Taub. I’m ready for my blow job now.” His voice is calm and matter-of-fact. Spittle collects in the corners of his thin lips.

There it was, the predictable request, stated without guile. I imagine he felt owed. A bending of will to his desire was expected, by the way he said it. Don’t get me wrong – don’t care what anyone does in bed, have at it. It was more the tone that he used – the command.

Who was Mrs. Taub, anyway? The name was too formal for a wife. Someone he hired? Maybe his secretary, if he was a boss? I imagine the pose of the supplicant, on her knees, imagine the bobbing of her head and his hand on her hair, guiding her.

“It’s Margo,” I say. “I’m here to check your vitals.” I use my most professional tone, and approach the whirring machine that holds antibiotics and liquid pain relief. My touch sets it beeping, as I reach over to replace the empty plastic bag that travels to a tube in his arm. I try to stay an arm’s distance from Peterson, but it’s impossible with the tasks I have to complete..

“How are you today, Mr. Peterson?”

“It hurts.”

“What hurts?”

“Life. Everything. Hurts.”

“I’ll be taking your temperature, Mr. Peterson. Open your mouth, please.”

“You betcha,” he says, unperturbed. Then, once the thermometer is out of his mouth: “The rain is in your hair, Mrs. Taub.”

I feel a chill when I hear this phrase, an expression my ex-husband used.

An image from the past invades as I wait for the thermometer to beep, as I wrap the blood pressure cuff around his arm. My ex, the father of the twins. We used to work together, how we met.

We hardly knew each other – just two people working the floor together. He was a resident. I was pulling my hair into a bun, and my ex told me he liked my hair, the wild and unkempt way it looked even after I pulled it into a ponytail holder, the renegade tendrils forever escaping. We were always at odds in our opinions, so maybe it shouldn’t surprise me that the thing I hated about myself was the very thing my ex told me he

loved. That was a long time ago. Excuse the predictability. Doctor. Nurse. Fell in love. Got married. Made some babies. Not necessarily in that order. Fell out of love. Got unmarried. The doctor married someone else, predictably, another nurse. Of course. He made more babies. The new wife quits work. Becomes a stay-at-home Mom. The type, I imagine, who has chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven, ready for her kids when they get home from school.

And the first wife, the original, me, well... I still work. Now more than ever, I need to work. That’s the economy of divorce.

I touch my hair and smooth it down. “Why, Mr. Peterson,” I said.

“I like it that way, Mrs. Taub. Pretty.”

And from somewhere, a gentle heat rolls from my abdomen up my chest, rises up my neck. Lands on my cheeks, a red stain, a warmth. Maybe even. A glow.

I text the two of them. “Why can’t you get along? Someday you’ll be everything to each other. When no one else is left, you’ll have each other.”

“Hah,” says Anna, the sarcastic one. She points out to me that I am not close to my older half-sister, who lives in Tucson. I haven’t had contact with her in years. She’s an artist. Her claim to fame started with wood-block prints called “Hands and Feet.” Now it’s her “brand.” Look on pinterest or her website and you’ll see all kinds of hands and feet; different shapes, colors, and sizes. If you want, she’ll paint you up an original with hands and feet – made to order. She sells watercolor prints, greeting cards, journals, even gift wrap. We drifted apart years ago when she moved away and left me taking care of Mom, and then when Mom died and left me the larger part of her estate. Well, say no more.

I text them, “Stop fighting. Work it out.”

“But we both need the car, You’ve got to pick one of us.”

I recognize my folly. I named my daughters Rosanna and Rosemarie, thought they’d be close for life. Roses - not for the flower – roses because I wanted them to have thorns. Girls need to know how to protect themselves. It worked. They came out of the womb caustic, fighting.

As teens, they became known as simply Anna and Marie, mutually deciding to lop off the beginning of their names. *That* they agreed on.

“Whichever one is willing to go to the bagel store,” I text back.

“All I want when I walk in the door is to eat one of the good bagels from the official bagel store.” I text them, “Who’ll go buy a dozen?”

Then I point out that I’m paying for the car they share and the in-

surance and it's the least they can do. Anna says something snarky about how Dad pays with child support, and I mumble something snarky back, and Marie says okay, okay, I'll get some. It's always Marie, the appeaser.

"Guess you get to use the car first. Then let Anna have it later."

Between rounds at the hospital, I imagine the crust as I take my first bite, the everything seeds so plentiful they land between my teeth, so full of sesame and poppy seeds that I'll have to floss to get them out.

It's a tough shift once it hits full boil, roiling like water in a pan, steaming, bubbles.

One patient complains of unresolved pain, another won't follow directions and is pulling out her IV drip, another has a fever, and another has a heart rate that is slowing down.

I knock on the door of the NA and she doesn't open it. She hears my complaints through the door and shouts.

"You're going to have to figure it out."

When I get back to Peterson, he's different, less alert. He doesn't want to acknowledge, seems to see right through me. He refuses to get out of bed even when I cast my "magic spell" with the word no one hears but me. Finally, he sits up, and I grab the bedpan and bring it to the bathroom. The sound wakes him up a bit. He seems delighted when I come back after flushing the toilet.

"Mrs. Taub, you're the best."

I shuffle my feet as I head back towards his bed. I can imagine throwing it at the wall, imagine the clattering sound it would make as it fell. Instead of emptying his bed pan, I could hold his pain meds back, I could "accidentally" let the shot drop on the floor instead of into the tube making its way into his veins.

But I'm not like that.

I give him the meds, measure out the dose carefully, and before I can utter "B.J." he's asleep.

When I walk through the door, the scent of sugar and chocolate mixes with the charred bits of food that have landed on the oven's floor and no one bothered to clean. I walk down the hall and Marie emerges from the kitchen with a cloth mitt on one hand and a spatula in the other.

"Bagels?" I ask Marie, the "younger" twin, the thinner, paler, bespectacled version of the prototype.

"Oh, Ma, I got some from the grocery store. I decided to make

you some cookies instead. Don't they smell great?"

"There's nothing sadder than a pretend bagel," I say. "A piece of bread pretending that just because it has a round shape that it can do the trick." The weight of the day settles on my shoulders, which suddenly are heavier than I thought. I open the door to my bedroom and let myself in, shutting it quietly behind me.

In the bathroom I toss my bra towards the hamper and miss so I bend down to pick it up. There's a small brownish-red dot in the center of the left cup. My fingers find the spot and rub at it, and a word emerges, courtesy of my medical training, one I can't dismiss. Discharge.

I close my eyes and begin the ritual I know I should do monthly, but almost never do. Ask anyone, doctors and nurses are the worst patients. I peer into the mirror: no dimpling, no buckling, no puffy spots. When pressed, a tiny amount of liquid appears on the toilet paper I press against it, watery, but with a slightly pink tint—deep breath in, deep breath out. I hold my left arm overhead and with the pads of my right fingers I begin the tiniest circles, lightly at first, more firmly as I reach the areola. Nothing. Not until I get all the way to the left, a few inches below the arm pit, do I find it.

The discovery of the lump feels inevitable, rehearsed. I realize I've practiced this moment in my mind a million times and yet there is still something surreal about it. I am watching a video clip of myself. Margo washes her face. Margo rubs her eyes. Margo brushes her teeth. Margo finds a lump.

I pick up the bra and bring it to my nose, smelling nothing but the stench that inhabits my clothes after a twelve-hour shift —familiar. I place each one of my breasts gently in the palms of my two hands, feeling the weight. They've always reminded me of water balloons. My left breast feels fuller than the right. It's been that way since I breastfed the twins. They both craved the left side for mouthfuls of milk. Closer to the calming sound of my heartbeat, I always imagined. The skin of my nipples is rough, and I brush them with my thumb until they pop out.

Oddly, feeling is absent from the lump itself. The skin around the bra feels irritated, but when I press my fingers against the lump, I feel nothing. Bumps and bruises have feelings. A cyst has feeling. But the lump is not part of me - it's something other.

Holding my breasts this way, I remember being a new mom, staring down at two bald infant scalps, both screaming. I'd just come home from work and when I heard them cry, the front of my hospital scrubs

was wet in an instant, milk staining the front of my scrub top, and my husband, (my ex-husband) stared at me as if I've peed myself. Breasts did that to me.

Friends would ask if I fed them at the same time. They don't know that the word twin is a fable. Mine came out reaching for each other's nonexistent hair so they could pull at it, rivalling each other over the loudness of screams, smelliness of belches, who could hang onto the nipple longest. One twin could not be soothed if the other was in sight. I put their cribs on opposite walls of their bedroom. They turned away from each other to sleep. Later, at about age two, the toys I chose so carefully became weapons that they threw at each other. That's when we moved into three bedrooms. My ex and I. He was a resident then.

I don't want to say the word, but it appears in block print in my mind. CANCER. My mother died of it. It's in my family, in the genes. My sister made her journey visible through TikTok videos. I followed the story from a distance, as she shared with the world her journey from discovery to double mastectomy. I watched every video, surreptitiously, the way I used to sneak and read her journals as a teenager.

CANCER.

I stare until I can't any more, a staring contest that the woman in the mirror wins. I reach for a pajama top from my drawer and pull it over my head.

"Mom?" says Marie. She knocks on the door. It's a gentle sound – rap, one on thousand, rap, two one thousand.

"Mom, I can go now, if you really want a bagel."

"Guilty much?"

"Maybe?" she sounds uncertain..

"No baby, it's okay," I say, and feel a tightening of my throat, vague feeling of nausea. "Honestly, I'm not even hungry," I say, because it's the truth.

I close the bathroom door and head to my bed, where Marie is already perched. I lie down and she pulls my feet onto her lap and starts massaging, just the way I like. Her hands are on my feet, pressing on my swollen ankles. Her hands encircle the whole ankle now and I feel the warmth.

"Ma, you're breathing weird," she says.

I close my eyes. "Just tired, that's all," I say. "Where's Anna?"

"You don't want to know," she says. "Hint: open her door and take a whiff. She's out with her friends."

I nod and put my face into my pillow. I don't want to admit to her that she's right. I don't want to know.

Marie has brought the scent of the cookies into the room with her. I think of my ex's new wife and the kids devouring her baking skills after she's had the whole afternoon with nothing but soap operas, placing frozen cookies on a stainless steel tray in her Wolf oven. Marie reaches for a plate she's brought with her and hands a cookie to me and says, "See, they are pretty good. The ones I didn't burn. We don't have any milk left, though."

"You know, I always hated glasses of milk. Those little mini cartons at school."

I think of how one day I'll have to count on her, maybe for the tiniest of things. I'll ask for a cup of water and perhaps she'll forget to put ice in it. "It's cold enough," she'll say. "Drink it," and I'll be too tired to point out that the ice is missing, too grateful for whatever she can offer.

"Mom," she says.

"Do you hate her? Do you hate Anna?" I say.

She looks at me strangely, but she's used to me, I guess. Questions come from nowhere after a long day of work.

"Nah. We're just different. She has her thing. I have a different thing."

Mickey is older than me by ten years and has a different dad.

The first time she left home I was twelve years old. She kept her journals in a locked cabinet.

Soon as she left home, I set about trying to figure out how to break the lock. When she came back the next time, she saw how the door didn't quite close and the lock was pulled out of the socket. She asked me if I looked inside. I shrugged my shoulders like I didn't know what happened. Still, she knew.

Inside the journals were tales of multiple loves, travels through the county, being spaced on acid, living on a commune. You know the stuff. It was the seventies.

Around that time she had a boyfriend who'd come over all the time. He was an artist too. One time when she was out of the house for a while, I can't recall why exactly, he asked if he could paint me. I was flattered. With no clothes he said. Well, I said, how about just the top. First time I saw that look, that greedy look, the gobble you up look of a man looking at my breasts.

My sister walked in and saw, and the boyfriend had his story – artistic freedom and all that.

The next time Mickey left and I read the journals, I saw I'd be-

come a character in the telling of her story. Not a lovable one.

I'd love to tell you that I was a little girl, but in my mind I was never that. I thought it made me older to hold the boyfriend's attention that way. It wasn't till much later that it occurred to me that it was the opposite – that probably my youth was the thing he was after.

I'm a rhododendron, you see. Not enough thorns in me.

I fall asleep and dream of an IV drip, wake to recall my mother screaming in pain.

"Figure it out," I say to her in the dream.

Years ago, my doctor told me years ago about the test I could take. "What's the point? Will it prevent it?" I asked.

"Not on its own. But there are options. You could choose to have a mastectomy as a preventative course of treatment."

"I'll take my chances," I said.

Next day, I'm back in the hospital, and it's another hot one. Beyond the hum of air conditioning there's the sound of moans and bells. I'm busy from the very first minute of the shift. I don't even have time to go to the bathroom to pee before my break. That's what I say to myself. When I finally get to the bathroom, I avoid the mirror.

Slowly, from the edges of my interior universe comes the memory of the little lump. The painless lump, hiding in plain sight.

Mr. Peterson is doing worse and will be transferred to another unit for comfort care.

This time, in his demented state, he calls me Mrs. Taub, and when I don't respond, he calls me by another name. Rose.

It's a weird coincidence, I think. Maybe this is the name Mrs. Taub - her first name.

"I have some magical words for you today."

He whispers this when I get in close to him to work on the bandages dressings. He takes his fingers, moves them along the sheets as if he is walking with them, and counts out loud. "One step at a time, Rose." Then he stares at my breasts.

I look away.

When I'm about to end my shift, I go back to say goodbye to him.

I imagine what it will be like to say goodbye to my breasts, these weighty mounds so reminiscent of baseballs with a bit of sag, say goodbye to the nipples that still feel, goodbye to these rounded spheres that gave nutrition to two little mouths, once upon a time.

A combination of all the problems in my life rolls in like a creaky crash cart. Lists of things - my ex-husband, my daughter Anna who vapes, the rivalry between the twins, the money worries, the lousy bagel I had for breakfast, and the good bagel that neither daughter could be bothered to go buy for me. Then I add to this list all the things I don't like about myself: my predictable acquiescence and agreeability. My yes-ness.

Peterson's gaze is relentless.

"Up here," I say, gesturing towards my eyes. He looks at my face.

"My dear Rose," says Peterson. "Your hair. The edges are coming undone."

"A mess. I'm a mess."

He reaches towards me and for a second I imagine allowing him to touch my hair. Instead, I reach over and find his hand.

"Remember what I told you," he says. Then, with a startling sudden movement, he grabs my hand and pushes his nails into my palm. He won't let go until I force the fingers open with my other hand.

"Damn, that hurt."

"Fight, Rose," he says, and smiles. "You've gotta fight back."

I pick up the phone. I consider dialing the number on Mickey's ad, the one for customers who want an original, their own unique Hands and Feet —a specially made portrait.

Then I think better of it.

Instead, I click the link for ordering one of her ready-made gifts. I use my phone and take pictures of my breasts – both together, then just the right, then just the left. She can choose which is best – she has a good eye for things like that.

In addition, I purchase a pack of twelve greeting cards. Her site is live, which means she's making money. She's alive. Somewhere out there, she's still alive.

Wyckoff Av

15

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EXCEPT
FOR DELIVERIES

NO PARKING
EXCEPT
FOR DELIVERIES

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My Own Private Mississippi

by Christopher Garland

1

There's a certain look people give you when you tell them you're moving to Mississippi for work. It's not outright disapproval, especially in the wake of the worst recession since the Great Depression, when any gainful employment still merits congratulations. But I can't help but notice a flash of emotion in their faces—a mix of sympathy, pity, and unidentifiable discomfort—that sometimes manifests as a wince, sometimes as a widening of the eyes. I think part of this look connects to something I can't shake, no matter what. As a New Zealander who moved to the U.S. in my early twenties, I have an accent that forever marks me as an outsider in the South. “Get ready for a real culture shock,” I'm told. “I bet you'll be the only Kiwi in Mississippi—Good luck!” And then I'm invariably warned about Mississippi as if it were a land far beyond this country's borders, a mythical place with a spooky, bloody history and a marginalized present-day condition: as it turns out, there's some accuracy there. Friends born and raised in Florida make jokes about Mississippi, and they're from Florida, home to face-munching zombies and miserable gun laws. Friends born and raised in the Northeast tell me they could never live in the South, least of all in Mississippi. My new American home is consistently framed in terms of the superlative: the most religious, impoverished, and backward. Mississippi, I'm told time and again, is the worst.

2

Growing up on an island in the (Deep) South Pacific, I first encountered Mississippi through the film *Mississippi Burning*, which I watched with my mom on a damp winter school night—American movies were both a treat and a reprieve from stodgy British dramas—when I was eleven years old. *Mississippi Burning* is the fictionalized account of the murder of three civil rights workers (two white northerners and one black southerner) in Mississippi. Had I seen images of the Ku Klux Klan before then? Surely, but I can't recall where. Nevertheless, the flaming cross, white robes, a shirtless black man surrounded by horses, and the noose dangling from a tree were more than scary images: they were the foundation of the visual language that shaped my understanding of the American South. Many years later, when I interviewed Pastor Thomas Robb, a native of Arkansas and self-appointed supreme KKK leader of the new

millennium, his racism seemed pointedly mundane—if no less odious—in comparison: for example, the fact that he felt “so sorry” for “those mixed-race” children.

At points throughout *Mississippi Burning*, I felt a familiar chill rippling up and down my spine, akin to the chill I felt when I watched horror movies on the VHS player my mom won in a mail-in sweepstakes. I was disgusted, sure, but it went deeper than that. Unlike the Stephen King movies I watched over and over again, there was no relief in sealing the terrifying bad guys (in this case, the Klan) in a box or stabbing them through the heart. When the movie came to an end, nothing *really* seemed *really* over.

3

According to a Pew Research poll (2025), 74% of Mississippi's population states that they “believe in God or a universal spirit” with “absolute certainty”; making the state by far the most religious in the United States, and just as certain as that statistic is that the state is also nestled deep in the American South, where the summer turns the air into hot syrup. If you go and watch college football in late September—which you should do at this very moment because long-maligned Mississippi football is on a high for the first time in what one of my students calls “forever”—you'll demand chilled liquid that blurs the edges and eventually folds the evening in on itself. When you make it home (the sound of cicadas loud enough to give the sensation of temporary tinnitus, winged cockroaches body-slammng the light above your front door), you'll be able to find sleep somewhere, maybe on the couch, and you'll sort-of remember the contents of your last cocktail: the one that, anywhere apart from the South, you should really always pass on, but you'll gulp it down because you were strongly encouraged to join in a libation-based celebration of the old, and because you convinced yourself that one more cocktail will aid sleep and keep at bay the heat and the bugs and the early morning rain pestering the windowpanes.

The drink is the Mississippi Punch (two ounces cognac, one ounce bourbon, one ounce dark rum, half ounce lemon juice, two teaspoons superfine sugar), and it was designed by America's “greatest ever bartender” (some legendary pulp writer's opinion), the “Professor” Jerry Thomas, almost 150 years ago: before the war that split this country up; before those ineffective stitches couldn't quite put it all back together; before the scars became set, bright pink, puckered, and gnarled in this place, way down where, in the words of the state's favorite son, Faulkner, the past is never dead and it's not even past; right here, right now, in the state of Mississippi, where the organized violence of football and God and booze come together on the weekend.

4

One undeniable thing about Mississippi: It's almost every possible

version of the poorest state in the union. Discussing his country of birth, the Haitian poet Jean-Claude Martineau says that Haiti is the only country in the world with a last name: the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The same can be said of Mississippi; it's the only state in the union with a last name: poorest. Certainly, Florida is home to the finest brand of American bat-shit crazy (and very often criminal) behavior. Still, it's equally known for theme parks, spring break, and electronic dance music. Florida might be reviled—see the widely circulated GIF of Bugs Bunny sawing off the peninsula for evidence—and it might have terrible and internationally newsworthy events (the imbecilic Christian minister threatening to burn a Koran, the murder of an unarmed teenager by an impotent vigilante, insert the things happening right here, right now, 2026). Still, it's not the 50th out of 50 states on almost any wealth/income index.

Twenty years ago, The Wall Street Journal released a report on wealth in the United States: it was a harrowing road sign of what had been and seemed likely to remain so for the Magnolia State. As it has almost every year since the failed reconstruction of this country after the Civil War, Mississippi ranked last in some pretty important national metrics. Nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, and nearly 10% is unemployed. The median household income is around \$37,000 (compared with over \$71,000 in the country's wealthiest state, Maryland).

Today, Mississippi remains one of the poorest U.S. states: about 17.8% of residents live below the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2020–2024 5-year estimate), and 23.2% of children live in poverty (American Community Survey/America's Health Rankings, 2023). The state's unemployment rate was about 3.7% in April 2026 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, Apr 2026), and the median household income is about \$56,447, compared with \$103,678 in Maryland (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2020–2024).

5

Driving north from New Orleans into southern Mississippi, you see burned-out and collapsed homes and commercial buildings, making it look as if Katrina happened last month rather than almost a decade ago. I'd been told this long before I drove that section of I-10, and I'd seen photographs online, but I still underestimated the breadth of Katrina's wake, which is still visible today. Once you leave greater NOLA and approach Mississippi, you rapidly descend into the Southern Gothic garden. In this part of the South, there's water everywhere, but you can't see it because of the density of the trees and brush. The green—and at some times of the year it's the whole universe of green—pushes out from the water you can't see, and it's fuel for one particularly potent nightmare: what if I had to walk into that? What awaits us? Alligators that never seem to move for anything until it's time to kill, and some of the

deadliest snakes in the country, looking like straps of leather when they sun themselves. Dodge the gators, jump the snakes: it's a real-life version of some Dixieland Mario Brothers level, where you're hopping through the fugue of swamp water and bugs you never see until it's too late.

6

Oprah Winfrey, Jim Henson, Elvis Presley, Morgan Freeman, Parker Posey, James Earl Jones, Tennessee Williams, Brett Favre, Tig Notaro, Nathan Bedford Forrest, Richard Ford, Bo Diddley, Shelby Foote, Donna Tartt, Sam Cooke, William Faulkner, Britney Spears, Tavis Smiley, John Grisham, Muddy Waters, Jefferson Davis, Shepard Smith: Mississippians all. (When did you ever think you'd see a list featuring Parker Posey, Brett Favre, *and* Nathan Bedford Forrest?) Mississippi? Birthplace of a disproportionate number of people who have indelibly shaped American culture and history.

7

Mississippi is also a rap album by Lavell William Crump, better known by his stage name, David Banner. The eponymous track epitomizes Banner's signature emphatic delivery and his determination to tell the story of contemporary Mississippi. As the beat kicks in, Banner begins his ode to the place where he was born in typically stark terms; he references the civil rights leader and Mississippi native Medgar Evers, who helped desegregate the University of Mississippi (commonly and affectionately known as Ole Miss) and was later assassinated in Jackson by a member of the White Citizens' Council, a white supremacist group founded in Greenwood, Mississippi.

*We from a place
Where Medgar Evers live and Medgar Evers died
We from a place
What we chokin' on sticky green to get high
We from a place
Some talk with a drawl but bitch we ball
runnin' through with two techs screamin' FUCK ALL Y'ALL!
We From A Place
where da rebel flag still aint burnin'
new schools but the black kids still aint learnin' BOUT SHIT!
but hit da streets and learn to pimp on a bitch
FIVE-O aw shit throw yo crack in the ditch
and y'all n— run y'all n— run
like Forrest Gump
they got pumps
and them crooked cops love to dump
in Mississippi*

That flag! On my first trip to Mississippi—a reconnaissance mission to find a place to live—I told a friend about a book I wanted to write about the American South (a laughable project, in retrospect) and showed him the State of Mississippi flag I hoped would adorn the cover. He grew up in the South, but his first question was how I came up with the design. He thought the flag was a slick design I'd come up with to show how the state was so acutely mired in the past. When I told him it was the official state flag, he took out his phone for a quick Google search to see if I was kidding. Another true thing about this place: Mississippi is the only Southern state to retain the Confederacy's battle flag as part of its own flag. Georgia removed it from its state flag in 2001; eight years earlier, the NAACP filed a lawsuit to get the state of Mississippi to change the flag. Interestingly, an omission in legislation meant Mississippi hadn't had an official flag since 1906, when new codes were introduced. Then-Governor Ronnie Musgrove (there's a Southern name!) fought bitterly to retain the flag and its central Confederate symbol, and, after understandable uproar, the decision about the flag was put to a vote among the people of Mississippi. They voted to keep it. However, it no longer flies on the campus where I used to teach writing, the University of Southern Mississippi, nor is it visible at the state's flagship institution, the aforementioned University of Mississippi aka Ole Miss. Still, I saw it the last time I drove around Hattiesburg, including its prominent placement above a Northern Irish-themed dive bar (how appropriate!): plus ça change.

If you think about it in relation to the rest of the United States, Mississippi is a place that makes us uncomfortable because it makes visible the porous membrane separating the haves and have-nots. Like all the poorest parts of this country, Mississippi reminds us of the third world, disclosing the sorts of governmental failure, the massive divide between rich and poor, and seemingly insurmountable natural disasters that are “characteristic” of countries like Haiti, not one of the wealthiest countries in the world. The realities of the third world seep into the first through places like Mississippi, an uneasy reminder of the tenuous and finite nature of superpowers. Mississippi is an uncomfortable guest, shuffling toward the door, reminding us that the party might be over.

The word “Mississippi” is also central to a common saying in the states that surround it: “Thank God for Mississippi.” A state—say, Louisiana—can be corrupt, violent, and uneducated, but at least it's not Mississippi. A friend of mine from Alabama told me that growing up, he was taught to be thankful for Mississippi and its unique ability to be last in so many things.

What else is Mississippi? The thrilling, humid world of John Grisham's novels, where white lawyers stare down the intractable, deformed triplets that wreak havoc across the South: poverty, corruption, and racism. My parents didn't read books, but we had family friends who regularly invited us to the kind of house I wished I'd grown up in, complete with all the gas station/airport fiction I could wish for. That's where I first met Grisham, creator of a best-selling, globally famous, and most importantly good white Mississippian. As a kid growing up in New Zealand, Grisham's world was incredibly exotic, draped in strange Southern rites and Spanish moss. Strangely enough, I met John Grisham once on one of those humid nights—this time in Charlottesville, Virginia—when the author was ordering pizza downtown. He looked just like the author photo slapped on all his novels, and despite that combination of wealth and good genes, he was still movie-star handsome. I spluttered out some words of admiration, and he nodded in a way that was both gracious and clearly conveyed that he'd prefer not to be recognized. He was Southern polite.

Mississippi is the forgotten story of Hurricane Katrina. Before hitting New Orleans, Katrina first battered Biloxi and Gulfport, and when it was all over, Mississippi bore the brunt of the storm: more property damage occurred there than anywhere else. 238 Mississippians died as a direct result of the storm, yet if you ask most people, New Orleans is where Katrina begins and ends.

And if we are to continue to tag Mississippi, what else might we name? The HIV epidemic in the United States is now concentrated in the South: in 2024 the South accounted for 51% of new HIV diagnoses, and the national HIV diagnosis rate that year was 13.3 per 100,000 (the South's rate was 17.7 per 100,000). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's constant monitoring reveals a grim landscape. Mississippi is among the states with the worst HIV outcomes. The CDC's 2024 release shows the state had one of the highest HIV-related death rates (3.3 per 100,000), and state-level diagnosis and prevalence measures have been well above the national average in recent years; reporting put Mississippi's diagnosis rate in the mid-teens to high-teens per 100,000 in earlier recent years). There is some good news: Mississippi may not lead every single metric year-to-year (for example, Louisiana, Georgia, and some Florida jurisdictions often rank higher on particular indicators), but because of its high diagnosis and death rates, persistent gaps in care and viral suppression, and long-standing access barriers, it is consistently among the hardest places in the country to live with HIV.

In a Human Rights Watch report, researchers interviewed a woman living in Jackson who was so terrified of the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS that she first tore the labels off her medicine and then threw them away in fear that her family and friends would find out. One of the most damning parts of the report: the finding that former Governor Haley Barbour actively works “to block health care reform that would expand Medicaid benefits for people living with HIV in the state.”

Mississippi is also faith: a wide, seemingly bottomless well of it. Faith in God, yes, but it goes further than that. It takes faith to live in southern Mississippi, where both hurricanes and tornadoes strike regularly. A friend of mine who recently left Mississippi told me about the first tornado he experienced a couple of years ago. He was ready for hurricanes, of course, but the tornado that tore through his town, plucking oak trees from their roots, was a shock. He waited it out in her bathtub, and when he ventured back into the streets, he learned that the tornado had mainly hit the poorest neighborhood in town. My friend is not in any way religious, but it takes some sort of faith to think that this won't happen again: the visiting of disaster on people without home insurance and all the other safety nets afforded by wealth.

There's also my own private Mississippi, the one that is all about me and, in turn, makes me a little embarrassed. One night, years ago now but settled in my memory like an errant stitch, I woke up sweating. In typical north-central Florida fashion, the weather was out of whack, giving us dense little shards of summer in the midst of a winter that was especially cold for nearly everyone across the country. At some point long before dawn, I threw up once, which didn't feel like enough. I tried to sleep with my feet propped up on the couch, feeling much too hot to do anything but doze. I knew I had caught one of the viruses that had taken out a half-dozen of my students for a couple of days, but I blamed it on everything but that, including the upcoming move to Mississippi. After reading everything I'd read about the state, I'd started dreaming about Mississippi as some heavy, weirdly shaped blanket I couldn't throw off. Mississippi became the first thing on my mind when I woke up at 3:44 AM, 4:17 AM, and 5:37 AM, and I became obsessed with things I'd never considered at length before: income adjusted for inflation, state literacy rates, national average income, teenage pregnancy, and income inequality by city. I became obsessed with my relationship with a state I'd only spent a few days in, shuttling around Hattiesburg in the strange rituals of the academic job interview.

Right now: It's 2:38 AM, and I'm going back over what I've just written. I'm thinking Mississippi might not be the backward state it's always portrayed as, but rather a barometer. I recently read Amy Wilentz's take on the poorest parts of the Caribbean and how we're wrong to see the third world as developing; rather, it might, in fact, be farther ahead of us. To extrapolate—maybe Mississippi is this country's future, rather than its past. I don't mean in the sense of race relations or raging against the federal government (though it might mean both of those things to certain people), but in the understanding that we're not separate from the rest of the world. Mississippi is a portal into other broken parts of the world: the revelatory state that shows us we're not so distant after all.

Her

by Tabatha Franklin

Everything changes
the moment
those two lines appear.

Not gradually—
not politely—
but all at once.

A future rushes in,
uninvited and overwhelming.

You start to build a life
inside your head
before there's even a heartbeat

you can hear,

What will she look like?
Will she laugh like you,
or carry the quiet strength of her foremothers?

You imagine birthdays,
first steps,
first heartbreaks.

You become a planner,
a dreamer,
a protector
all in the same breath.

And then—

It hits.

She's here.

Suddenly,
time doesn't move forward anymore.
It spins.

Days blur into nights,
nights stretch into something endless.

You measure life in ounces,
in diapers,
in minutes of sleep you can't quite reach.

Coffee becomes something of survival,
not comfort.

You wonder—quietly, guiltily—
was I meant for this?

because all she does
is eat
poop
sleep

REPEAT.

And you?

You give
and give
and give
until you're not sure what's left.

You wait
for something to change.

You wonder
if the newborn stage is a tunnel
with no visible end

And then—

after nine long weeks

No, not a miracle,
not a sudden transformation,

but something softer.

She lingers a little longer in your arms.
Her eyes find yours,
like she knows you,

like she's been looking for you all along.

Then, for just a second—
one small, fragile second—

you breathe.

Really breathe.

In that space,
between exhaustion and wonder

you see it.

The beauty—

not loud
not perfect
not easy

but real.

This life
you and your partner created,

swaddled in pink
tiny and impossibly whole.

A person,

your person,

your little girl,
who you never thought you deserved.

Now she's the center
of everything

and somehow—

even in tired,
even in doubt,
even in the repetition,

you know

this is the hardest thing
you've ever done

and she is the best thing
that's ever happened to you.

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Lizard Pizza

by Emma Atkins

The guy in the pizza shop is a conspiracy theorist who thinks giving women too many rights makes them violent offenders who'll knock a man to the floor over a thin-crust pepperoni. Most days, you linger outside and wait for him to get sidetracked by a call, so his kid takes over the counter—he's a quiet lad, who just sort of mumbles and passes your order along to his dad after he's hung up. No fuss, then. You can place your order, perch on the corner stool and scroll through your phone until your pizza is ready without having to justify why you're still masking up. He catches you sometimes, though, holding the cheese-stuffed crust hostage while he explains that more people die from colds than COVID.

That's what's happened tonight. He's going on about how Big Pharma gave us all COVID to test their mind control vaccine chips. Fuck, you should've gotten chips. Your eyes drift to the five-star hygiene rating in the window. Is it a fake? He doesn't look like the sort of guy who bothers to put a net over his beard. Then again, he doesn't look like he thinks the internet is run by lizards, either, but with every conversation, he's veering closer to lizard-shadow-government territory. That, at least, would be funny.

Other customers give you a wide berth. You're guilty by association. *Look at me, you want to say, I've got gummy bear earrings and Doc Martens. Does it look like I think women should stay at home?* You don't say anything. You imagine the hostage negotiator telling you not to enrage him. He's liable to start shooting chicken nugget children.

It's hard to show active listening with half your face covered, so you resort to a series of exaggerated eyebrow raises. You can't help but glance over his shoulder at the wall clock. It doesn't help. Pizza is a fickle mistress. There's no telling how long it'll take to reach beautiful, oily perfection. You gave up a corner shop because the guy was a racist, but this... feels more bearable. As long as his views are only backwards concerning your demographics, you can put up with them for the ultimate slice. Yeah, yeah, the queers are converting dogs in their thousands. Yeah, of course, women do love their hormone salami. Give me the pizza, you paranoid Sphinx; your riddles have already been answered.

The box in hand feels like victory—payment for ear-service to his nonsensical bigotry. You've got to get out of there but can't resist making a parting comment, now the pizza is secure: "Cheers, yeah, thanks. Shame

about the moon landing, though. Hard to believe they had AI in the sixties, but there it is."

The twist of his expression is warmer than the greasy box. Chew on that, pizza guy.



Glutton

by Adeeb Chowdhury

When I am seven years old, my father tells me that for every grain of rice I waste, a snake will come and eat me in Hell. I never ask anyone else if this is true, because I don't need to. When humans try to stuff the enormity of God into a little box that they can fit in their heads, that box often ends up shaped like a father. I am a child of my father and I am a child of God. I understood the latter only through the former. To disbelieve one would be to cast doubt on both.

I certainly believe him as we shovel clumps of white rice into plastic bags with our bare hands, trying not to look at the sand, dust, and grime from the train floor that inevitably makes it into our food. A passenger had spilled their lunch and left it there. Once they disembark, their sandals crushing the scattered mounds of rice underfoot, out we scamper. Me, my father, and another man who sleeps in the luggage hold with us, clothed in rags that barely cover his protruding ribcage. He seems content with scooping up a handful or two, but my father and I linger on our hands and knees. Every grain, my father said. My fingernails dig into the dirt-stained linoleum like pincers, squeezing themselves around every morsel of food scattered among the candy wrappers and muddy shoeprints. Every grain.

After dinner, I lie on a wool blanket with my bare back sweating against my father's, the rice and water churning inside me in sync with the *chug-chug-chug* of the New Bengal Express. Once I fall asleep, I dream of punishment. I had left a grain of rice on the floor of the train. It had been too small, and I didn't see it, or it had been too dirty, and I didn't want to. The Hell I dream of is a hole in the dark. A blank and spaceless pit that I try desperately to claw out of, but out doesn't exist anymore. After an eternity of sitting and rotting, deaf and blind but my mind excruciatingly intact, I feel the snake arrive. It slithers on its belly across an invisible floor, tracing a slow and winding path through the nothingness, its tail so endlessly long that it disappears into the void. My heart thumps into my throat in sheer terror, but my bones have calcified into rock and my eyes strain painfully against their sockets. I cannot move or scream or breathe. The snake coils around me, as silent as it is patient, its scales dry and abrasive like sandpaper. The silhouette of its head approaches mine, its jaws unclasping and opening so wide that all I feel is the humidity of its breath and all I see is a darkness blacker than my Hell.

I wake up thrashing and flailing, my father's name on my lips. Go back to sleep, he says.

Years later, the firebombing of Dhaka reduces its trains to charred skeletons. A surviving bridge becomes the roof over our head, and we subsist on foraging in the neighboring woods. Hushed meals of sassafras roots and birch bark ground into an almost-sweet paste by our bony, unskilled hands. One December morning, my father returns with a limp animal whose teeth and tail I do not recognize. Its fur smells like hot paraffin as it blackens over our fire. With each swallow, my teeth dig into the inside of my cheeks, and I can almost feel the strange meat bristling and bubbling against my throat. In the flickering firelight, my father stares straight ahead, his jaw working furiously to grind the semi-cooked carcass, its colorless juices trickling into his beard. The only expression that registers on his face is disgust; not at the meat, but at me as I lurch forward and heave out my breakfast. What a waste, he mutters.

In my dreams that evening, a snake lurks in the dark and watches me gnaw on warm, smoking meat that smells like paraffin. I wake up gently chewing on my knuckles.

Over time, the tar-black clouds of soot over Dhaka begin to thin, and the rain ceases to taste like ash and grease. Mornings bring the sound of birdsong and evenings, the pitter-patter of paws on young grass. Familiar animals burn in our fire. I snatch fish from rivers once dammed by tangles of discarded bodies. The holes in the bridge are stuffed with cement, and across it come shepherds and farmhands, carpenters and bricklayers, mothers and fathers. Tin-roof townhouses and windowless schools are pieced together by boys whose hands still reek of gunpowder. I spend my days flaying fat from still-bleeding slabs of meat, and from little what the butcher pays me, I manage to arrange a shack for me and my father. He doesn't say much. He sits with his hands on his knees and his eyes on the dirt floor that we had once walked as nomads. I bring home quail and small chickens, and he gnashes through them until his teeth scrape against bone. I tell him one night that I've met a woman who loves me and that I will be leaving the shack. Just eat while the meat is still warm, he tells me.

Two decades later, my father dies. A local imam, one of the few villagers who had kept tabs on the aging hermit, gives me the news. He says that he died the way he had lived for years: propped up in a chair, staring noiselessly at an empty wall, decomposing in place. I ask the imam whether anything in the word of God says that a snake will eat you in Hell for every grain of rice you

waste. He looks at me in bewilderment.

I return home to my wife and daughter, who enjoys finger painting and playing with a baby turtle that had crawled out of a drain pipe during a rainstorm. I sit at our rickety table and watch her slurp rice, lentils, and poached eggs out of a bowl. She grins at me with yolk and daal smeared across her lips, little vegetable bits dribbling out of her mouth as she tells me about her turtle. Her appetite meets its end before her dinner does. My eyes remain glued to the remnants of her food, flecks of egg white and grains of rice swimming in yellow-green soup.

That night, I dream that a giant is eating me. When he opens his mouth, the darkness is of cosmic proportions, engulfing me in its entirety. He bites off my limbs, his mountainous jaw rumbling like thunder as he chews. He gnaws at my bones and rips every morsel of meat off my skeleton. The giant is neither malevolent nor hungry. He is scared. I can see it on his massive face, with wrinkles like sand dunes and a beard like a graying, rotting jungle. His eyes are like those of a fearful child: darting, avoidant, watery. I ask him to stop. He tells me to go back to sleep.

I wake up, and all I feel is full.



From 2020-2026

**Explore the chaotic merge team & contributors
from the very beginning.**

CHAOTIC MERGE Staff

Jasmine Ferruffino



Issues 1-10

Editor in Chief

Jasmine is sad to see this magazine come to an end, but she is grateful for all the memories it has brought over the years. She will continue writing in her spare time, and you can find her spreading book joy with Random House Children's Books!

Lassiter



Issues 2-10

Fiction Managing Editor

Lassiter Waith is a black, queer artist and short story writer who grew up with Chaotic Merge and who will be sad to see it go.

Emily Townsend



Issues 5-10

Nonfiction Managing Editor

Emily Townsend has worked on five CMM issues across 4 years in 2 states. With a small crew of former classmates and friends, she has enjoyed reading nonfiction submissions (and snooping in the poetry category). So many zooms. So many laughs. And so many great essays to discuss. Thank you for sharing your memories with us.

Britt Trachtenberg



Issues 2-10

Poetry Managing Editor

Britt Trachtenberg (She/Her) graduated from CUNY Queens College. In March 2022, she published her poetry chapbook Return To Sender. The poems discuss LGBTQIA+ women's triumphs and struggles.

Alison Van Glad



Issues 2-10

Ali is a female solo traveler, writer, and yogi with a voracious appetite for food, exploration, and learning. She hits her flow state while walking through the park, coffee in hand and music turned up loud. Chaotic Merge has been a space that supports and brings people together, and it has been an honor to gush over the work of many throughout my years with the Chaotic Merge fiction and poetry teams.

Basil James



Issues 7-10

I'm Basil! I had the privilege of working on the last four issues of CM, for nonfiction and then poetry. I've lived in Olympia, WA going on five years now, I have a cat named Zelda and, I've been working on a short story collection about reeeccally big animals.

Isha Jain



Issues 5-10

Originally from Delhi, Isha (she/her) is a recent graduate from the University of Sheffield. She is a creative writer that loves analyzing films and dreams of directing one someday. A Frank O'Hara fan, she romanticizes the everyday rhythms of poetry.

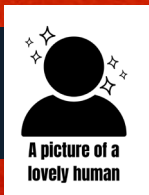
Kylie Ayn Yockey



Issues 6-10

Kylie is a queer creative in Canada. She is the Editor in Chief of Blood Tree Literature and the Social Media Coordinator for EastOver Press + Cutleaf Journal. She's going to miss working with all the amazing and insightful editors at Chaotic Merge!!

SJ



Issue 10

SJ received a master's at Stephen F. Austin State University and currently works as a technical writer. submitted work to us.

Chris Barton



Issues 6-10

Chris enjoyed his time volunteering with Chaotic Merge: meeting new people and reading some excellent nonfiction. It was a perfect way to reconnect with old friends and make new ones. He will now fade into obscurity (back to the 8-5), awaiting the next opportunity, blessed by his time with CM.

Mason Martinez



Issues 2-8

Mason Martinez (they/them) is a Latin, queer writer from Queens, NY. They received their BA in Creative Writing from SUNY Purchase and won the Ginny Wray Senior Prize for Fiction. When they're not writing, they're spending time getting lost in the woods, climbing rocks they really shouldn't climb, and listening to the sounds of birds.

Tabatha Franklin



Issues 2-9

Tabatha is a former editor for Chaotic Merge, where she contributed from 2020 to 2025. Now teaching 5th-grade Reading, she is fostering a love of reading in her students. Will always be grateful for the years spent with the magazine and its community.

Frederica Danzinger



Issues 3-6

I've been working on getting my life back together. I'm living alone for the first time in over seven years; it's been a wild ride. I'll always remember Chaotic Merge fondly; I still love telling people about it. We put out some really amazing work and I'm so lucky to have worked with such talented people, both on the team and the amazing authors who submitted work to us.

Emerson Gray



Issues 2 + Spectrum

My time at Chaotic Merge was brief but meaningful—I made lifelong friends and had the privilege of reading work from so many poets. Since leaving, I have completed my masters in poetry at University of Missouri-Saint Louis, published work in RFD Magazine, and presented at Poetry at the Point (Saint Louis Poetry Center).

Kaitlyn Crow



Issues 2-4

Kaitlyn is a queer writer from Virginia. Their work has appeared in Door Is A Jar, COUNTERCLOCK, and Screen Door Review, among others. Right now, they're living a peaceful, social-media-free life and working on a novel. They'll miss Chaotic Merge very much. Read their online work at linktr.ee/kaitlyncrow (someday, they'll create an actual author website... but not today).

Audrey T. Carroll



Issues 6-8

Audrey T. Carroll, aka Dr. Audrey T. Heffers, is the author of What Blooms in the Dark (ELJ Editions) and The Gaia Hypothesis (Allen Buddha Press). She is the Chair of the Creative Writing Studies Organization. Her Instagram/ Bluesky is @AudreyTCarroll and her website is <http://AudreyTCarrollWrites.weebly.com>.

Bailey Peabody



Issues 4-8

Bailey was the editor for the Playwriting/ Screenwriting division of Chaotic Merge. After graduating SUNY Purchase in 2022, Bailey has been working as a receptionist at a veterinary hospital and spending her time off the clock writing, traveling, and playing with her dog and two cats!

Thomas Orr



Issues 2-5

Thomas Orr (They/Them) holds a BA in Creative Writing from Longwood University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the Bluegrass Writers Studio at Eastern Kentucky University. Their work has appeared in HeartWood Literary Magazine as well as The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature. Find them on Instagram @housefnchpoet.



Contributors

Sarah Elizabeth Grace



Issues 5

Sarah Elizabeth Grace is a theater artist who examines the intersections of human need, gender, sexuality, and emotional intelligence. Her first publication was with Chaotic Merge Magazine, with the short play I Won't Be That Person. Online work: her substack "Grace and Storms" and the limited podcast series "Nora's Dragon".

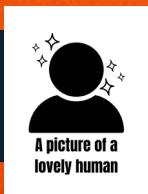
Emma Goldman-Sherman



Green Zine

Emma Goldman-Sherman will miss Chaotic Merge! They authored the chapbook, Dear Palestine (Moonstone Press); micro-chapbook, Possible Paths for the Minotaur, (Ghost City Press); podcast-series, Abraham's Daughters, at TheParsnipShip.com; work in Bellingham Review, Strange Horizons, tinderbox, Best Microfictions 2025 & 26, The Nature of Our Times... Emma supports writers at <https://www.bravespace.online/>

Mike Callaghan



Issue 9

Mike Callaghan's work focuses on fragmentation, rearrangement and reinterpretation. His work appeared in ZYZZYVA, Rhino Poetry, StreetCake Magazine and The Shanghai Literary Review. His art was exhibited at Marin Museum of Contemporary Art, Griffin Museum of Photography and Soho Photo Gallery. Mike earned an MFA from San Francisco Art Institute.

William Doreski



Issue 1-2

Being retired, I spend my time writing, putting around in the garden, planning grandiose literary projects that will never happen.

Chahat Soneja



Issue 2

I am a visual artist and graphic designer specializing in surrealist art. After exhibiting globally from Toronto to Miami, I'm currently back in India, refining my design expertise and mastering French. My focus is now on returning to Canada, bridging my passion for immersive art with professional gallery management.

Shome Dasgupta



Issue 3

Shome Dasgupta is the author of The Seagull And The Urn (HarperCollins India), and most recently, the story collection, Atchafalaya Darling (Belle Point Press), and the poetry collection Cajun South Brown Folk (Belle Point Press). He lives in Lafayette, LA and can be found at www.shomedome.com and [@shomedasgupta](https://twitter.com/shomedasgupta).

Kateryna Bortsova



Issue 9

At present time Kateryna Bortsova is a painter – graphic artist with BFA in graphic arts and MFA. Works of Kateryna took part in many international exhibitions. Kateryna is always open for commission and you can view her work on Instagram: @katerynabortsova, or on her website: <https://bortsova6.wixsite.com/bortsova/>

Eliza Marley



Spectrum Zine

Since being featured and interviewed in Chaotic Merge, I published my first book (named after the story published with Chaotic Merge, You Shouldn't Worry About the Frogs), completed a masters degree, and am in the middle of a doctorate degree for fiction writing. Chaotic Merge was one of my greatest publishing experiences, such kind and helpful people and so much love for literature. An incredible magazine cover to cover!

Allan Lake



Issue 6

I make poems daily and publish 70-90 / year. I've been published in 30 countries. Originally a Canadian, I now live in Australia and spend time in Sicily. Very different places but there are poems everywhere if you can catch and tame them. Want to read some? Google: Allan Lake, poet.

David Serafino



Issue 9

Still writing, but now in Spanish.

Ken Tomaro



Issue 2

Ken Tomaro is a writer living in Cleveland Ohio whose work reflects everyday life with depression. His poetry has appeared in several online and print journals and explores the common themes we all experience in life. Sometimes blunt, often dark but always grounded in reality.

Gina Gidaro



Issue 6

Gina Gidaro is a first-generation college graduate with a love for photography, literature, and cosmic brownies. Her work has been published in magazines such as Humana Obscura, Last Leaves, Soft Star, Clockhouse, and many more. Her publications can be found at <https://ginagidaro.wordpress.com>

Francis DiClemente



Issue 6

Francis DiClemente is the author of numerous poetry collections and the memoir, Stunted: A Memoir of Delayed Manhood (Toplight Books, an imprint of McFarland & Company, 2026). His blog can be found at francisclemente.com. I was honored to have my short play published by Chaotic Merge. All the best!

Marie V. Recalde



Issue 8

With the final issue of Chaotic Merge releasing, I want to extend all my love, gratitude and appreciation for the editors and team that worked on every publication and made the dreams of so many writers and artists come true.

Synovia Roberts



Issue 3

Synovia is a Jamaican-American writer using her writing to explore different aspects of who she is. Between fiction and nonfiction, Synovia explores her sexuality, mental health, and various interests. She is currently publishing short essays exploring her love for fashion on Unfashionable the Blog!

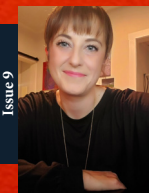
Maia Joy



Issue 2

Maia Joy here! I finished undergrad and am now engaged, finishing grad school in Performance Psychology, and coaching all the joyful and adaptive movement. I published my first poetry collection, and am more grateful now than ever for the incredible community of writers and readers that have gotten me here! <3

Yoda Olinyk



Issue 9

Publishing with Chaotic Merge was such a joy and highlight. I look forward to continuing my poetry career and supporting small presses. <3

Cara Peterhansel



Issue 4

Since appearing in Chaotic Merge, Cara Peterhansel has continued to write poetry. She is currently a high school English Teacher, where she loves getting to share literature and art with her students (especially her Creative Writing students!).

Corey Mesler



COREY MESLER has been published in numerous anthologies and journals including Poetry, Gargoyle, Lunch Ticket, Five Points, Good Poems American Places, and New Stories from the South. He has published over 50 books of fiction and poetry. With his wife he owns Burke's Book Store (est. 1875) in Memphis.

Kailey Tedesco



Kailey Tedesco is the author of four poetry collections including MOTHER-DEVIL (White Stag Publishing, Elgin Award Nominee). She lives in PA and teaches courses on Gothic lit and horror in Bethlehem. She will always be grateful for the care the Chaotic Merge team extended to her poetry!

Nancy Jorgensen



Nancy Jorgensen is a Wisconsin writer, educator, and musician. Her essays appear in HuffPost, Business Insider, Next Avenue, The Offing, River Teeth, Wisconsin Public Radio, and elsewhere. Her most recent book is a middle-grade sports biography, "Gwen Jorgensen: USA's First Olympic Gold Medal Triathlete" (Meyer & Meyer). NancyJorgensen.weebly.com

Sarah Harley



Sarah Harley is a writer and high school teacher from the UK who supports refugee students in telling their own stories. Her work has appeared in Mud Season Review, Sonora Review, Bluestem Magazine, and other journals. She's currently working on a novella, The Age of Consent. More at sarahharley888.com.

Brittany Micka-Foos



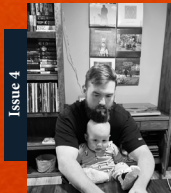
Brittany Micka-Foos is the author of "It's No Fun Anymore" (Apprentice House Press, 2025), winner of the Chanticleer Grand Prize for Short Story Collections, and the chapbook "a litany of words as fragile as window glass" (Bottlecap Press, 2024). Her work also appears in American Poetry Review, Ninth Letter, Barrelhouse, and elsewhere. More at www.brittanynickafoos.com.

Felix Quiñonez Jr.



Born in Paraguay and raised on Long Island, in 2007, I moved to NYC to attend Hunter College. There, I studied journalism and art. Like millions of people, I fell in love with the city and now I can't imagine living anywhere else. I use my art to tell stories that are personal but also touch on universal themes. My work often combines semi-autobiographical elements with add sci-fi, fantasy and my love for NYC.

John T. Leonard



Hi, everybody! Since I was published in CMM, my wife and I have had a son and I continue to write. I've also founded an art and literature journal called Rawhead and released my first chapbook, "You Are Alive When They Start to Eat You" through Bottlecap Press. Cheers to this beautiful final issue. Let's all connect!

Stephen Joffe



Stephen Joffe (he/him) is an award-winning actor, writer, and composer. His work has appeared in Black Warrior Review, Literary Review of Canada, CV2, and Dalhousie Review, among others. He is the recipient of High Commendation at the Poetry Wales Award, and a finalist for the Leonard Cohen Poetry Prize.

Abby Hosterman



Since being published in Chaotic Merge, I've published my first full-length collection titled Burnout Diary with Game Over Books and started doing more essay writing, specifically about pop culture. Find me on IG at @theabbyhosterman. Congrats to the whole Chaotic Merge team for their run on this project. Y'all are appreciated!

Katey Funderburgh



Publication in Chaotic Merge helped to spark my passion to being a literary community member who cares deeply about access, originality, and representation. All my love to the editors and writers who have left a mark on these pages.

Smitha Sehgal



In this world with a never ending war, every little magazine holds out a candle of hope. It stands to say that all is not lost and it brings together voices that believe in the beauty and power of words. I am grateful to Chaotic Merge Magazine and its editors for having brought forth and nurtured this beautiful magazine so long. I wish you the very best.

Gladys Siddi



My work is deeply influenced by travel and the landscapes I encounter, particularly places where nature reveals both its beauty and fragility. During my time in Iceland, the melting glaciers became a powerful source of inspiration, confronting me with ideas of transformation, disappearance, and impermanence.

Jacelyn Yap



I'm a UI designer by day, a gremlin that makes pictures and eats ice cream by night. Chaotic Merge has such a cool and memorable vibe, glad to have my illustrations and photography here alongside other great creatives. Our art is eternal!!

KJ Hannah Greenberg



KJ Hannah Greenberg delights in words and images. She's had over fifty-five books published and has had her photography grace two galleries as well as appear on print and electronic covers.

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi



Since "Pasture Statues" graced the digital pages of Chaotic Merge, the Pushcart Prize and Sundress Publications' Best of the Net have taken notice of other titles. In the ensuing years, a pair of novels and a short story anthology have been born, in the midst of various life milestones. Thank you to the Chaotic Merge team for taking a chance on "Pasture Statues," and best of luck to all.

Dan Brotzel



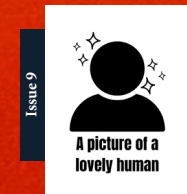
Thank you for accepting my story, "The Long and Bouncy Road: The Key Stages of Psychosocial Development, Re-imagined as Masochistic Trampoline Games I Play With My Children! Loved being part of CM, the readings and the amazing richness and range of all the work you brought together. Thank you CM!

Audrey-Anna Gamache



Audrey-Anna Gamache is a writer/filmmaker from New England. Her latest publication was in Moss Puppy Magazine. She is completing a dental assistant course while in pre-production on her fourth film. "To Be Fed Well" is her favorite story that she's written. She can be found on Instagram @ScoutyLynch.

Rebecca Kane



I'm a playwright, theatre worker, and now a screenwriter living in Queens, NY. Since Chaotic Merge gave my short play Dream Meaning its first publication, the play received additional performances in the US. This publication also gave me the confidence to start converting it into my first finished short screenplay!

Charmaine Arjoonlal



Charmaine Arjoonlal is a first generation South Asian/Portuguese writer and social worker who lives with her husband and two dogs in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada. She is working on a collection of creative nonfiction and poetry titled, *Rock the Boat*. Thanks Chaotic Merge! You will be missed! Find her at charmainearjoonlal.wordpress.com.

Allen Means



Allen's first ever online publication was with Chaotic Merge, and was subsequently nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2021. Since then, Allen has published in *Salt Hill*, *Only Poems*, and *Seventh Wave Magazine*, among others. He has been supported by the McCormack Writing Center (Tin House) and Creative Philadelphia, and been a James A. Michener fellow at the University of Miami. His first poem, "Ace of Cups" was later republished in *Voicemail Poems* as "Colorado."

Lauren Rudolph



Lauren is very grateful for having had the opportunity to place her poem, *The Intern*, in Chaotic Merge, and in print nonetheless! She is still daydreaming among the moon and concrete and doesn't anticipate this nocturnal love affair fizzling out anytime soon. She wishes everyone at CM all the best.

Shannon Dunn



Shan is a queer and trans poet, currently assisting with web design and communication efforts at a local university. Their free time includes dancing, being a loverboy, and helping out with the local Charlotte Dark Scene!

Jennifer Stark



Jennifer Stark (she/they) lives in Toronto, Canada and loves writing from her front porch in the summer and huddled beside a space heater under a big orange cat in the winter.

Aïcha Martine Thiam



Since appearing in Chaotic Merge, I've published my third collection, *(TO BRING YOU MY LOVE* with Kith Books), which was a Deborah Tall Lyric Essay finalist. I've also completed two novels, have attended various, beautiful writing retreats, and started a small editing business *Virago Editing and Creative Services!*

Terri Mullholland



I'm a writer living in London, UK. My flash fiction has appeared in various journals and my pamphlet *Weather / Patterns* was published by *integraphia* press. I loved being part of Chaotic Merge. It was a dream working with Kylie and the team and Chaotic Merge will be much missed!

Elise Scott



Elise Scott writes from their lived experiences of queerness, disability, neurodivergence, fat-positivity, and petting three cats with two hands. Their debut novel, a cozy mystery featuring three kittens who must solve a murder to save their human, was published in May, 2026. Elise is a *Not Quite Write Prize* winner and *Best-of-the-Net* nominee. Find out what they're working on now at <http://elise-scott.com>.

Charlie Brice



I'm so sorry to see Chaotic Merge go. It was a wonderful magazine and I was honored to be a part of it. As for me, my 10th poetry collection, *A Brief History of the Sixties* (Alien Buddha Press, 2026) was just published.

Renee Keele



I'm an Arizona native who loves to write and explore what the desert has to offer.

Erica Hoffmeister



Born and raised in Southern California, Erica Hoffmeister been chasing that elusive concept of home since her first cross-country road trip at the age of seven. She's since driven to all the lower forty-eight states and thinks anything can be solved with a good book and a long drive. She has three books of poetry published, but writes in all genres and is currently working on her memoir-in-essays. She still wants to be a novelist when she grows up.

Soramimi Hanarejima



Ever fascinated by the role storytelling plays in sense-making, Soramimi Hanarejima writes fanciful fiction in hopes of encountering insight and delight. Soramimi's story collection *A Psychography of Modest Intimacies* was published earlier this year, and it includes "Helpful Distractions," which was published in issue 4 of Chaotic Merge!

Arlo Arctia



I am a poet in Rutgers-Newark's Creative Writing MFA program; currently, I am working on my first book and building my website on *Substack*. *A Taste of Melancholy*, to house my creations. I was given the honor to be included in Chaotic Merge's Issue IX.

JP Seabright



JP Seabright (she/they) is a queer disabled writer living in London. They have seven solo pamphlets published and four collaborations, encompassing poetry, prose and experimental work. JP has been nominated for *Pushcart Prize*, *Best of the Net*, *Forward Prize*, and shortlisted (twice) for a *Saboteur Award* for Best Collaborative Work.

Corey Davis



I am a writer from Mississippi whose work primarily explores everything dark, strange, and Southern. My short fiction and poetry have been featured in a number of titles around the world, and most recently one of my stories was long-listed for the *Oxford American's* 2025 Debut Fiction Contest. I'm also a librarian and current graduate student, with a background in public librarianship and a special interest in prison libraries. Chaotic Merge was such an enthusiastic champion of my weird work (Lassiter Jamison, in particular), and it was an honor and a pleasure to be featured as a contributor in one of their issues!

Kenneth Gulotta



Editing my story with Chaotic Merge was a pleasure. This is saying a lot, given how much time I spend editing multiple types of writing: fiction by night and technical documentation by day. I live in New Orleans with my wife and our menagerie. For more information about my fiction, see www.kennethgulotta.com.

Vicky Viola



Fine Art Photographer based in Scotland. Thank you for publishing my work and for supporting artists all over, your support made such a difference to me and my career and will forever be a reminder that if you put your heart into something it can not just work out but become something incredible!.

Blair Kinsey



Blair Kinsey is a writer, mathematician, and nature lover from Austin, Texas. Here, she works at Austin Bat Refuge, nurturing the orphaned and injured bats of central Texas. An enthusiast of all things strange and creative, Blair is honored to be part of the Chaotic Merge family.



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