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ISSUE 9: Erasure
September 2019

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Introduction An Editorial Note	30	Bear In Winter Ashley MP
4	Receipts From My Car Kimberly Vargas Agnese	34	According To My Counselor,Rachael, First Graders Aren't Promiscuous Ashley MP
6	Increasingly Synthetic Kimberly Jarchow	36	When Uncle Art Babysat For Mom C. Christine Fair
8	I Have Awakened Shirley Davis	38	Jamaican Rain Hannah Clark
10	The Silence Keepers Monika R. Martyn	42	My Body My Rules Bri Mehen
16	Shall We Dance? Catherine Lavender	44	Reflections On Pregnancy Danielle Hark
20	Beast Of My Mind Jorie Rao	45	One Hundered Faces Danielle Hark
21	A Hand To Hold Jorie Rao	46	Shattered Self Danielle Hark
22	I Asked Nicely, But Jorie Rao	47	Under The Oak Tree Danielle Hark
24	Another Draft Of The Same Poem Kimberly Jarchow	48	Inner Child Danielle Hark
28	Not The First Spark But The Explosion Emily Perkovich	50	Body Unbound A. R. Bekenstein
		52	Emerge Marela Aryan Balagot

54	Man's World Chelsea Bunn	93	A Fraction Of Myself Rachael Chatham
56	Swimming Lesson Anonymous	97	Healing And Hookups C. H
58	Things That Are Heavy Jay Audrey	101	Halo Kite Shallow S. Schaefer
62	Naked AB Mambo	102	Story To A Child S. Schaefer
64	Butchered Gina Tron	103	The Door At The End Of The Hall S. Schaefer
66	The Victims Dipak Shaw	104	The Nancy Drew Files S. Schaefer
68	The State S. Miller	106	Power Of The Storm D. A. Simantis
72	The Everything J. Askew	109	Beauty D. A. Simantis
80	We Are Born Katherine Page	112	Unvanquished Jorie Rao
83	Closets Bridgid Taylor		
89	Reclaiming Aeryne James	114	Call For Submissions Awakened Voices
91	When I Hear The Name Andy Rachel A. Clark	115	Awakenings A certified 501-c3 organization

Introduction

An Editorial Note

As Awakenings continues to look at reclamation over the Fall of 2019, we as writers, editors, and readers have been looking at how erasure participates in this conversation. We might think of this in print or in political terms like a redacted text. We can think of this as taking the false parts of a narrative and rearranging them to create what we know is the truth. Taking away text can also look similar to the taking away of someone's truth, agency, or body.

As we received responses to our call for writing around the theme of Erasures, we had to broaden our vision of this theme. Our writers taught us just how much bigger this idea is on the page and in their lives. During a traumatic event, a person may focus on details such as objects in a room or something other than the traumatic action in order to cope. These might be the only details a survivor remembers. This kind of erasing, the mind saving some details and erasing others, are thought to be a form of protection for the mind and body. Some of the unhelpful rhetoric and shaming from well-meaning people includes versions of "do you remember what happened?", "Maybe it wasn't that bad if you can't remember?" when the erasing

of some details was there to protect the survivor, however, living with rhetoric, that often comes off as shaming or invalidating, paired with the unknown of what has been erased, can be very scary and hard to live through. At Awakened Voices, we choose to hold space for what is erased, what is reclaimed, and the broader ways writing and creative expression allows this expression, and, we hope, healing.

Readers, we hope you will find these healing and to expand your own ideas about erasure, writing, and healing.

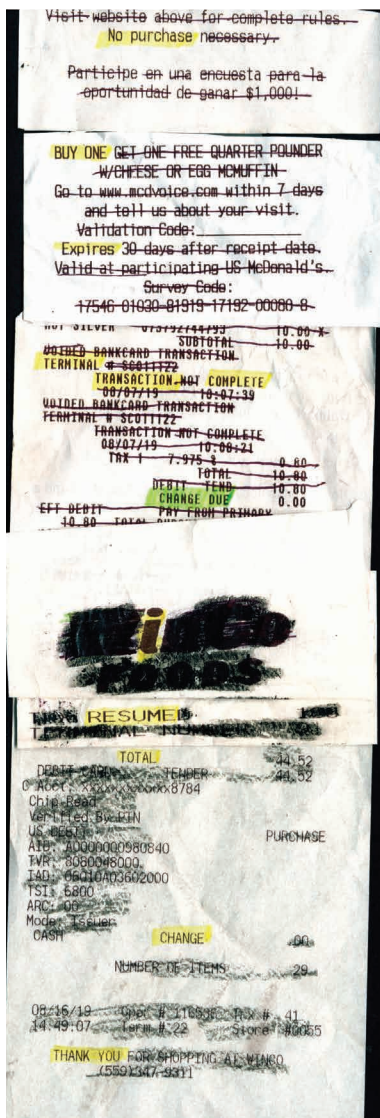
Introduction

Content Warning

The following writing contains material including one or more of the following: Rape and Sexual Assault, Abuse, Self-Injurious Behavior, Suicide.

Receipts From My Car

by Kimberly Vargas Agnese



No purchase.

Buy one expires.

Terminal transaction complete.

Change due.

I resume.

Total change.

Thank you.

Receipts From My Car

*A born-fighter who has overcome acute stress disorder, molestation and rape, **Kimberly** frequently advocates for survivors of sexual violence. To read more of Kimberly's work, visit www.bucketsonabarefootbeach.com.*

Increasingly Synthetic

by Kimberly Jarchow

This poem is the hero for the voiceless pages
I could not write when I was afraid.
Now, not so much fearless as stubborn in the face
of him, the night still tries to
spill itself out, bounce itself off my
tongue like it was a diving
board, my voice a dead spring.
There is still an earthquake
here, ripping me to shreds, flies circling the
hollow in my eyes, but here is the difference. There
is an absence now that
replaces the bruises, a better decoration, a reminder
of what I could have
lost and fought to keep. This poem, my liberation as
others have been, from his gaze
against me, a pen better than fists
here as the walls come
down without a sound, gone. And he is too, now
merely a cardboard cutout, a crash test dummy,
the cheap trick revealed at the end of the horror
movie, the fake blood at the scene of a crime,
and all that is left is the girl becoming a
woman, a free bird ready
to feel her heartbeat beyond a cage.

Increasingly Synthetic

Kimberly Jarchow is a recent graduate from Northern Arizona University with two Bachelor's degrees in English and Strategic Communication. She currently resides just outside of Boulder, Colorado with her partner and two cats.

I Have Awakened

by Shirley Davis

I have awakened

Like from a long-drugged sleep
From not caring where I was
Not content any longer
To remain imprisoned in my sorrow

I have awakened

Sometimes, as a woman I'm overwhelmed
Yet fighting is better than slumber
Where I was imprisoned for so long
Although, it is difficult facing reality again

I have awakened

I long to prove myself
I long to find my niche
In a world who would doubt me
And hold me down, in my place

But I have awakened

To craving new life and respect
To owning my flaws and my cracks
An awakening of heart, who I am
Is pushing me into the future

For, I have awakened

The dark of night is over
My heart is renewed
My spirit is soaring
Hear me roar to the world

I have awakened!

I Have Awakened

Shirley Davis lives in central Illinois and works as a freelance writer. Her philosophy for life is although it isn't easy for anyone, it is still full of beauty and triumph.

The Silence Keepers

by Monika R. Martyn

Years ago, when his mother died, I mailed a hallmarked condolence card to the family. I never blamed the woman, and there was no point in stirring the hornet's nest, as undoubtedly it was too late to warn her that she had raised a monster. Besides, I understood that a satin-lined coffin left little room for such intimate secrets. The weight of death was enough to fill such voids.

Back on my home turf, the ghosts of my past meandered as aimlessly as I, and I saw their shadows lurking everywhere. On first sight, the meadow, where it all took place remained disguised as a violent crime scene forever cordoned off in my memory, was just a benign field. Without the customary yellow tape, it was a modest meadow, and even the seasons had been denied the pleasure of slowly whittling away at the past and tearing the tape to shreds. In the wind, I overheard the murmur of speculation, the tide of gossip corroding my truth. Forty years ago, no one conducted an investigation into such topics, as always, things were ultimately better left unsaid, albeit everyone knew.

That the field was so much smaller than my memory had insinuated, yet deep like a chasm I couldn't crawl from, was a striking contrast. Still, the pain resurfaced after lying dormant, like a Phelps' phenomenon plowing through the water, gasping, spitting, clawing and only one goal in sight. A malignant victory strangled by the burden of a silent medal.

I rounded the bend in the lane, ascended the slight incline, my head tucked into my raised shoulders. Bands of stress compressed my spine while my shallow breath denied me the simple luxury of oxygen.

Onward—without looking backward it was a homecoming, but I was never crowned queen.

While I walked, I waited for the onslaught of residual pain to run its course, although there were no blueprints to follow on just what to expect. Earlier that afternoon, a farmer, a man whom I no longer knew by name, mowed the meadow and stalks of grasses and wildflowers were turning to hay as the scorch of summer heat suntanned them to a crisp silver shade of

jade. Robbed of their innocence, just as I had been, the flowers wilted. I inhaled deeply, appeasing my lungs.

"This is it." I said. "This is where it happened."

My gaze bravely lingered on the gentle slope. Another disappointment. In the distance, the traffic hummed and stillness lay a long way off. It had been such an innocuous night when it happened. I was too young to understand then, in the glory days of my youth, that evil lurked, not only under the solitary tree in the meadow but in the faces of those I trusted. My muffled screams died an agonizing death beneath the bang of a drum, the snare of a bass, the whine of a sax. His hand covered my mouth, his hand molested the tender parts of my innocence. A victim of circumstance, a target at short range, I collapsed like a crash-test dummy and never fully rebounded.

For me, that evening time stood still, yet it happened so quickly, and it stretched the elastic bands of time into the wasteland of forever.

"I couldn't tell anyone. The shame of what was done to me." I spoke the words into the cave of my mouth, which I clamped shut out of habit. My aborted words were merely thoughts in a one-way dialog and conversation was a long way off.

"What if you had?" My stern demeanor demanded of me and as always was ready to defend the victim. "Would anyone have believed you?"

I walked faster up the slight incline, rounding the bend and moving briskly away from the scene of the crime. Pretty horses once roamed in the same pasture, cantering, their manes tousled, sweet sweat, a neigh begging for a carrot or apple, a rub along a velvet nose. Cows, with docile eyes, grazed on meals of grasses and stunk up the night, dispensing methane.

As a child, I ran barefoot through the tall grass decapitating flowers between my toes, laughing and somersaulting, careful not to step into heaps of warm dung.

Above me, birds chirped in the trees and in the distance I overheard the unmistakable toot of a pheasant and the soft coo of pigeons. Sooner or later I'd have to face the timeless scenario and him. A thousand buttons of agony to be undone. A handshake in public. A whole lot of pretending and not falling apart. A polite how do you do. The secret festering like a scab ready to be picked off, despite the pain and unfinished healing.

I wondered if he heard of the hashtag movement and if he feared the reckoning. The hashtag which provoked the sleeping giant into opening its shuttered eyes.

"It happened to me too." I confessed to my sister over dinner. I entrusted my husband with the burden while in bed. Aloud. Echoes reverberated. Waiting for the ashes of the fallout. The documentary rolling deep inside my head. Another tumultuous ending.

"I wasn't even fourteen." A trigger: I remember the new sweater, the bell-bottom pants I borrowed from my older sister.

"Why didn't I tell someone?"

Why? If only I knew how to form the words, which glued themselves to my tongue. No one prepared me in home economics, in religion class, in math, or sciences how to recover from the transaction that exposed my fragile core. But miraculously, just maybe, my language class gave me the one tool I needed to survive. Only then, I didn't understand its power.

"Why? Tell! Are you kidding me?" For a month I was breathing below water. Shame over what had happened to my body made me think of ending my life. At fourteen. Grasping for hope, I struggled to resurface, I was irreparably damaged. Imprisoned and scared, the only map on how to survive wasn't within my grasp and never readable.

"Inevitably, my life went on." I chomped on the pain, swallowed the shame and shoveled. Now it lies unearthed again, like a gravedigger after scavenging for bones.

A whiff of jasmine in the night air calmed my nerves just enough to endure.

My sandals slapped the warm tar. A dog barked in the distance. Forty years have vanished a lifetime ago. The moment when someone took possession of my body lies in the past, yet unmistakably it remains a tender bruise that oozes and soaks through the bandages.

When I arrived at the party, he was waiting. I wasn't an accomplished enough liar to avoid the situation born out of obligation.

That afternoon, I had seen his laundry flap in the breeze, his garments mimicking his shape and I flinched. Every inch of my body remembered the pressure of his hard body pressed against mine.

His weight. My powerless struggle. The tall grass, the damp ground beneath me. Winded, the air in my lungs sought refuge hindering my futile struggle and the strength to escape.

Resonating in the room, I heard his unmistakable laughter. I saw his wife standing elbow to elbow next to the man who did what he did. My senses were on radar alert to every movement in the room.

Prickles of electricity charged my nerves. One gulp, the wine in my glass rushed down my throat like a violent current while I gasped for air. There wasn't any left to spare.

He shook my hand, a shiver of revulsion trembled within me, as he said, "how are you?"

"Fine. And you?" I mumbled. Clods of dirt formed in my mouth, beneath my nails. Dirt which clings and stains despite the scalding baths, the violent scrubbing in the countless showers since. I have never felt entirely clean again. Shame stained my soul permanently.

I felt, and still feel, like Cinderella covered in soot that will never wash off, not even on the extended cycle. He introduced his wife.

"Nice to meet you."

How can you NOT know? I fire off the question via telepathy.

"Heard so much about you."

No, you haven't. Or you wouldn't be here shaking my hand, married to the man who did what he did. I can't comment that if you knew the truth that you'd still wear his ring and introduce yourself with his name.

"Ah! I have to go." I planned my escape before my lips betrayed me but cold sweat dabbled my skin. Bile rose, a scream festered at the base of my throat—choked like a rotten egg wedged in place.

Two years ago, when the movement began, was the first time I allowed the dirty secret fresh air. Shallow words in a pan and the stench of a confession. Testing the sound of my voice in a room with the two people I trusted most.

Days earlier, I'd been watching a documentary about young students who were assaulted, and who decades later had to relive the ordeal again, confronting not only the evil hands who harmed them but also the doubters. The critics who sliced their wounds open with their insensitive and callous word-swords.

Out loud, the words to explain the utter horror, the unabated shame, are always garnished with tinges of loneliness. The residual disgust laid flat in the desert of absolute devastation.

I thought back to the longest day in history when Christine Blasey-Ford gave her sworn testimony. A brave woman who didn't just defend herself—finally. She spoke for the mute, the thousands, perhaps millions of others. As always the same script, the varied plot, the change of scene. Without fail, the trite and scripted dialog was rehearsed by the defense. "A case of mistaken identity!"

Out under the clear night sky, the cool air sank into my lungs, luckily knowing the way, thank God, because I had forgotten how to breathe. What could I have done differently? By accusing him, I would have destroyed his mother, father, and his family. Ruined their lives because of what he did to me. People, even those in my own family, would have chosen sides like a game of ball in an after-hours courtyard. Last chosen for the team.

If I had spoken out, it would have ended so many lives and started a war. Instead, I lived within the confines of my own dread. A battle I will never win without a knightly champion to court my plight. Statistically, I knew, even while I raged against my own emotions, somewhere far away, perhaps even in the house next door, another girl endured the same fate, or perhaps still endures. There are no earplugs that can mute the silent screams reverberating and singing in the dunes of oppression, filling the sandbank of time.

Kneeling in the ditch, the cool night air orchestrating the heat rushing through my body, stalks of grass and sleeping insects were my grand audience: I vomited.

"It happened to me too when I was just fourteen."

Monika R. Martyn is a loved, minimalist-nomad, writer, and traveler. Her one indulgence is words and her stories have been published online and in print.

Shall We Dance?

by Catherine Lavender

Alana chewed on her lower lip as she waited for the landlord to unlock the door. "Unit5-B3," he muttered, fumbling in his coat pocket for the key.

Alana stood next to him silently in an oversized sweatshirt and a pair of old corduroys she'd received from a Women in Recovery charity. She tried to ignore the tremors in her left arm and held on to a small duffel bag that contained the rest of her possessions.

The unit was furnished sparingly with a single bed, a broken nightstand, a vintage 19 inch tube screen, and a small kitchen table that had a wilted plant as its proud centerpiece.

Alana placed her duffel bag down on the bed and walked over to the window. She had never been to New York City, and she wished that she could afford an apartment that had a view of the Hudson River or Central Park. But instead she saw neon lights from across the street that read Ho Wok Chinese and Fast Cash Pawn.

"Do you think anyone will notice me?"

Alana asked while gazing out the window.

The landlord placed the key on the kitchen table. "The entire world knows your face, what you did was brave."

"Tell that to every news station that calls me a liar." "Well, I believe you."

"Thanks. But nothing will happen to him, so does it really matter?" The sadness in her eyes made him search carefully for his words.

"Regardless of how many years have passed, what he did to you is wrong," the landlord finally said before leaving.

Alana sat on the edge of the bed and opened her duffel bag. Her fingers reached for a ballet skirt that still had the earthy fragrance of rosin. She placed her cheekbone against the soft tulle fabric and imagined herself perched and balanced next to a wooden barre.

Dance of the Swans 5-6-7-8 - again-
5-6-7-8

It was in 1987 when Alana, a scrawny girl with uncombed hair, sat on the living room floor watching Kusakari's performance as Odette in Swan Lake. She was captivated by the beauty of the ballerina. This was who she was supposed to be, but as a foster child, nobody cared to know.

There was never enough money for dance lessons, so at the age of eight, Alana taught herself how to dance. She eventually became numb to the fractured bones and the torn muscles and was proud of how quickly she could wrap a sprain ankle: overlap the bandage, make figure eight turns, and circle the calf.

By the time she was 22, the prescription pain killers no longer subdued her injuries, and a year later, she turned to heroin to help relieve the pain.

Interrupting her thoughts, a familiar voice came through the static from the muffled speakers of the small tube television.

"These allegations are false. I've never touched that woman," the voice said angrily. A crowd of reporters and protesters were standing outside the steps of the courtroom.

A female reporter ran up to the politician holding a microphone and shouted "Accuser number 3 claims this happened during a fraternity party." The reporter waited briefly for a response then continued, "She was a student that same year under a dance scholarship."

There was commotion amongst the crowd as protesters waived colorful feminist posters and chanted, "No means No – it doesn't mean maybe! Don't touch me – I'm not your baby!"

The politician smoothed his necktie with his hand and gave the crowd a reassuring statement: "This is a troubled woman who is trying to tarnish my image before the election. This is all fake news." He excused himself before he walked away from the cameras.

Alana found the remote and turned off the television.

A wave of nausea came over her, and she could feel his strong hand covering her mouth and the smell of alcohol on his breathe. Her therapist once told her that the fragments of a bad memory can remain trapped inside the human mind. But it can be suppressed when the inner consciousness is filled with at least twenty seconds of a positive memory.

Alana slipped into her ballet clothes and tied the ribbons of her satin pointe slippers. She walked over to the bathroom mirror. In an imperfect contour, she crossed her legs and pointed her toes to the ground. She lifted both arms in the air to form her lean body into a crois  .

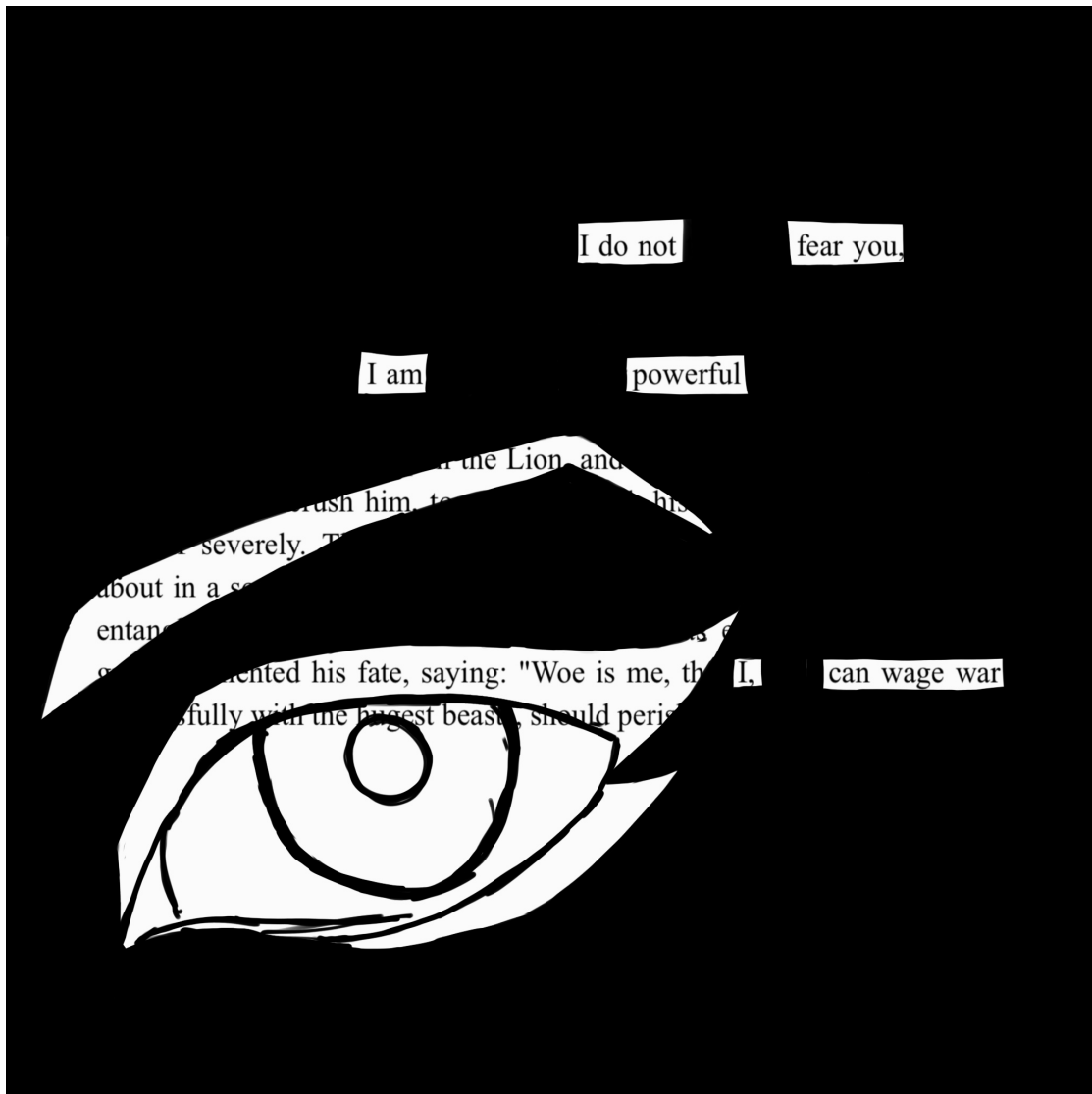
Despite the ugly needle scars on her arms, Alana felt graceful like Odette in Swan Lake.

Shall We Dance?

Catherine Lavender is an author of Women's Fiction. She is known for her novel *In Black & White*. A native of Baltimore Maryland, she now resides in the Sunshine State of Florida.

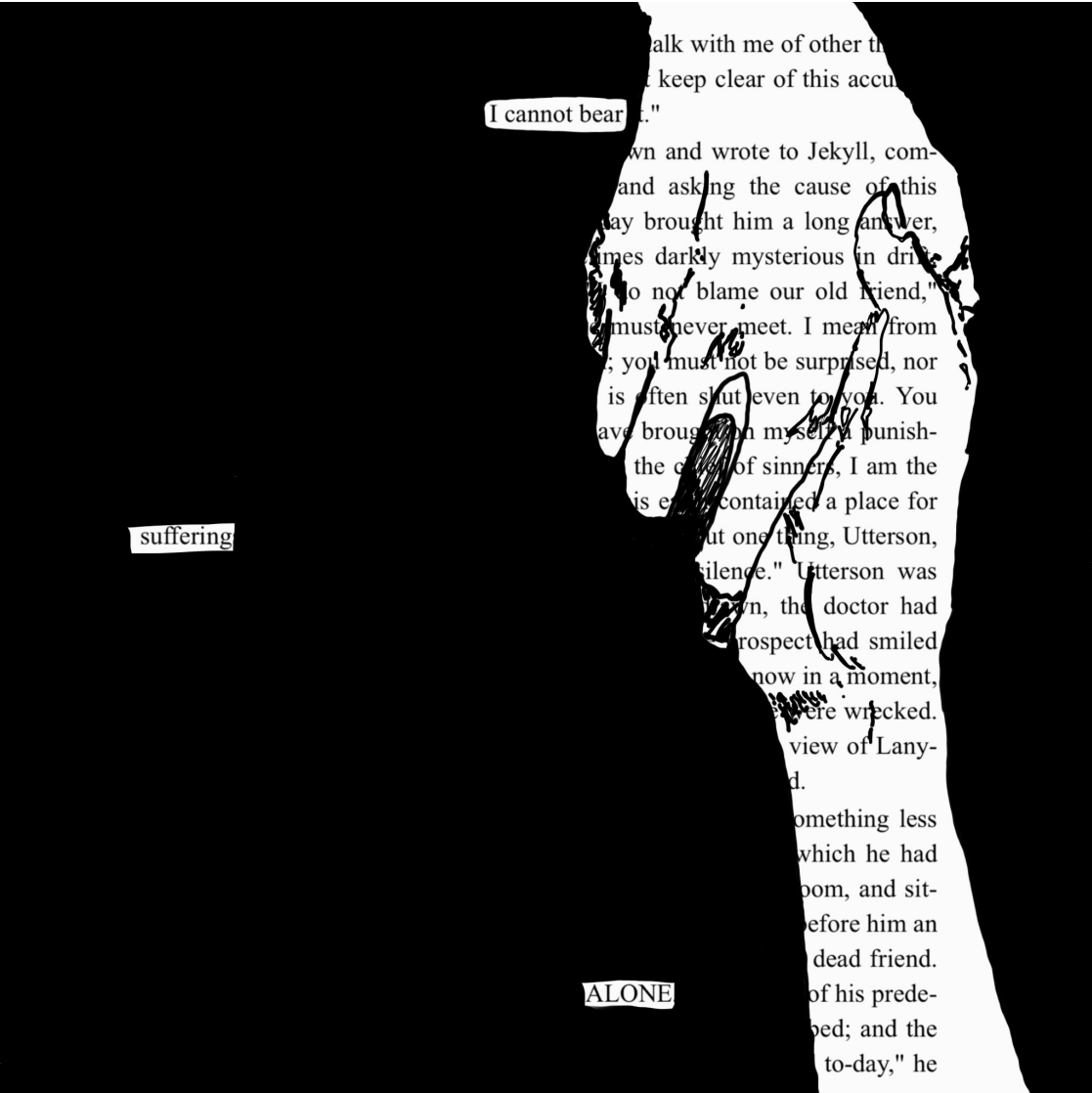
Beast Of My Mind

by Jorie Rao



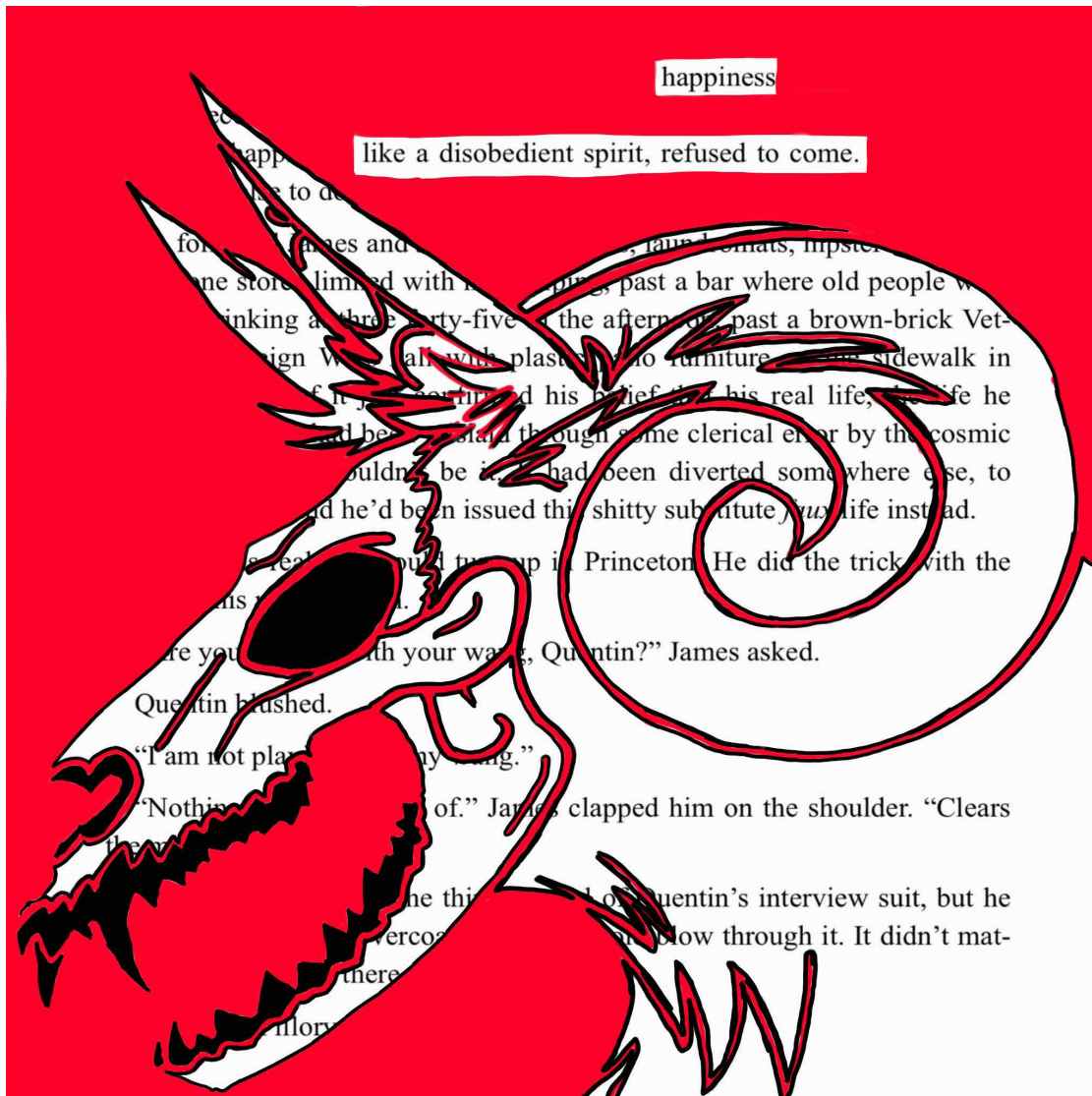
A Hand To Hold

by Jorie Rao



I Asked Nicely, But

by Jorie Rao



Jorie Rao is an English Literature professor with a passion for reading and writing. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and Composition Theory and won the Toni Libro Award for Excellence in Writing.

Another Draft Of The Same Poem

by Kimberly Jarchow

The first time I write a poem about sex,
I have already learned to dissect my body for the tastiest parts.
Split me down the middle and
you will find all of the memories men have left,
my tired heart and
swollen liver and
water-logged lungs.

You could say that I was never quite sober
whenever I gave myself up to another man's greedy fingers.
Too drunk on good outfits that caught another sparkling eye,
too high on attention and, of course,
there was always the beer too.

Always another joint to pass,
another round of red solo cups,
another way to get me wasted and out of my uncertain skin,
But.

The first time I wrote a poem about
the first time,
It was a love poem.

Caught in the middle of my freshman year of college
caught between men who used hands and muscles and gravity,
caught once before and they could catch me again,
there's no more running this time.

I'm in his room this time
and he's playing my favorite songs on a Spotify playlist
and what else is there to do but give in a little
let his lips fall all over me
and sure, I said no once
but when he kept going I didn't say no again
so here I am the virgin in a college dorm

looking for love and finding this instead,
believing it's the same thing and
when it was over,
I thought I was supposed to like it, so
I wrote a poem about love
and remembered where the consent was supposed to be and wasn't
but it didn't matter.

This body was an afterthought back then.
It was a means to an end.
A warm body against a warm body against
a cold, shivering truth,
to be raised into such a desperate girl,
to crave affection enough to disguise it against your own judgment,
clouded from the beer and bongs already
so what's another bed then?
Which boy, with snarling fingers playing God,
does it end with this time?
The first time I come home to my body was three years after
the first time it saw itself naked from another's eyes.
I come out to myself, begin to know the words for love and queer as
synonymous,
to find a body as tired as mine, still waiting for the yes at every next step
between soft, patient fingers and
in this bed, I am always in control,
even when I choose not to be.
I unlearn the art of cutting myself open,
instead letting my partner kiss each scar all the way down.
I no longer believe that I am
something worth sacrificing, but

something worth celebrating.
For so long, I let myself turn all of my worst traumas
into oversights,
into shallow art,
Into incomplete love poems
and now I know better.
That this body is beautiful because of
what it knows that it has survived at the hands of others.
That this poem is better
because of the ugliest parts,
raw and splayed open
and part of who I was,
part of who I still become tomorrow,
better than yesterday
always trying to do it better
rewrite my story better than I did
the last time.

Kimberly Jarchow is a recent graduate from Northern Arizona University with two Bachelor's degrees in English and Strategic Communication. She currently resides just outside of Boulder, Colorado with her partner and two cats.

Not The First Spark But The Explosion

by Emily Perkovich

His knee is on my chest, and his left hand holds both of mine pinned above my head. And for a second as his eyes meet my wet ones I think he'll loosen his grip. His mouth comes close to mine, and I think that he'll remember everything I've ever made him feel. I think that I can feel his heart beating in time with my own. I think he must feel it too. He'll remember that I am already his. He'll remember that I'm his, and it's unnecessary to take. Instead his right arm wraps around my waist and flips me onto my stomach. I struggle to pull away without hurting his feelings. I love him deeply. Insatiably. Irrevocably. I want to be able to give him everything he wants. Even when it's not what I want. And though I pull away my confusion limits my strength. My face buried in the pillow limits my breath. He yanks me from the bed and onto the floor pulling a down comforter with me. It wraps around me straight-jacket like. And even if he wasn't stronger, I love him. And no one tells you how much harder it is when you want to be able to say yes even though your insides are screaming out to say no. My voice is broken. And my eyes must be too. Because the tears never stop. And I swear I say no. And he swears that I didn't. All I know is a white blanket wrapped around me holding

me down, a wooden floor bracing against me, and an open window sending snowy air into the warm room. All I know is I cry until I vomit. And he strokes my sweaty forehead with confusion etched on his handsome face. His mouth trying to kiss away all of the pain he's caused me. And I want to run. But terrified and exhausted I sleep in his arms. Terrified and exhausted I wake in his arms. Terrified and exhausted I return over and over. Terrified and exhausted. And I think I've forgotten how to sleep now.

Not The First Spark But The Explosion

Emily Perkovich is from the Chicago-land area. She spends her free time in the city with her family. She is previously published by Wide Eyes Publishing and Witches N Pink.

Bear In Winter

by Ashley MP

Secrets have the propensity to keep us sick
but I wrap myself back into a cocoon despite knowing
its warmth was and never can be my truth

His hands incarnate of evil lust
soaking into cardinal hair
These moments plead with my brain to form them in the present tense

I dig, I remember, I digest, I regurgitate
Disgusting visions, insomnia, scrubbing my skin again and again and again
and again, my eyelids, wrecked witnesses in sleep

I'm sorry if you're reading this because it means the
most unimaginable, unsanctified thing happened and nothing I say
will mercifully allow me to mend the soulless, unforgivable truth

I was five, six, seven with so much God in me
Little Pins of Light, my grandmother explained
So beautiful, so blinding

You were once a star before becoming
and with gullible brown eyes I had to believe her
because at night she would let me inch closer to the warmth of her skin

Then, if there was consistency, it was this
imagine a little girl reaching for a mother or any mess of limbs to wrap around her
messy limbs that didn't suffocate and smother like the limbs of him

Him—thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four
tall and hovering, with tan skin, brown beard, tobacco stained teeth
just as a bear in winter awoken too soon, his appetite ravenous

His power, all consumed preying, and how
I wanted to use mine but could not decipher
any way to pray for freedom from his affections

This is where the outline begins; I'm sorry
Us, Bed, Uncle, Sheets, Bathroom light, Bathroom tiles, scrub, scrub, scrub
Claws dug into flesh so young and hallowed

There were too many times, but the absolute first
I was a kindergartener wearing a Pocahontas t-shirt
my mother bought me, probably because I was quiet in the store that day
Alone in my grandmother's living room coloring pages of Lisa Frank dogs
he quietly asked what I was doing, but I didn't speak, didn't move
because when a bear speaks to you, there is no movement or formation of words

with belt unfastened, he lifted me
as though I was weightless, a paralyzed doll maybe
voodoo to match my Cajun blood

Ceremoniously laid me down on cold tiles the color of salmon
the preferred and primary source of life of Grizzlies, those fish
Some fortunate enough to escape further upstream

My hands tracing cracks and grooves
Focusing on the contrast of my skin and the 1970's decor
Long locks of wavy hair swirled and sticking onto my back

When all was said and done
the bile in my stomach grew so hot; my face, my stomach, my mouth, each part
all defiled and somehow made incomplete by a man who shared the same blood as me

Bear In Winter

that night in the same bathtub, I could not wash off enough, flesh marred
it soaked into my being, the smell of spearmint Skoal tobacco and
sin, evil, something I could not know

later that evening, the snow fell violently outside and
the white, it washed over our yard
the Winter the Bear came home

**According To My Counselor, Rachael,
First Graders Aren't Promiscuous**

by Ashley MP

When I was in therapy for three entire calendar years
Each week I sat cross legged, cold feet colors of plums

Splinting my stomach with cream thrift store pillows
Old lumps of polyester, yet my guardians

Without them, I believed my therapist would see the secret spilling out of my stomach
The one where he took his hands and pressed down onto me, paralyzing my body

A floor lamp sat across from me with a glow that made me both nauseous
and curious as to where they could have possibly purchased their light bulbs

I would distract myself with these thoughts and the red glow of the clock's numbers
reflecting against the side table's veneer, a glaring reminder that

Fifty minutes was what I had to get through before I could gracefully leave the room and then run
Fifty minutes of vaguely listening and nodding my head with cheeks burning from speaking at all

Once in a session I wondered, silently, as I bit ulcers onto the insides of my cheeks
If somehow, I misinterpreted what it meant for an uncle to love his niece

Tongue scraping the roof of my mouth as a mother preparing to wag her finger and say "tsktsktsk"
Maybe I was one of them, must have said something, dressed promiscuously, made sad eyes

Searched for closeness and love and maybe, just maybe
I was a girl who caused it, made the whole thing up, ached for the breath on my neck

The tangled hair, calloused hands gripping the ends tightly
The morning before I asked my mother if it was okay to cut my hair for first grade picture day

Ashley MP is a Southerner hoping to provide insight on the very complicated intersections of childhood sexual abuse, addiction, eating disorders, marriage, and motherhood. She is in graduate school to become a PMHNP and lives with her husband, son, and daughter.

**When Uncle Art Babysat
For Mom**

by C. Christine Fair

When Uncle Art Babysat for Mom

His avuncular fingers plunged deep into my girlish flesh,
Plowed furrows and planted seeds of rage and fear that grew into Sequoias which
Scratched his name across the sky for even the blindest to see his crimes.
--No one believes children. Not even their mothers

C. Christine Fair, PhD, is Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor in Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. Her most recent book is *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (OUP, 2019).

Jamaican Rain

by Hannah Clark

Without really meaning to, you've been listening to the rhythm of his footsteps and you know. Before anything has happened, before your upper arms are seized and before you feel the bulge in his jeans pressing against your hip, you know. But there is so little time between the crystallising formation of this knowledge and the physical reality of your situation that your only reaction is to flinch. Time pulses in fractured shards, gleaming, scattered ahead of you in prisms of wriggling light at the edge of your vision. A vapour like ozone gathers in the broad caverns of your nostrils. Time is forming the narrative of this moment without you, baby. You need to move. It takes two and a bit seconds for you to drop your bag and smash the back of your head into his face. He shrieks, sounding nothing like the red-winged parrots that used to scare you with their late night chatter as a child, and a heavy first thumps between your shoulder blades. You swing wildly, wrenching your freedom out of his grasp and your fist hits something soft. His breath sags across your throat and it reminds you of the hot whoosh of air dredged up when your mother hacked down the palm tree in her yard after it forced her vegetable garden into shade.

You run.

Run.

Run.

Your heels are cheap, they're from your friend's sister's stall on the high street and somewhere at the back of your mind you worry that one will snap and take you down, but God bless the talented woman who glued these diamante spikes because they hold steady for you and suddenly you're out of the park and onto the road and there are cars and people and you have never been so relieved to see the neon-glow of a chip shop. Your dress is ripped and one of your purple press-on nails is gone. The brittle bed of your natural stub looks sad and plain, but you're alive and you're unharmed and that is something. Dear God that is something.

The young man behind the counter shuffles slices of roughly chopped potato into bubbling yellow oil and ignores you completely until you clear your throat in his direction. He looks up to take your order and your money and then ignores you again. Rudeness is an epidemic in this country famed for its manners, you think. You could be the Princess Diana herself and still

this man would not look into your eyes. You drop down into the nearest chair because your legs feel like they are about to give out. It's the shock. Resting your hands on the soft folds of your belly, you can feel your flesh trembling. You need to lose weight. You glance down at your heels in renewed disbelief and they wink back at you like the diamond in a wide-boy's smile.

When the chip man rings the counter-bell for you to collect your food, you ask to make a call. He sighs and hunches his shoulders, looking uncomfortable and angry, as if you have asked for a forbidden liberty. Finally he squints up at you and whatever he sees decides the matter. You may make one call and be quick. Grateful, you dial the only number you know in this whole London city. Kaz arrives like an island storm. Her hair is wild, her nose-ring hurls bolts of reflected light with every breath she heaves. She looks all wrong in this place of grease and plastic. Your heart squeezes with more love than you knew you had in you.

"Baby! What happened? Are you alright?"

Her voice is a gentle thunder, a rich roll of sound coming in off a distant ocean, reverberating across the darkness to cocoon you. She opens her arms and wraps you in silver and deep mahogany. She smells of spiced split-peas and roasting meat. Your chips are untouched and congealing in their box. Kaz tuts at them and takes them back to the counter and dings the bell though the man is stood right there in front of her.

"You called the police for this woman?"

"She didn't ask me ..."

"Well look at her, for Christ's sake! Lord Jesus the stupidity of men..."

Kaz places the call and then, while you all wait for the police to come, scolds the chip-man for his lack of sensitivity, for taking money from a traumatised woman in need. She invokes his grandmother, his mother, his future daughter, she lists them as witnesses to his cruelty. You get a refund for the chips.

A police officer comes and she takes your statement with care and you hold your head up high while you answer her questions. You and Kaz leave arm in arm, swaying down the street. You talk about the shop, about your heels, about your nails. She strokes your hair and those shards of time slink back to your side. It feels like the remnants of a bad dream then Kaz makes a joke and her laughter is the heavy, soothing patter of rain on a tired tin roof, it is droplets forming on the big pink flowers in your mother's garden, and it is your new home under cold grey skies of Western opportunity. You start laughing too and people are staring but it doesn't matter.

Hannah Clark lives in Manchester, UK, with a charming chap, two eccentric cats, and a baffling array of houseplants. She is a creative writing MA student and editor at Lunate.co.uk. Her fiction has appeared across a variety of online and print journals including Litro, EllipsisZine, Spelk, and ReflexPress

My Body My Rules

by Bri Mehen

The first time [REDACTED],
I was [REDACTED] years old.
[REDACTED] still bright, laugh still true,
[REDACTED] untouched.
The next time [REDACTED],
I was [REDACTED] years old.
[REDACTED] dulled, [REDACTED] hollow,
[REDACTED] but used to it.
The last time [REDACTED],
just a [REDACTED] month ago
is the last [REDACTED] time.
No one [REDACTED] ever gets
[REDACTED] me,
[REDACTED] me,
or [REDACTED] me [REDACTED].
Without [REDACTED] consent.
My body [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] my rules.

Bri Mehen is a rugby playing writer from Akron, Ohio. Her prior works have been featured in *The Broken Tongue Review*, *Blood Puddles-Silent Screams in Liquid Darkness*, and *Ashbelt Journal*.

Reflections On Pregnancy

by Danielle Hark

belly swelling with first child,
she examines her foreign form
in a white-rimmed bedroom mirror,
still as the aching subject
of a 19th century daguerreotype.

breasts swollen, tender,
darkened nipples, like copper coins,
belly button flat, aching back, nausea.
she stares, entranced
by the stranger looking back.

sad eyes, distant, haunted,
two magnets fastened to the past.
dark shadows beneath,
aging young, porcelain face.
exhausted, melancholy,

frightened, alone, knowing
she is supposed to feel joy,
but all she sees and feels is sorrow,
guilt. her flesh, touched by many,
has never been touched

from the inside.
her body, used, abused,
used again but for creating life.
she's been invaded in new ways,
intimacy she's never known.

dissociating, vacant,
far away from bedroom,
mirror, tiny kicks, hiccups.
she's alone but not alone.
never alone again.

Reflections On Pregnancy

Inspired by Self-Portrait, Pregnant, N.Y.C.,
1945, by Diane Arbus

One Hundred Faces

by Danielle Hark

looking in shattered mirror shards,
a hundred morose faces
reflect pain,
war she endured,
violent men overpowering her,
disgruntled apes, coercing,
taking her confidence, sense of self,
leaving a battleground,
land mines and scars.
untouchable, unknowable,
even to herself.
bullet fractured reflection
shows twisted faces,
swollen with unshed tears,
possibilities stolen
by men she still feels,
men whose faces she cannot see.
only her own pained reflection
echoing back a hundred times.

One Hundred Faces

Inspired by You are Not Yourself, 1981, and
Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground)
1989, by Barbara Kruger

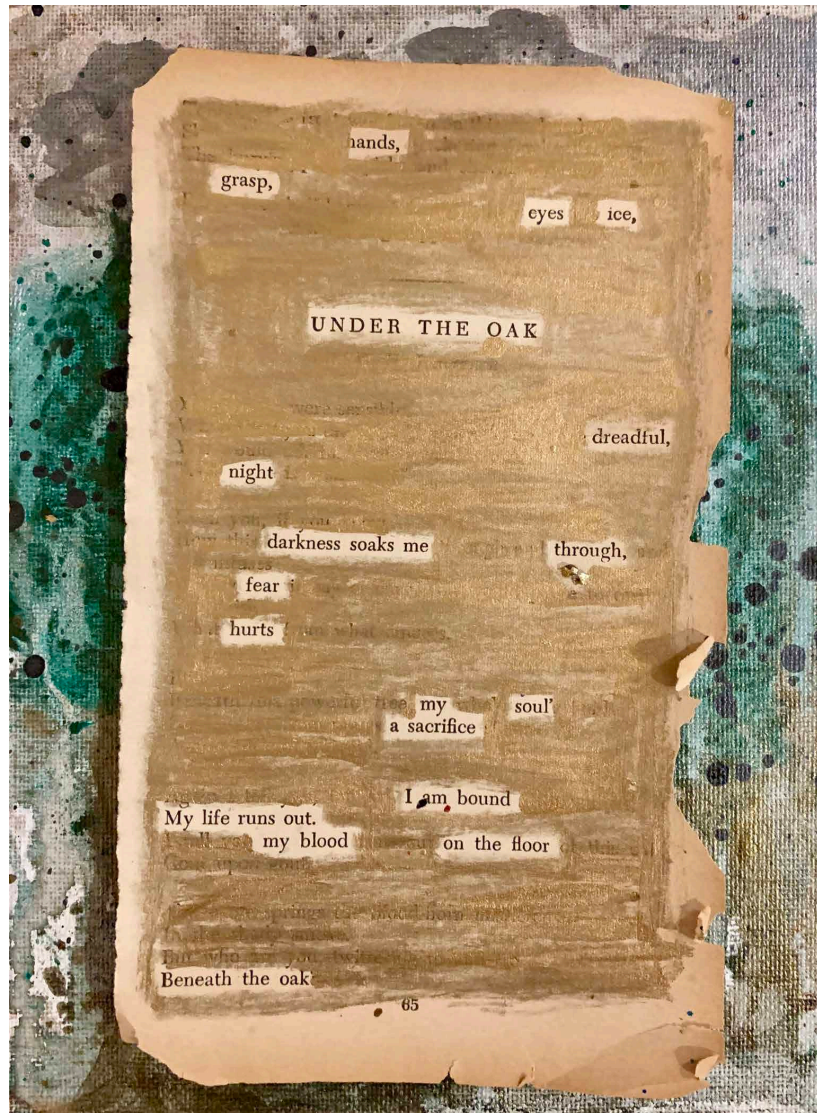
Shattered Self

by Danielle Hark



Under The Oak Tree

by Danielle Hark



Inner Child
by Danielle Hark



Danielle Hark is a writer/artist living with PTSD and bipolar. She founded the nonprofit Broken Light Collective that empowers people with mental illness using photography. Danielle lives in NJ with her husband and two daughters.

Poetry and art have given me a voice after not having one for many years due to sexual violence, including repressed sexual abuse that only came back in the last few years. Art helped me process as the memories emerged, and other instances of sexual violence. I think it is important to share our stories so others who are struggling can feel less alone. This work can also inform partners and others as to what it can be like to experience sexual violence and the aftermath. It can be hard for family to understand. This work humanizes survivors when our culture works against that.

Body Unbound

by A. R. Bekenstein

In the days after I was sexually assaulted, I tried to smother the incident with sweatshirts and starvation, hoping to somehow make my body disappear. I felt afraid of taking up space, and the only way I knew how to reclaim my body was through restriction. So I hid behind collarbones and ribcages, confining my existence to a thigh gap and the number of calories I was eating each day. My body became a canvas to reflect my inner fragility and pain. But as I continued to shrink, I began to realize my coping mechanism was only hurting me. I hardly functioned in school, my health suffered, and I spent too much of my life in and out of hospitals and treatment centers.

During the weeks following the assault I would've described myself as broken. But I'm not broken, and I never was; I'm healing. It's been three years of growth. Three years of appointments with therapists and dietitians and psychiatrists. Three years of learning and relearning how to live again. I no longer crumble at the sound of compliments, wishing to shrink and fold and fade. I no longer base my worth on my physicality; I am too big to confine my existence to this body.

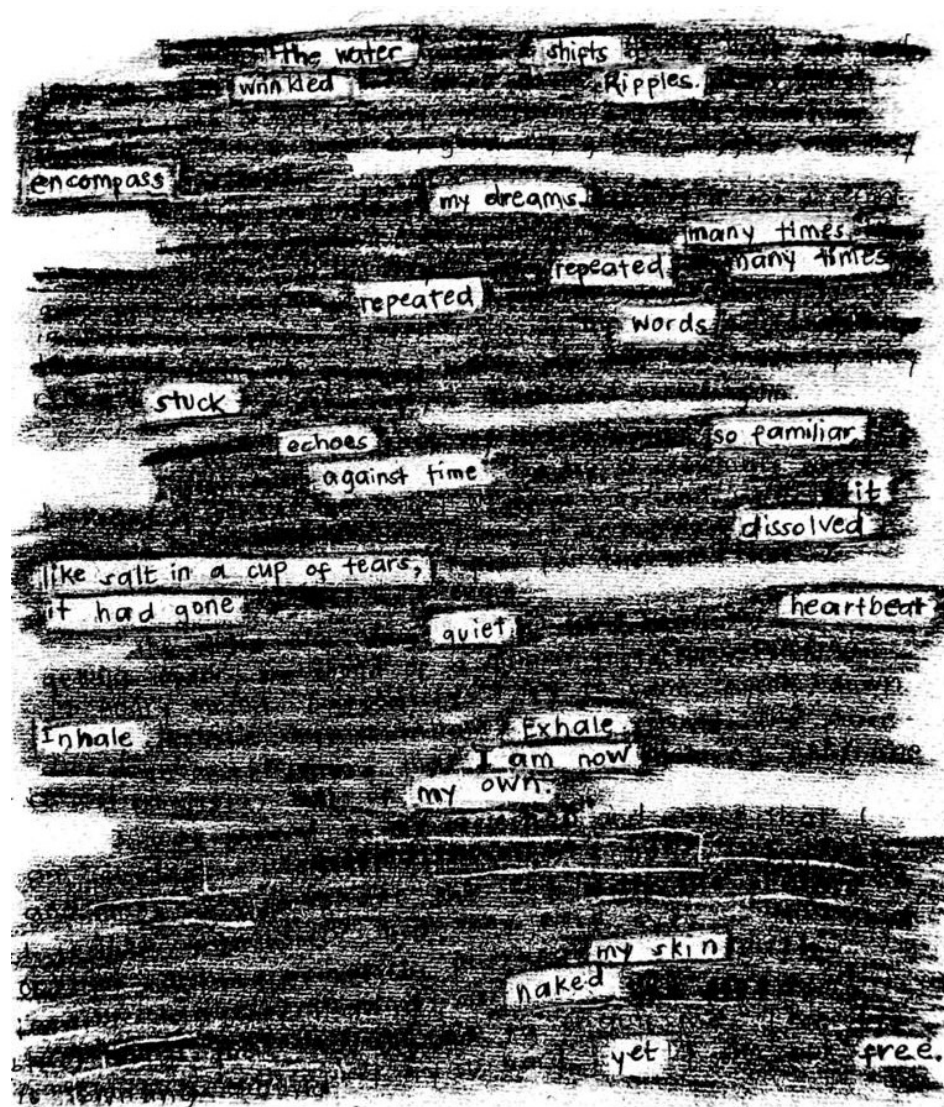
My body is not a cage. My body is a tool for creating, a vehicle for my intelligence, a means for giving back. My body lets me dive and crochet and do the things I love. My body lets me read poetry and novels and appreciate the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Phillip Larkin. My body lets me speak new languages and learn about court cases and research the etymology of pasta shapes. My body lets me volunteer with organizations I care about. My body lets me help other people.

Overcoming my anorexia has been incredibly challenging and hasn't been all rainbows and confetti, but the mental and physical progress I've made has predominated the struggles. Recovery has expanded and enriched my life. Today I value myself and my contributions to the world and I know my worth. I'm no longer addicted to isolation and self-destruction nor obsessed with smallness because my life is bigger than my body. Why change my body when I can change the world?

A. R. Bekenstein is an undergraduate student at Wesleyan University planning to major in French studies. She writes to encourage hope and aspires to embody the color yellow.

Emerge

by Marela Aryan Balagot



Emerge

Marela Aryan Balagot is an English Literature major at the University of the Philippines - Diliman. You can currently find her stumbling through life with her dog, Nimbus.

Man's World

by Chelsea Bunn

The energy shifted and I became
very uncomfortable

My body

went into high alert

How do I get out

of the room as fast as possible

I said no

lot of ways
a lot of times

Did this shit happen
every day

He was so big

This gatekeeper
who could anoint or destroy me

I was nobody
I was a kid
It wouldn't stop
I couldn't speak
I could no longer move

—was powerless under his weight

I just froze
I didn't know what to do

He said something
about having bought his daughter
a mirror for her birthday

Maybe I didn't try hard enough I escaped five times

I'm sorry
I have to leave
I'll never be that girl

I got quiet
I deserved not to tell anyone
I hope it's over now

It felt like both

a threat
and a reassurance

Whichever road you choose
you're still broken

Finally I just gave up

found an unlocked door

and left

Chelsea Bunn is the author of *Forgiveness* (Finishing Line Press, 2019). She holds an MFA in Poetry from Hunter College, and serves as Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Navajo Technical University.

Swimming Lesson

by anonymous

Flipped a coin, I'm lying in your sheets
Dark ocean blue, you're teaching me how to swim
You say *it's normal to be scared*
tell me why there's no window,
tell me why I want my mother,
she knows I can't breathe
underwater
Draining blood, draining feelings
bits coming up through the sink, overflowing
Shut the door, make sure to lock it
Waves crash, smoldering caresses toppling me
You're teaching me how to swim, losing patience
and I can't feel my skin

Swimming Lesson

Anonymous *intentionally has no bio listed.*

Things That Are Heavy

by Jay Audrey

I'm ripping the sheets off my bed and I feel possessed by it. I haven't felt possessed in a long time. The mattress buckles and pulls like a Spanish bull. It is cheap and it folds over itself, longing to give up. It is desperate to release the tension from its corners but the sheets won't let go. The harder I pull, the tighter the elastic becomes and the more impossible it is to rip the sheets away.

But I need to throw the sheets into the ocean so I take a shallow sweaty breath. My bedroom air is ripe with the stink of desperation even with the windows open. January is spilling inside. A handful of the sheet holds my hand, sucks up my sweat, yellows in my palm. The sheets are pink. I think I will replace them with gray.

Methodically, reverently, wondering if this is a kind of prayer, I reach my fingers under the corner of the mattress, easing the fitted elastic away until it finally exhales and goes limp. My sheets are an animal at the end of a fight. If they started bleeding, I wouldn't be surprised.

I wrap the fitted sheet over itself, around the loose sheet, around the throw blanket with its black tassels, around the two pillows, and around the comforter. All inside-out, it looks like the pork dumplings he bought for us last night, pinched at the edges and containing a hot wet secret.

And then I get mad at myself because I didn't want to think about last night. I just want to get rid of the sheets. The anger splinters through my skin because now I'm mad at myself for being mad at myself. Everyone tells me I'm not supposed to be mad at myself. I'm not supposed to feel guilty. I'm supposed to "be kind for myself" and "hold space for myself."

So I tie the anger up into the sheets, too, bundle all of it together and hold it under my arm and on my hip like an empty laundry basket or maybe a screaming toddler. I grab my car keys off my dresser and go downstairs. Before going into the garage, I shove my feet into the sandals I keep by the door for when I need to go buy Tylenol late at night or when he used to call and I would run to him. There will be no more of that.

All I can hear as I slide into the car is the ocean, sixty miles away and biting against the rocky coast. I put the sheets gingerly in the passenger's seat because that's what they are and my mom calls as I'm turning the key to start the engine.

I press the phone into my ear. Whenever mom calls, she asks what I'm doing. Not how I'm doing, like most concerned mothers do. What. And I always tell her because I know she feels isolated now that I live alone. I didn't tell her what had just happened when she called last night because that's not what I was doing. It had already been done and he was already gone, so what was there to say?

But today I say, "I'm going to drive down to the beach."

And she says, like I've announced I'm adopting triplets or moving to the Middle East, "Why on earth would you want to do that? It's January and-"

I hang up the phone because I can't answer that prickly little why, not yet, and I let my phone fall out of my hand and out of the window and onto the concrete garage

floor. There is no clatter, just the flat drop. It'll be there when I get back. I imagine her calling and calling and getting my deadpan voicemail every time. I know I should feel guilty but everyone keeps telling me not to feel guilty so I feel nothing instead and peel out of the garage.

I wonder absently as I turn jerking corners through town if I should strap the sheets in, buckle around their waist and tighten the strap like they're my child. But that feels cruel, somehow, deceptive, somehow. To fasten them in safety and then throw them to the sea. Even more cruel and deceptive to think of them as a child in the first place. They are not a child. They are complicit, an agonized bystander smeared with traces of my foundation and sweat.

The drive is an hour but it feels like a split second, like how sleep and sex feel too long and too short all at once depending on when you let yourself think about it. I'm crawling through town and speeding down the highway in the same instant. Hummingbird wings beat in slow motion and clouds whiz past in the sky. He is inside of me and then he is gone.

And then I'm on the beach with the sheets, a part of the beach not open in January, a part of the beach with no lifeguards and no life and no guardedness. The pebbles that stretch from the water to the parking lot are white and rough, bleached by the sun and a few thousand years from being smoothed by the calm sea. Larger rocks knife out of the shore like smoking chimneys, fog rolling off of them and spilling out. Winter mornings turn the usually idyllic landscape into the planes of a foreign planet.

The water is a strange transparent blue like a stained glass window. As I walk closer to the ocean's edge, I can see through the rising and falling waves to the larger rocks underneath. Or maybe it's my imagination projecting all those afternoons when dad would take me here and I would perch like Ariel on the rocks that jutted up from the waves. Sometimes I don't know if I'm imagining things or if they're real. Last night was real. It happened. That's the only thing I've ever been sure of.

The sheets begin to weigh down my arms. Sometimes sheets are spun from things that are heavy instead of cotton.

Metal, maybe, or stone or porcelain or memory. The sheets are a fat full moon pulling down the stars. I could see the moon out the window last night, facing it. I could see my white round face reflecting just beneath.

I reach the shore. I kick off my sandals, leave them spread apart like legs, and step into the sea. The water can't be much warmer than freezing but I let it surround my feet regardless. My arms are bare and the wind has sharp nails that dig into them. For a fleeting second, I imagine his hands in the wind. Stark white and strong and long fingernails. Then they're gone.

I wade out, knowing that I can't take too long but knowing that it has to last long enough to mean something. When I woke up this morning all wrapped up in the sheets I'm now carrying, I thought maybe I should throw them into the lake that sits at the center of town, that I was conceived on the shores of, that I was born five blocks from, that I first kissed him by. The lake is always cool, placid, submissive, like me, somewhere between gray and brown and green all at once like the bruise he left on

the place where my waist becomes hip. But I'm not sure the lake in all its multitudes is big enough to contain all the rape he left in my sheets. I'm not sure I'm big enough to hold all the rape he left inside me either. I hope the ocean is big enough because it's all I have left now and my feet are starting to turn purple in it.

I drop the sheets into the water. They aren't heavy enough to sink. Last night should weigh them down but for some reason it doesn't. I fold down onto to my knees and the pebbles bear into them and I push the sheets into the salt water until they're saturated and soaking and willing to drift away from me. The package I had rolled them into comes apart at the top, birthing out its pieces in C-section release. The top sheet, followed slowly by the fitted sheet, wriggle like eels toward the deep. The comforter -- weighted with tiny beads that were supposed to make me feel like I was safe in the womb or something -- sinks and slinks to the bottom and away. The pillows are bloated bodies floating to the surface. I wonder what I am, here in the water with them.

Jay Audrey is a contemporary young adult novelist pursuing publication of her first novel while trying not to be too exhausted about the state of the world.

Naked

by AB Mambo

I never knew I was naked
Until that harmattan morning
In late February
When I was six
And bathing in the courtyard
While you leaned out of the second-story window
Fresh chewing stick between your teeth
Drool hanging mid-air like a silvery cobweb in the sun
That night you groped me
When Papa and Mama went dancing
Stuck your cigarette-tinged tongue in my mouth
Forced my hand down unzipped trousers
Stifled screams of "Uncle" growing bitter between clenched, chattering teeth
And two decades later
I can't buy enough clothes
Or wear enough layers
To cover my body or obscure the memory of the day
I found out I was naked

Naked

Abam Mambo's work examines voice, taboo and womanhood in a cross-cultural context. The Cameroonian-born American lawyer has been published in *Farafina*, *African Roar* and *Kalahari Review*. She lives in Singapore.

Butchered

by Gina Tron

The courtroom
The grand jury
and 2 men that were outlined.
The \$16.99 salad afterwards,
across the street
from the courthouse.

Soggy tomatoes,
my friend talking about her bf
as I stared at the wall,
through the wall.

Not enough evidence.

That's what they said.

12 of them were there,
but

I know it was probably the men.

I didn't talk about it for months.

But if I did:

Fuck you for telling me to wear a wig.

Because blondes' bodies are for the taking.

Brunettes, only sometimes.

Gina Tron is the author of three books. Her poems have been published in *Green Mountains Review*, *Tupelo Press* and others and she's written for magazines like *VICE* and *Politico*.

Erasure

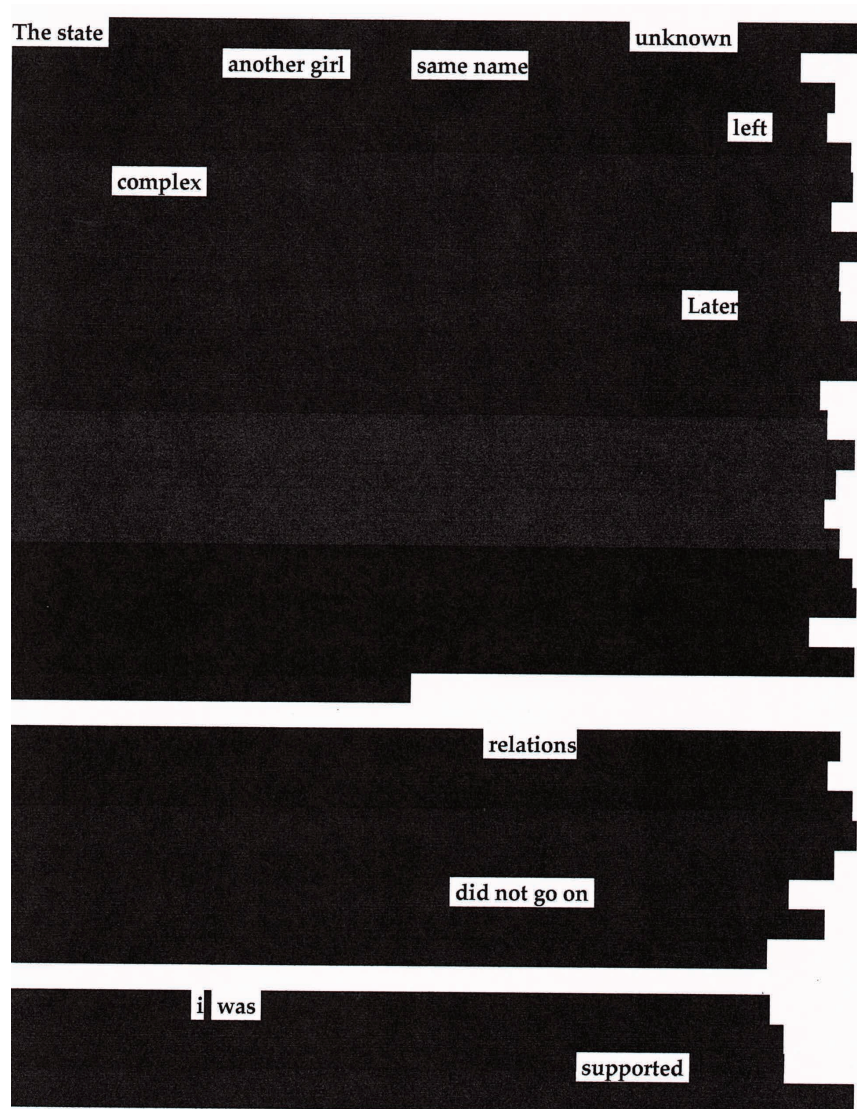
The Victims
by Dipak Shaw



Dipak Shaw was born in Kolkata in 1992, and got a BFA degree from Government College of Art and Craft Calcutta, 2015. Shaw has been working on Indian mythology for the last four years and has a great interest to innovate experimental work with their thoughts and paintings.

The State

by S. Miller



not

i

could not be

he

mentioned

i

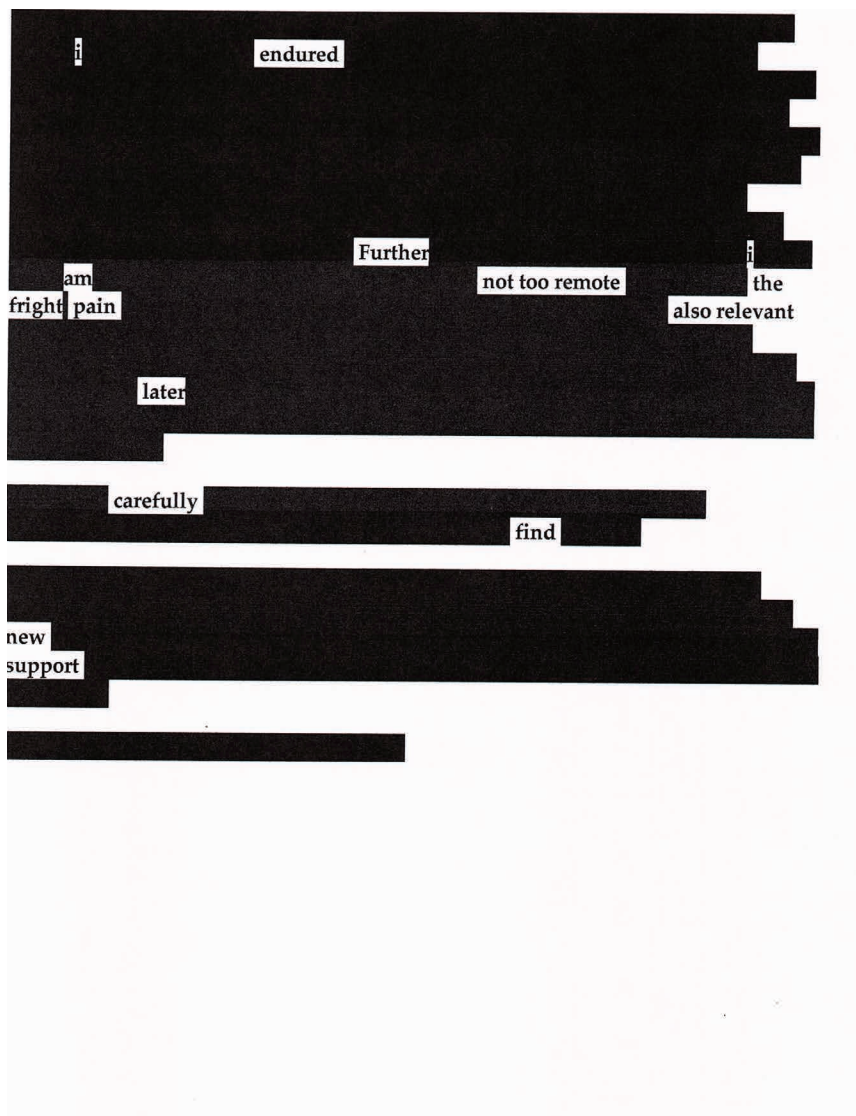
was

too remote

not properly linked up

I felt

proper



S. Miller *intentionally has no bio listed.*

The Everything

by J. Askew

It was ten years before I saved Silas Goodwin.

Two in the morning, I heard a shuffle in the corridor and my door sliding open. The captain stumbled in, grasping at the walls to steady himself, a bottle of liquor clutched in his fist. He sat on the edge of my bed, cool sheets wrinkling under his uneven weight. I had given him the code to my door for emergencies. I trusted him. He was the captain of our proud science ship, guiding us into new territories and new races. I asked him what was wrong. He didn't talk, at least not in complete sentences. He pushed himself on top of me. I said no. I said no at least thirty times that night. I screamed it when he began to sodomise me.

The room was dark, lit only by the tank of extinct Mars fish I kept as part of my work. It created a sinister red hue that dusted everything; my pale skin, my mousy hair, his forcing hands. The room became hotter and hotter as his assault continued. It stifled my lungs. I thought I saw steam rising from the bed sheets at one point, but through the tears that choked my eyes, I'm sure it was a mirage. I caught

a moment during his assault and rushed to the bathroom. Before I could lock the door, he was there, turning me around and attempting to rape me again. He left four bruises on me that night, but ten years of guilt and confusion.

After, he passed out on the floor of my cabin, his war medals lining his shoulder, and his bare ass facing the sky. I didn't sleep that night, with him just inches from me. Instead, I let my mind drift across all the things I had yet to do with my life. I wanted to lead a first contact team and write a paper of the tribes of Planet GJ 357. I was going to perform at the ship's open mic night and show my colleagues how my fingers danced on the fret of a violin. I was even planning to take a vacation with the girls from my training squad. But none of this happened. I was too broken to work.

In the morning, when he came to, I told him that what he did to me was disgusting. He pretended not to remember. I transferred to a new star ship soon after and didn't take my violin. I didn't report my rape. He was the captain. I didn't want to ruin his career.

I watched him over the years, succeeding at everything he did, rising higher in the ranks. He became a commander of an entire fleet. Many times, I thought of writing him a letter, telling him he didn't own me, he didn't own my fear or my mind. But the thing is, I'm sure he never once thought of me. I obsessed over what he had done, taking more of me away. It was a domino effect. It tumbled over and over in my mind knocking each part of me out of line. It changed everything.

I found Silas Goodwin in a transparent tank submerged under the ice of Neptune. He had been taken there and left isolated from the universe. Nobody knew why. I shone a torch in his face as I swam in the ice-cold depths, deeper than any unaided body could ever survive, apart from him. He cringed from the light, stopping it with his long fingers. I treaded water as I gazed at the man. His black hair was long, floating like a halo above his head, joining with a scruffy beard at his chin. He had thick eyebrows too, framing a cautious face. When he finally opened his eyes in the deep water, his pupils dilated, and he seemed surprised to have been found.

I gestured to him, signalling the strange man to come closer to the glass that imprisoned him. He floated over to me, naked, still confused, eyes wide like a child seeing a puppy for the first time. He put his hand to the glass. He was human, or at least appeared human. No true human could survive the years he did in the ice-cold depths of that planet. I put my hand back to his. We had learned that mimicry was the best way to initiate first contact with an alien species. He looked at my gloved hand for some time. I pointed towards the surface, communicating I was here to free him. He nodded and never took his eyes off mine, even though he had to look through several layers of glass to see them.

He watched my fingers as I delicately used our advanced tools to break through the walls of his prison. When I was almost through, I gestured to him to back away. He did so immediately, like an obedient dog. I clicked a button and part of his glass tank melted away. It bubbled the water around us, but before it cleared, a hand reached to mine and clasped my wrist.

The man, Silas, used my arm as a brace as he pulled himself free into the

outside waters. He didn't let go of me, not when I signalled to him to grab the pulley that would bring us to safety, not until we were well above the surface.

When we were back on the ship, hovering elegantly above the icy surface, he shivered violently. I called to the science team, glued to the computers surrounding the trap door entrance to the ship's hull. They rushed over, covering Silas with silver blankets. He was in shock.

The team thrust fingers and palms across my vision as they took off my equipment. When my head was finally free, I flicked my hair from the place it fell under my dive suit. Silas Goodwin looked at me properly and the confusion left his eyes. He pushed the blankets from his body and tried to stand. The arms of the team pushed him back down. I told them to stop. I told them to let him settle, but they were thrust across the room by an unknown force emitting from Silas's hands.

"Stop!" I cried as they came back to him with restraints, but they didn't listen. He was in another prison of metal by the end of the rescue mission.

It was a few days till they let me see him again. They had sedated the hell out of him and wanted to be sure it was safe.

"It's you," he said as I walked into the metal room where he was held. His voice was as cold as the water he came from.

"What happened?" I asked him. "I panicked, and now they know."

"Know what?" I edged closer, lowering my shoulders in a sympathetic way. "What I can do."

"They say you haven't spoken yet." I pulled up a chair to face his, but I wasn't bound to mine.

"I'm speaking now, aren't I?"

"I guess you are..." I crossed my legs. The movement did not catch his eyes. "Silas. I'm Silas Goodwin."

"Silas. I'm Aspen."

"Aspen, are you my handler?"

I narrowed my eyes as if it would allow me to see more of the man. "No. I'm a scientist. I study new life forms."

"I'm not new."

"You're new to me." I paused and registered his glare. They had cut his hair, shaved his face. His eyes were clearer to me now. "How long were you down there?"

"I don't know."

"Why were you down there?"

"For a reason I don't agree with." He raised his chin slightly as if disgusted by the reason.

"Tell me then."

"Aspen, is that your first or last name?"

"First. Tell me."

"I will, but not yet. I'm not feeling myself." His head dropped slightly but he caught it and propped it back up.

"Because of the drugs they've got you on?"

"And the cords that bind me, yet again." He never took his eyes off mine, even though I knew he wanted to look at my hair.

"Usually I observe new species. Watch them, give them different stimuli."

"I'm happy just talking, Aspen."

"Well, I need to do my job, Silas."

"Then tell them this... they can't know the truth, but I think I can help you too."

I let my facial expressions fall to confusion. He noticed but carried on. "I don't remember why I was down there, or how I got there. All I know is that I lived every painful second of the freezing waters."

"That's a lie then, is it?"

"Yes. It's our lie." I raised one eyebrow in response to the strange man. "I can help you," he repeated. "There's an itch in your mind. It's burrowing in there, ripping out the

supports of who you are, making your mind cave in on itself.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied. I turned to leave.

“I can kill him for you.” My head bolted back to Silas, unsure of what I heard, but his face stayed still. “I can make him go away forever. You never need to think of him again. Just say the word. You saved me, now let me save you.”

“I... don’t know what you’re talking about, Silas,” I repeated. I left him. I didn’t need to hear anymore. He knew what was inside my mind. He was special.

But that night I couldn’t sleep, and I think he knew that. I went back to him after hours of changing sleeping positions and counting sheep.

“It’s me,” I whispered through the dim blue. I could see his profile silhouetted by the dim safety lights that lined nearly every room onboard.

He was awake. “I thought you were coming back tomorrow?”

“Can’t sleep.”

“Friend, stay here awhile.” His voice was tender but strained, like he wanted to soothe me but needed it more himself.

I raised a finger to him. He was strapped to a bed now, instead of a chair. “When was your last dose?”

“Six hours ago. Don’t dose me again. I can’t stand it.”

“Ok. I trust you.” I didn’t know why.

“The last man you trusted didn’t turn out to be all that nice.”

“How do you know about that? Tell me. I have time.”

“Take off these shackles. I want to see you as we talk.” I did as he said. He wasn’t threatening. In fact, I pitied him. I wanted to help him, protect him from the world.

As I unbound him, he sat up and I swore, for a second, he leaned in to smell my hair. I backed away and sat in front of

him, knees up to my chin, arms wrapped around them.

"Talk," I said.

"You came back. Do you want that man gone? The one who raped you?"

I was shocked at his bluntness. "Just tell me how you know."

"Every time your stomach flutters with the anxiety he has given you, I can feel it. Like you're making waves in the water and they're rippling out to me. But we can make that go away. We can make him go away forever."

"Are you dangerous?"

"Only to people I don't like." "And you like me?"

"You came down from the surface of that desolate planet and took me away from all the pain I have ever known, and you did it with the gentlest touch I have ever seen. I like you, and you could have been a captain yourself by now."

I laughed. "I don't think so."

"Ten years of shame, disgust, guilt. What could your brain have done without that?"

He was right, although I wasn't sure how. "I hate him."

"I know. You hate him enough to wish him dead. I've seen that. I can help with that."

"How?"

"I can do things, more than you've seen. I don't die. I don't bleed. I can be anywhere in my mind, anywhere in the universe, and still impact the physical world."

"Why, Silas? Why can you do this?"

"The same reason I was put under Neptune's sea. Science gave me my gifts. I was taken from my people, taken as a teenager and raised with another race. They have scientists too, but these ones don't stop when things go wrong. They kept going with me, kept going until they made me too powerful. They discovered

that humans were easier to work with than their own tough bodies. Humans were more open to change, even on a genetic level.” He was actually telling me the truth. “I broke free, but it wasn’t for long. They tricked me, put me under, then put me under the sea, like I was a lab rat they were done with.”

I reached out to his hand offering my comfort. He grasped me, bringing me closer to him, desperate for my touch. He stroked my palm with his thumb as we talked.

“I don’t want to go back to them.”

“You won’t. You’re human. You’re ours.”

“You made the pain go away. Let me do that for you. Let me help. Let me get rid of that man.”

If I’m honest, I craved the peace he promised. I wanted my old captain far from my mind. I wanted to be strong enough to feel power over him like he had felt over me all those years ago. I wanted to know that he had paid for what he had done.

“Silas, do it. Get rid of him.”

Silas’s eyes lit up, excited. Was he blood thirsty? “Aspen, are you sure? You need to be sure because we can’t go back after this. Everything will change.”

“I’m sure.” I trusted him. I don’t know why, but it was like another version of me was watching, telling me that he was good.

He closed his eyes and leaned towards me. I leaned into him too. He placed his forehead on mine. I closed my eyes, and half a second later the captain was gone.

In his place was the Everything. An infinity of hearts and souls and minds burst into my brain, all at once. Every single living thing in existence resonated inside my mind like the long notes of my violin. There was more than any number could describe. I saw the past, and the present, and the future, all framed and guided by the infinite number of lifeforms in the universe. I saw strange seeds turn into even stranger trees, and flocks of scaled birds that blocked sunrises within a blink of an eye. I saw the opposite of nothing. I saw all that existed, and all that was yet to exist. But shining stronger than all those souls was him, Silas.

Lit by the green of a million new plants, he gestured to me like I was the one in his tank. I floated forward, and the Everything went away as quickly as it had appeared.

"He's gone now," Silas whispered in the dark of his prison. I searched my mind. The captain was still there, but he wasn't, not really. My brain was so full of the Everything, the captain lost his starring role in my mind and I never thought of him again. He was dead to me, and what took his place was infinite life.

J. Askew writes stories that show the strength of those with alternate needs in a sci-fi or horror setting. Her debut novel, *Green Again*, is in editing and explores mental health at the end of the world.

We Are Born

by Katherine Page

with the shells of a robin's egg
under our skin,
prepared for a world of expected tidiness,
tiptoe waiting for the crackcrunch
bursting light blue
calcium carbonate through our own flesh,
paper slivers from the inside out,
obsessive thoughts misfire, miss fire, *miss, fire*
a bullet through your brain,
Legos on the floor in the barefoot dark,
with words of our mothers, their own self hate
swallowed blades, threats of fear of actual violence,
whatever dopamine baths,
bile shame burning
holes in the esophagus, enamel on the teeth,
with the boy who calls dyke
in the middle school hallway
because he saw it in a movie or heard it from his dad,
with the thousand times we cut ourselves, ten thousand small
slashes to release the shells,
the itch beneath, so easy to splinter
like newspaper or butter or a piece of crabgrass in the backyard or milkweed leaves
or a sand-filled balloon or a cloud in the chest
with such deceiving air,
lifetimes of sorries and silence and swallowing the no
because we learned
it didn't matter anyway.

I passed a lifeguard swim test by treading water for 10 minutes
and we laughed because we've been treading water

our whole lives,
scared of the suction
from the grate on the bottom,
jolted by reflections in the one-way windows
hiding judges and spies.

Seven weeks after my rape I got a period;
something ended, something started.
I am reminded each month of that first after,
a kinder kind of blood, and I hear
the eggshells dissolve inside of me,
my fists around an empty case, fireworks of gold. I explode
we explode
into feathers and wings,
helicopter seeds from maple trees
twirling down to eager earth, sprouting
roots that nestle veins around bones,
emerge from pools dripping and glistening and shouting
ownership of the body, this body
my body
shouting
present and messy and thunder,
shouting I you we
are a goddamned survivor.

Katherine Page is a writer and elementary school teacher from Chicago, currently living in Leadville, Colorado. She has had writing published in Open Minds Quarterly, Bluestem Magazine, and Chanter Literary Magazine.

Closets

by Bridgid Taylor

When memories are shards of shattered kaleidoscopes
that play with the hippocampus of your brain
like a funhouse mirror
the fragments of the memories you're sure of
embed themselves into the skin of your fingers
For me there are blurred edges of grey surrounding memory
Like when you look into those telescopes that you put a quarter in at tourist destinations
The center is fairly clear but the periphery is blotted out
What is crisp for me and know to be true
Is the utter blackness that enveloped me in that closet
as unseen garments swayed above my head with my movements
My tiny fingers fumbled over my zippers
Buttons
Layers which protected me until discarded
I'm to keep everything on except my underwear
Those are the rules of the game
That damn
underwear
As I emerge from my coffin-

or was it a cocoon?
I see the flash of bright red cotton with large white polk-a- dots
I feel every step toward the bed as my stomach folds in on itself
Knowing what is coming
Rumpled white bedding and billowing curtains
My eyes take them in
So clearly
And then the muddied fringe of recollection returns
like the foggy ring some people get around their iris as they age
Did I remove my underwear before or after I climbed into the bed?
Contrary memories surf on the wave of recall
Perhaps both are true?
Depending on how many times this game took place
It seemed ritual
I do remember very clearly the sense of shame and guilt I felt as I removed my underwear
My last barrier
I was playing the game
I was four year old
Vomit winked a threat at my esophagus

Closets

as adult hands took over
I remember saying
That I would tell my mom
And then it stopped
The suffocating touch of large grey hands stopped
For now
Then
Just me
Looking up at a Tang container on the table
way above my head
the sickness and shame I felt still takes over
anytime I see Tang
I can't drink the stuff
Closets are funny things
They keep our secrets
For some they hold us hostage
I still can't go into one without my heart pounding
At 40 I emerged from a closet of my own making
Or to be fair

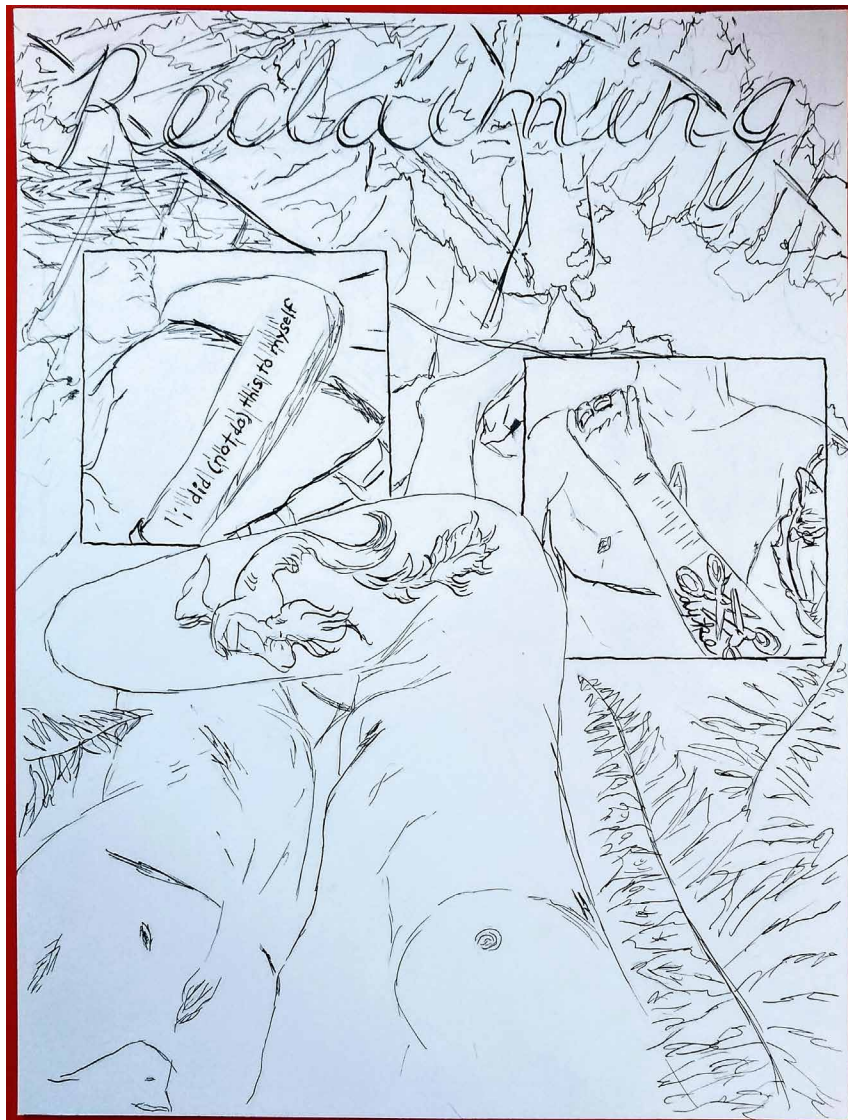
I didn't create it alone
Or maybe at all
I just inhabited it
I did not grow up Catholic
but the church's arm is long-
as long as my grandmother's rosary that I once put in my mouth
to pull out bead by bead
It was not supposed to be sacrilegious
I just wanted to see if it would fit
That arm had far reach through bloodline
And sacrament and penance and faith were all entangled
My understanding was that
boys could be gay
but girls
well to be a gay girl
there were rules for that
The 1980's told me that lesbians wanted to be men
and wear leather
and had slicked back hair

Closets

I didn't want to be a man or wear leather
I loved my favorite yellow lace dress
So much that once my mom was tossing out old yellow curtains
and I cried because I thought they were my dress
At 40 I went on my first date with a woman
I made love to a woman
I could breathe and fly and stand where I stood and not feel like I was lying
Christian reformers of homosexuality would say
that my lesbianism stems from things that happened to me in childhood
dirty things
and that my only redemption is to be cleansed by Jesus
But
I always dreamt of women
Their curves lulled me to sleep
My queerness is not my abuse
My abuse is not my queerness
They just both started in a closet

Bridgid grew up in the Chicago neighborhoods of Uptown on the northside and Gage Park on the southside. Her writing is heavily influenced by her social justice upbringing in neighborhoods fighting against gentrification and violence. Bridgid is a poet, playwright, teacher, and mother. Her play, "Along With" was produced in two runs in community theatres. Bridgid strives to use her theatre and education background as a vehicle for change, particularly in regard to navigating her own childhood abuse and in working with children dealing with trauma and learning challenges. As a queer woman, Bridgid is committed to building bridges in the LGBTQIA community to unify us in our shared social justice struggles, especially pertaining to trans rights and racial equality. "

Reclaiming
by Aeryne James



Aeryne James draws and writes in Aakland, CA., where ze lives with zir spouse and three rescue dogs. Ze uses zir art as a self-healing modality to explore memory, identity, and trauma, and to connect with other survivors healing from sexual abuse.

**When I Hear
The Name Andy**

by Rachel A. Clark

When I Hear the Name Andy
I think of the boy,
who wondered the clouds in Algebra,
wore worn t-shirts with cargo pants,
and welded lustrous dreams.
The same boy,
who saw me alone at Homecoming,
and squeaked a nervous,
“may I have this dance?”
He clung to my hips
in a timid caress
as he sweat
silently stuttering.

I don't think of the man,
who drank himself into a scaly stranger.
That spontaneous summer night,
when the trees peered softly. Until
his venomous eyes sank sharp
through the hiss of bonfire flame.
The same man,
who prodded my chest,
in the isolated loft upstairs
of his parents' house,
with potent fingers, as he
seized my hips, with
sustained bruises.
That stranger
nervelessly strangled,
sweated, grunted.

A mouse lay silent.

That man I saw with lifeless eyes,
as the roller coaster straps constricted me,
the ride they call The Viper.
So, when I hear the name Andy,
I try,
try to only think of the boy who,
who once,
once swayed with me on a Ferris wheel.

Rachel Clark *lives along the countryside of Western New York with her family. Her interests include spending time in nature, writing poetry and doing tarot readings.*

A Fraction of Myself

by Rachael Chatham

I took him back, if you can believe it. Even after waking up in the ICU with the most excruciating headache of my twenty-year-old life and no real explanation for how I'd gotten there. Even after I'd spent three painful days in the ICU; five days total in the hospital after a heated argument turned into a complete loss of consciousness. Three consultations with three specialists preempted my discharge. I was told by all of them of my good fortune to have survived the fall. I had suffered a head trauma. I had a fractured skull and broken nose but time would heal my bodily injuries. My forehead was badly bruised, my eyes were swollen and purple.

My memory of what had happened that night was profoundly impaired. The result of intoxication and a second-story fall taking its toll on my cerebral cortex. I recalled chasing after him as he stormed out of my apartment and leaning over the balcony, calling out to him, but I couldn't find him. Where was he? He wasn't downstairs. Was he behind me? Had he pushed me, or hit me, causing me to fall forward over the railing? These details still remain a mystery to me. He'd never been physically aggressive with me before, but he was

certainly emotionally abusive, and even though I didn't realize that at the time, I knew I didn't trust him.

Even now, twenty years later, I struggle to accept that I'll never really know what exactly had happened on the night of my accident.

Over several weeks I grew physically stronger and my bruises lightened from purple to shades of yellow and finally back to my typical fair skinned complexion. Emotionally, though, I was still in the thick of my impairment. The weakness in my system, a result of the insidious chipping away of my confidence and any semblance of self I'd once had, had proliferated. And I took him back.

Brett and I had been dating around six months by this time. Our relationship consisted mostly of flirting with one another at the restaurant where we both worked, shooting pool and snorting cocaine at local bars and having sex. Brett was tall, dark and handsome. He fit my criteria of being street-smart, rough around the edges, and charismatic. After a few months of dating he was also belittling and highly critical

of me, dismissive and offensive to both myself and others. But he also provided companionship, access to a 'feel good' drug he had introduced me to, and, by then, he offered a familiarity that I couldn't seem to shake.

I went back to waitressing in the same restaurant where Brett and I were colleagues, and we resumed our relationship.

...

A few months after our reconciliation Brett got me pregnant. I recall seeing that the condom had broken after we'd finished having sex. He'd known it had broken but his desire to get-off outweighed any concern he had for me, or the repercussions of this decision. He was unfazed by my expressed concern about an unplanned pregnancy. My health, my desires, and my future goals eluded his thought process when he felt the condom break. He had a singular agenda.

Only recently did I become aware his choosing to deceive me in that way is considered a form of sexual assault.

"Stealththing" is non-consensual removal of, or damaging of a condom when a partner has consented to only condom-protected sex. Brett minimized the implications of his inaction, choosing instead to jocularly focus on the "beautiful babies we'd make" if he had indeed gotten me pregnant.

I always knew I wanted to be a mother -- that was no question. I also knew how lost I was at this time of my life. In the midst of my undergraduate studies in college, I had deferred choosing a major well into my third year as I didn't feel equipped to commit to a lifelong career. The prospect of making the wrong decision was paralyzing. Smoking pot and cigarettes daily and drinking and snorting cocaine on the weekends was my lifestyle. I was entrenched in avoidant behavior.

I could barely keep myself safe and fed, let alone be responsible for another human life. My diet consisted of bags of cool ranch Doritos purchased from the gas station next to my apartment after I rolled out of bed at noon. They served as both breakfast and lunch. I was basically struggling in every facet of my life and yet on this one matter I was clear. I didn't want

to be tied to Brett for the rest of my life and I wasn't ready to be the kind of mother I longed to be. Some fraction of myself — a very quiet and very small part of me, knew better than to choose that fate.

Brett said he'd pay half for the abortion, but he didn't. He dropped me off and picked me up in my car from the clinic, never setting foot in the building. When I awoke from my rest after we got back to my apartment we snorted lines on my coffee table. I was a mess.

I don't know how I finally did it, but I managed to pry my fingers from the stiff grip that I'd had on Brett shortly thereafter. After clutching on in desperation for nearly a year I let him go.

...

Now on the cusp of my forty-second birthday, with the benefit of hindsight and introspection, I realize that there were factors that led me to choose Brett as a mate. I had sought out several boyfriends prior to Brett who engaged in risky behaviors, though none were quite as detrimental to my health as he was.

Cheaters and liars; men who devalued and betrayed me had been my dating resume by the time that I met Brett. He rounded out the list by also being a thief, stealing from me by taking all of the money out of my wallet while I was being hospitalized, fighting for my life.

This relationship served as a turning point for me. Within a year of its end, I decided on psychology as a major and I entered into my first healthy relationship. Never again did I use illicit drugs or seek comfort in the arms of a predator.

I have worked hard to achieve and maintain mental, emotional and physical health; to reclaim my psyche. After seeking out my own healing through psychotherapy and education I have been able to cultivate compassion for the young woman in me who chose to engage in unhealthy relationships.

The value of these events is that they have informed me in ways that only lived experience can. They have made me more empathic and compassionate, a better ally and stronger advocate for victims of abuse, and they have added conviction

to my belief in a woman's right to choose. In my work now as a psychotherapist, I aim to educate others about the often overlooked dangers of emotional abuse and hold space for women and men who are submerged in these types of toxic relationships so that they, too, can find their way back to wholeness.

Rachael Chatham is a psychotherapist in Asheville, NC. Her latest work will be published in *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature* next year.

Healing And Hookups

by C. H.

To me, sexual boundary violations feel like the time that I was 16, driving with my mom and brother, and our car spun out. We had made it halfway home in a snowstorm and, before we could realize what was happening, the car was headed straight into a ditch on the side of the road. We could feel the car tremble as others sped by, I felt a tremendous weight on my chest and my heart in my ears. We lost control of the car and I was stuck in a ditch, panicking.

For me, healing from sexual trauma has been about getting control back. At the beginning, this meant one of two things – choosing yes or choosing no. I chose yes, although looking back this may have been because I was afraid that my “no” wouldn’t be respected. It’s counterintuitive – more sex to cope with and heal from violent sex. The first time I had sex after my assault, it was with someone I wasn’t serious about, but had slept with before. A fling. Sex lost its sanctity and became a tool – I didn’t save my “first time” after assault for my long-distance partner at the time. It felt better to take control of my body and sexuality on my terms, outside of the boundaries of a high school relationship.

My fuck buddy was there as I began to learn what my boundaries are, how to listen to my body’s cues. “Do you want to stop?” he asked. I paused, thought for a moment, and we stopped having sex. We lay in bed naked and talked. One nice thing about having sex with someone you barely know is that you have near-endless topics for conversation. “It’s like we don’t see each other for weeks or months at a time, then we have sex and act like we’re in love for a few hours,” he said. It was safe to be vulnerable with me, and joke about how our pillow talk was overly intimate because I had a boyfriend. It’s not like this was anything besides sex.

Hypersexuality is actually a common reaction to sexual assault. It’s a way for survivors to feel in control of their bodies. To cope with the loss of agency that accompanies assault, I found ways to regain.

I learned who I could and couldn’t have reparative sex with. My hookup from orientation was a good person to have sex with. I was lucky that we were able to have actual conversations beyond sex. Once, he spent the night and all we did was lay

there. In pajamas. Maybe we kissed once or twice. I invited him into my space, I made it clear that I wasn't going to have sex, and we slept. He was such a romantic – what he needed was a girlfriend, not me.

My neighbor from home, who also happened to go to my university, was not a good pick. Things got too messy. All I wanted was to sleep in a room that wasn't mine, and it turned into sex. I felt like I was in the car that was spinning out again. It was worse because I trusted him, had confided in him after my initial assault. The momentum felt too great for me to stop the sex from coming, so I stopped feeling. I said yes. While we were home for winter break, after months of silence and confusion, he texted me to hang out. I suggested that we get coffee, but our meeting moved from coffee as friends to – It's freezing outside – his living room. Then, my sister is home, to his room. His arm crept around my waist and before I knew it we were kissing, he was on top of me or I was on top of him. I only remember the desperate look in his eyes. On the way to my boyfriend's house afterwards, I cried, not because I had cheated but because I felt like I hadn't had a choice.

A couple weeks later, I saw him again, on my terms. We slept together, it was bad sex, but I felt better afterwards. We haven't really talked since.

The spring after my assault, newly single, I started seeing someone gentle. His hair was long and his hands were light. He saw me, I began to see myself. One night, after a cold walk across the city to his apartment, my body had a flashback during sex. We stopped and lay there. He stroked my back and, when I asked what he was thinking, he said, "I'm trying to make you feel safe." Our time together was slow and gentle. He liked to just look at me. Our time together happened as spring was moving into summer. I never had to question whether he was interested in me or valued my time.

I've grown to love the intimacy that comes with a "fling." I'm amused by the reactions that I get when, after sex, I walk around naked. I like choosing to share my sexuality with others, probably due in part to the fact that it's been taken for granted before. I like setting boundaries, taking and giving control, negotiating sexual encounters in a healthy way. I slide easily

into space that's usually reserved for lovers. That's where my healing happens: feeling each other's bodies, their hands in my hair, holding hands as naked bodies touch. Sometimes I wonder if kissing a hookup goodbye is like counting coins before you throw them into a fountain – too much care to give to something fleeting.

There is power to be found in a hookup. It's an opportunity to ask for what I want, give what I want, and listen to myself and my partner(s). In my healing-sexcapades, I've gotten good at telling the other person what about our interactions was (or wasn't) good for me. Cutting off contact when I want and need to.

Different sexual partners have given me opportunities to say yes and no, to establish my boundaries. I've become better at listening to my body, better at knowing what sex means to me and to what degree I can and want to separate it from romantic attachment. The people who I've been with since my assault aren't the cause of my growth, but they were witnesses.

Sex has turned from a weapon into a form of self-expression. I'm no longer a

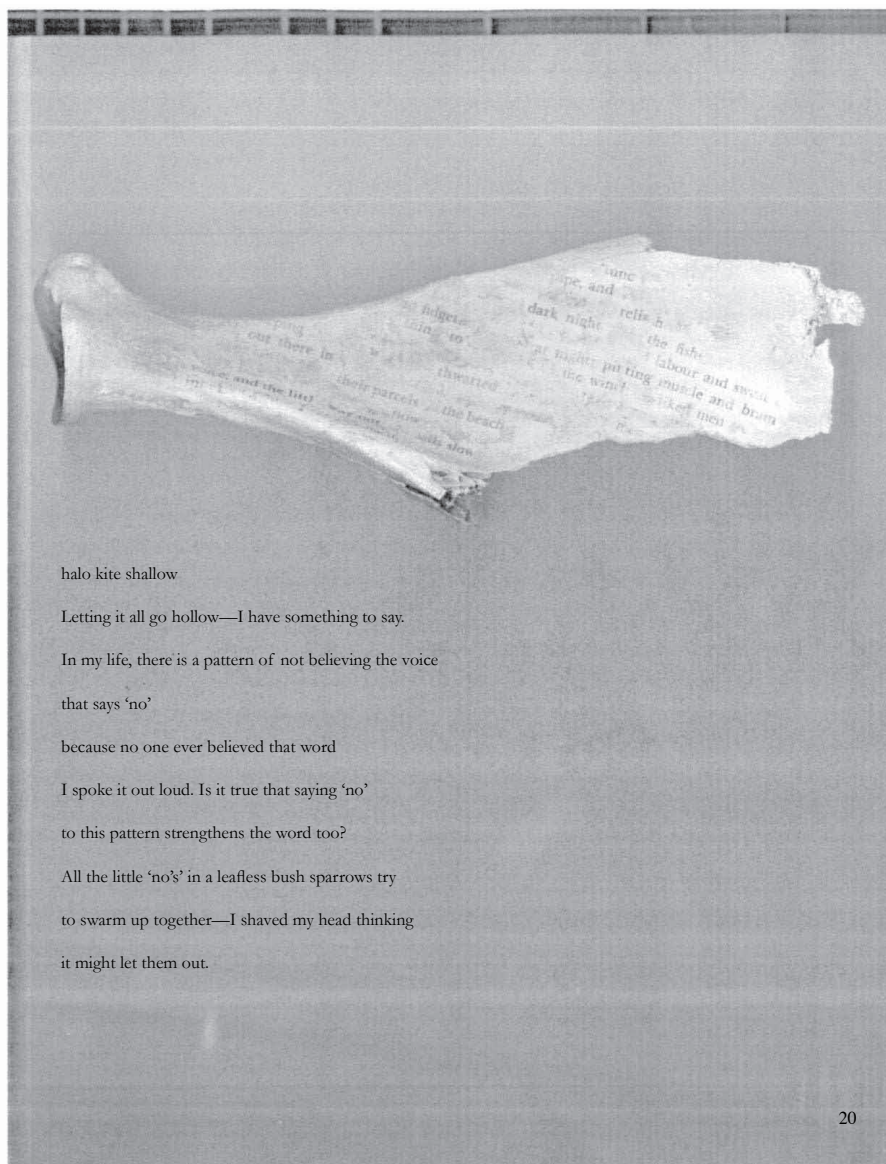
passive party in decisions concerning my body. I own and direct my own experiences. Both hands on the steering wheel, I am my sexuality.

Erasure

C.H. *intentionally has no bio listed.*

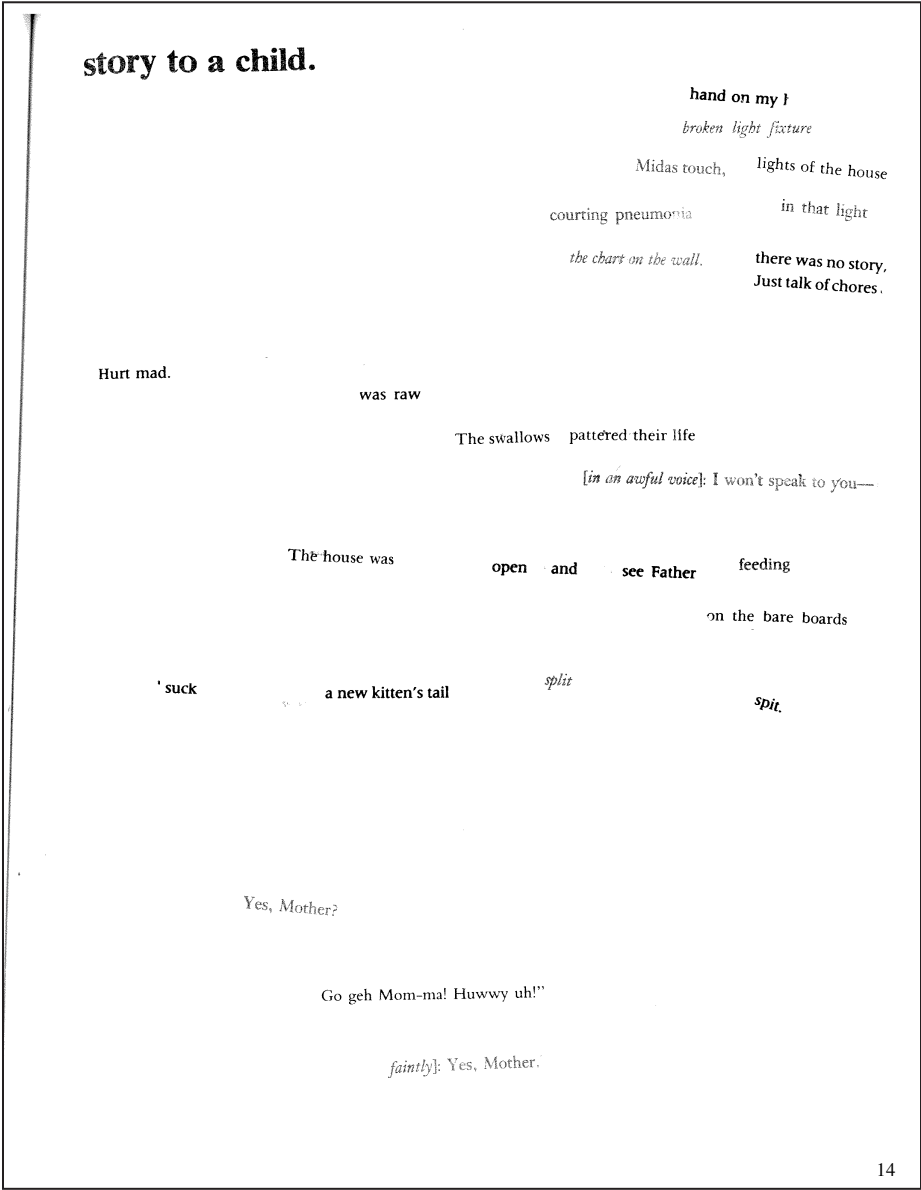
Halo Kite Shallow

by S. Schaefer



halo kite shallow
Letting it all go hollow—I have something to say.
In my life, there is a pattern of not believing the voice
that says ‘no’
because no one ever believed that word
I spoke it out loud. Is it true that saying ‘no’
to this pattern strengthens the word too?
All the little ‘no’s’ in a leafless bush sparrows try
to swarm up together—I shaved my head thinking
it might let them out.

Story To A Child
by S. Schaefer



The Door At The End Of The Hall

by S. Schaefer

will." Nancy said with a smile. But I

The door at the end of the hall opened and

134
honey in the yellow light

He carves quietly,

warm

and on top there

-all carved out of one piece of sugar-

Did it have a name,

the small knife he uses

which he held like an infant,

it wasn't an easy thing

the colors all

links of chain

fabrications so as to protect

my memory now. the ambulance heard it. benefited me to let

the child.

/ that Moth /

stove is like a friend.

standing where I stood.that day is very clear.

laugh me out of the

mica windows in the door-

little

god, if you are still there, make him tell Who and What

Father can tell us where

The Nancy Drew Files

by S. Schaefer

THE NANCY DREW FILES

Pinned under the knife was a page ripped from a magazine. Someone had printed over it with a heavy black marker. The large capital letters read: Drop your investigation before someone gets hurt!

messages of love to a girl on the wing feathers

Think! Make yourself come up with the answer.

The clouds were tinged with it.

box of letters, thrown open.

to not believe—how strong they are and how
they'll still let me climb their legs like trees.

Go into them and come back out.'

bright stairways

I want to read until my eyes close,

S. Schaefer, MFA in Poetry from Columbia College Chicago as a Follett Fellow. Experiences: Co-editor of *Black Tongue Review*, Writer in Residence at Brushcreek Foundation for the Arts, Resident at The Poetry Farm. A Pushcart Prize winner, her work appears in *TYPO*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Science-Based Vulnerability: Scientists and Poets #RESIST*.

Power Of The Storm

by D. A. Simantis

The feeling of standing on the shore, watching a hurricane come towards you, knowing it will
rip you limb from limb-

Standing on the edge of a tall building, toes dangling, waiting for the wind to push you over-

The powder of times half forgotten entering your bloodstream and laying siege on your
mind once again-

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

These things are not normal -

You will not find them in fairy tales or fables -

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] these things are you -

And who cannot be [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] terrified?" -

[REDACTED] you -

You, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the first to hug me, skin pressed against skin and scars against scars -

You, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Yes, [REDACTED] you were different -

Your heart was like the beating of a war drum, [REDACTED]

Your lips danced around your words like the kicking of a hanged man, leaving ropeburns across my eardrums and a sense of victory wrapped around my throat -

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I mourn for [REDACTED] you [REDACTED]

Because everything else seems so [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Beautiful [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] in comparison

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I am not one to be afraid of the power of the storm and hide away in stone buildings -
There is a storm in me as well, waiting to collide -

And [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I'm [REDACTED] terrified [REDACTED]

Beauty

by D. A. Simantis

I have survived it all
Physical abuse
Five mental disorders
Four deaths in one year, many more in my experience
And a lifetime full of loneliness
I am resilient
I am a survivor
I can exist without anyone by my side, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
I don't need you to survive

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a mess:

[REDACTED]

I found myself looking for you
even when I was in love with someone else
[REDACTED] without any hope

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I think about you [REDACTED] with [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] regret [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I [REDACTED] promise [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

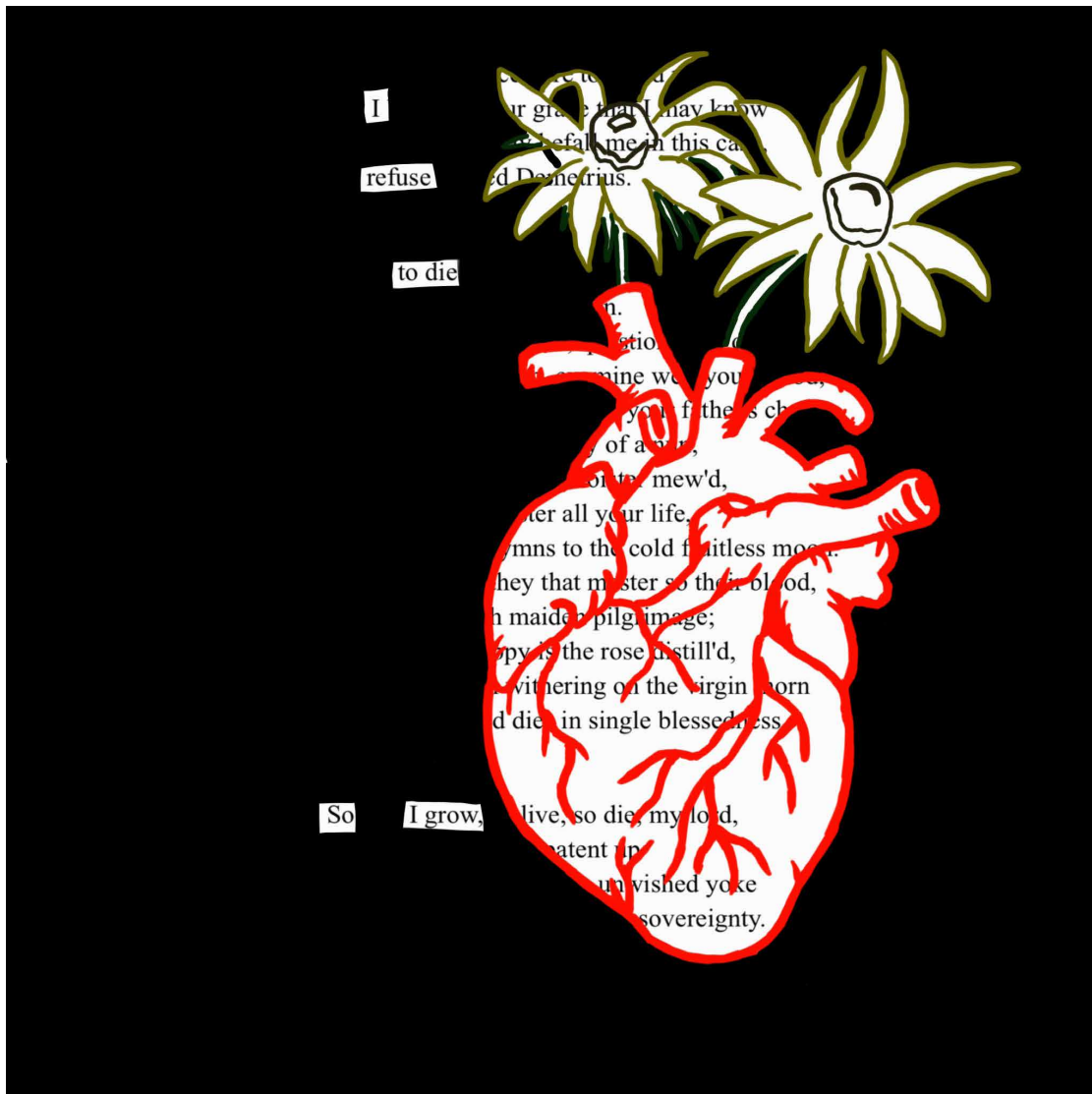
Suffice to say, I think of you

These are poems I wrote for my abuser when we were still in a relationship. Looking back, I can see how many unhealthy sentiments were permeated throughout my writing during this time, and, through blacking out my former justifications for these unhealthy feelings, I can expose them for what they truly are.

D.A. Simantis's ultimate goal is to always write about what is truly important. His debut novel, *Mostly Melancholy*, is now available on Amazon.

Unvanquished

by Jorie Rao



Jorie Rao is an English Literature professor with a passion for reading and writing. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and Composition Theory and won the Toni Libro Award for Excellence in Writing.

Call For Submissions

Awakened Voices

Find our visual and literary art calls at Submittable:

<https://theawakeningsfoundation.submittable.com/submit>

The mission of the Awakenings is to Make Visible the artistic expression of survivors of sexual violence. Awakenings is home to a multi-media art gallery featuring the artistic expressions of rape and sexual abuse survivors. By showcasing stories of survival, we are helping survivors find peace while simultaneously challenging the cultural taboos that prevent an honest discussion of sexual violence. We shine a light on the truth. We don't mince words. We are up front and dead center about the prevalence of rape and sexual abuse in our culture. We are here to tell the truth and share the stories of the survivors brave enough to tell them. Submissions: If you are an artist, writer, musician, or any other type of creative truth-teller, you can submit examples of your work online for inclusion in our exhibits, our magazine, and our events.

Awakenings

A certified 501-c3 organization

Awakenings is the parent organization of Awakened Voices. Awakenings exists to make visible the artistic expression of survivors of sexual violence. By showcasing stories of survival, we are helping survivors find peace while simultaneously challenging the cultural taboos that prevent an honest discussion of sexual violence.

Awakenings is a certified 501-c3 organization with a small art gallery space in Chicago, IL. We hold a wide variety of year-round programming that includes rotating art exhibits, monthly art making nights, musical concerts, dance and theater performances, poetry readings and open mic nights, live painting events, and much more. We also publish an online literary magazine twice a year, and hold writing workshops to help survivors heal through literary arts. We partner with rape crisis centers, counselors, art therapists, local activists, and like-minded nonprofits to collaborate on events and share our audiences. We are growing rapidly and want to spread the word, expand our community, and widen the resources we are able to offer survivors.

We shine a light on the truth. We are upfront and dead center about the prevalence of rape and sexual abuse in our culture. We are here to tell the truth and share the stories of the survivors who want tell them.

The logo for Awakenings is enclosed in a thin black rectangular border. The word "AWAKENINGS" is written in a large, teal, sans-serif font. Below it, the phrase "see. hear. heal." is written in a smaller, lowercase, sans-serif font. The words are color-coded: "see." is pink, "hear." is green, and "heal." is purple.

AWAKENINGS
see. hear. heal.

Special Thanks to:

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