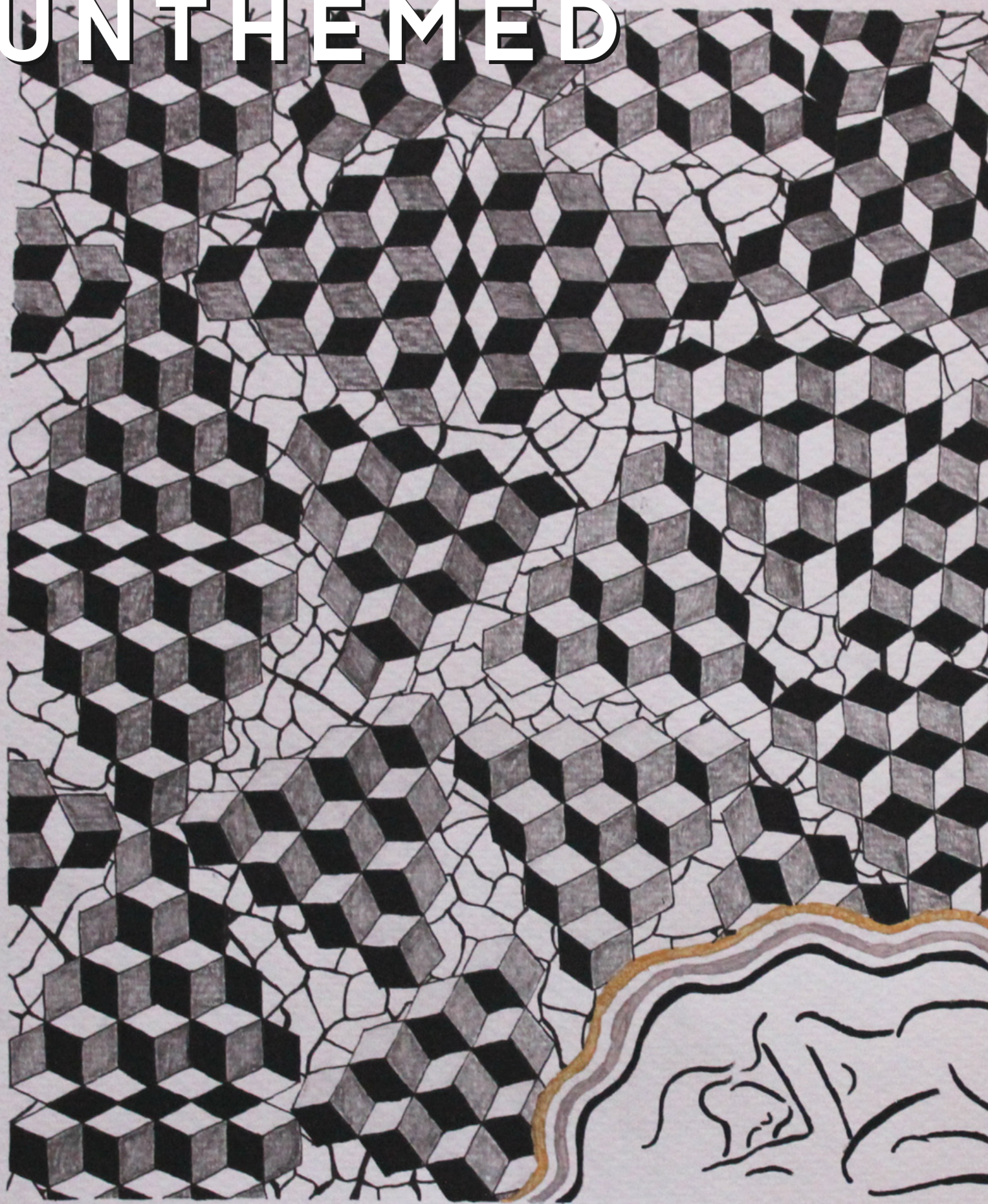


UNTHEMED

AWAKENED VOICES | ISSUE 12 | SPRING 2021



Dreaming of Breathing

Caroline Andreea Zgortea
Ink, pencil, markers, 37,5 cm x 27,5 cm

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INTRODUCTION

AN EDITORIAL NOTE

Reading can be a complete experience or it can be the ignition for our own creative engine to explore healing.

This is the first unthemed issue of *Awakened Voices*. Survivors, allies, and advocates guide the issue through what they have decided to share. They mold the conversation our community is and should be having around surviving sexual violence. As so many have said before, survivors are not a monolith, neither is healing, neither is writing. This gathering of poetry, stories, and art doesn't include every possible voice or expression, yet here are powerful, lyrical, beautiful expressions of the conversation we want to build around survivorship and healing.

Survivors are not alone. As readers, creators, and artists, we are not alone. Within these pieces, writers craft stories of finding healing connections with other survivors, with indirect survivors, and with nature. Kuntz's poem weaves the connection between siblings with snapdragons, and Nyamwa's story sculpts a complex friendship through the passage of time. Green's multimedia piece links us together in the

repetition "I was...I was...I was." and Bartholt's poem reaches out to us in the spaces between the repetition "it...I say, 'it'...it". In two ekphrastic pieces, Goldstein and Rittenhouse bring their own creation alongside a sculpture and a canvas as artistic companions in healing.

May you find a part of your own experience or new hope within these pages that hold flowers, gentleness, regret, pain, uncertainty, mess, angels, breaths. May you find beauty and release in the creative expression here as we join in this healing literary community.

The Editorial Team is Jeri Frederickson, *Creative Director*, Megan Otto, *Literary Associate*, Liv Meyer, *Literary Intern*, and Gabrielle Ghaderi, *Literary Intern*.

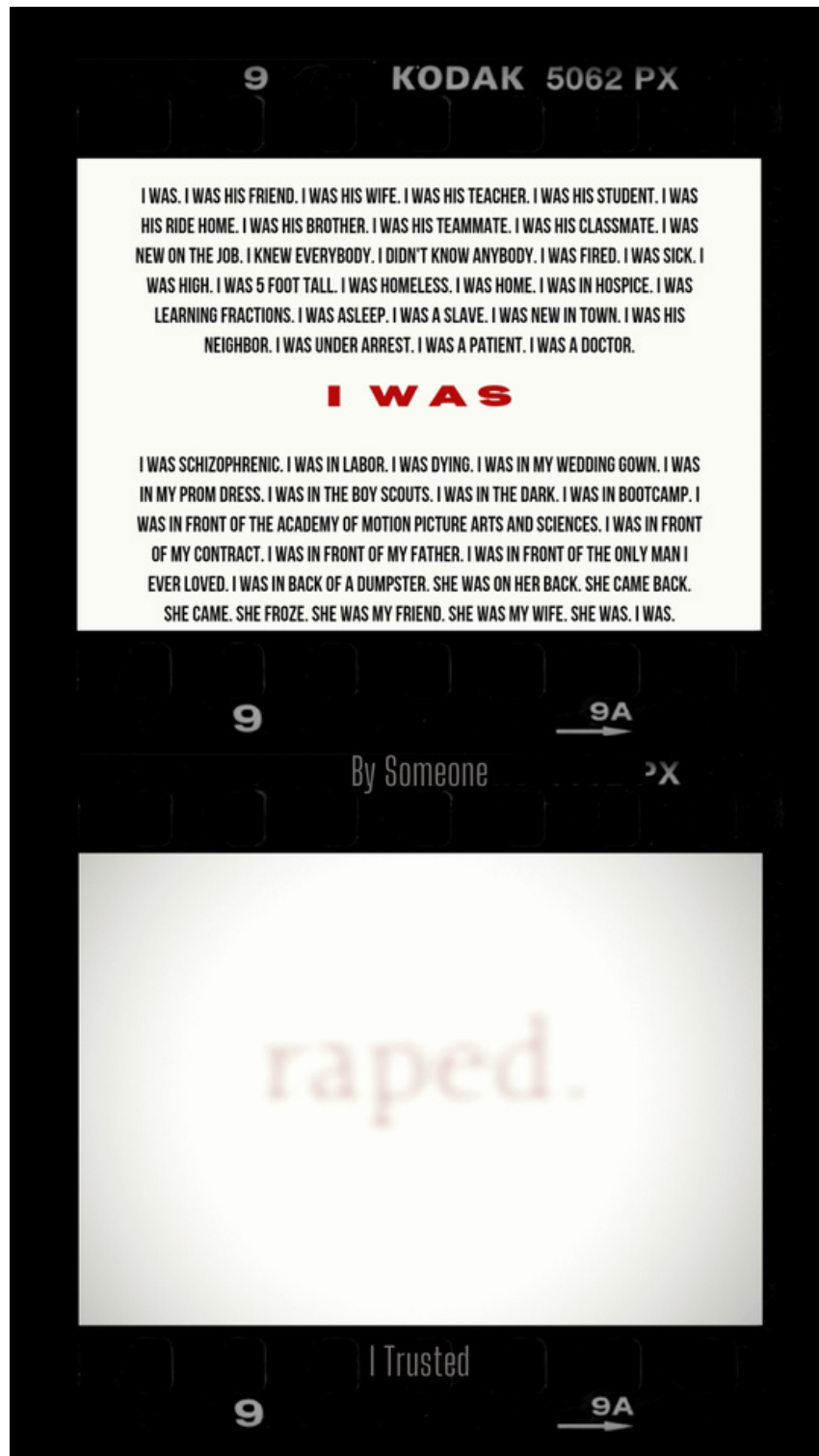
CONTENT WARNING

The following writing contains material including one or more of the following: Rape, Incest, Sexual Assault, Abuse, Child Abuse, Self-Injurious Behavior, Suicide, Blood, Racism, Classism, Sexism.

The intention behind this content warning is to prepare a reader so they feel safe, even if safety doesn't always feel comfortable, to take in this writing. May it also serve as a reminder that a reader can pause and take a break from reading. The stories will be here, waiting for the reader to return.

Morning

Jae Green
Multimedia, digital



Jae Green is a writer, second generation artist, mother and cancer survivor originally from the South side of Chicago. Her poetry can be found in anthologies such as Tia Chucha's *Open Fist*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Hand Over Hand Magazine*, *Antirhinnium*, and *Voices from the Heartland*. She has performed at The Green Mill, Randolph Street Gallery, Uncommon Ground, The Chicago Cultural Center, WomanMade Gallery, The Chicago Poetry Fest, Metro, Around the Coyote, and The Catherine Edelman Gallery. She recently participated in *BodyPassages*, a year-long collaboration between the Chicago Danztheatre Ensemble and The Chicago Poetry Center. She made it to the \$16,000 question on "Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?" before she gave her final answer.

Bad Anagram*Elisa Albo*

Vile. Kick a letter back, it's evil. Haven't known
much, don't like the word. Like Anna Frank and

my father's good-nature genes, despite much, I stick
with people as basically good. The evil I have known

was not like my uncle's, who survived Auschwitz,
or my parents', who fled Castro. I knew the 18-year-old

president of the religious youth group my father
insisted I join after my bat mitzvah—a transition to

womanhood all right, at thirteen. And again, at sixteen
my cousin's 25-year-old husband of one year. Both

used their hands, soft slow words. I did nothing, not
what they wanted, and said nothing, silenced by shock,

years of guilt, when it came to me at 30 years of age,
with lucid fury: Not my fault. Not my fault. It was not

my fault. Not. My fault. What it must have felt like
if there had been an edenic garden, an early apple,

a bite, the sheer clarity or pain of searing knowledge.
Evil. Shift a letter. Lift a veil. Pull it back. Live, live.

Elisa Albo was born in Havana. She is a contributing editor of *Grabbed: Poets and Writers on Sexual Harassment, Empowerment, and Healing*. Her poetry chapbook *Passage to America* recalls her family immigrant story and *Each Day More* is a collection of elegies. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *Alimentum*, *Bomb Magazine*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *International Literary Quarterly*, *MiPoesias*, *The Notre Dame Review*, *Poetry East*, and *SWWIM Every Day*, and in anthologies such as *Two-Countries: U.S. Daughters and Sons of Immigrant Parents* and *Vinegar and Char*. A professor of English and ESL at Broward College, she lives with her husband and daughters in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

dissipate*Elaine M.*

i live in a city of millions and still i am surrounded by Him.

i am on the subway and there is a toddler who is running up and down the car. his mother seems amused but out of courtesy to the rest of us, she says, "michael! come sit." the boy must be no older than four and his mother is shorter than i; there is no threat, and yet the name itself brings a wave of nausea over me.

i am walking from the subway station to work and when i pass a group of teenagers outside their high school. i do not look at them and they do not look at me but out of the corner of my eye, all of them seem to wear His face. it has been five years and now i am an adult and still i am scared, still i walk faster.

i take an order for a small caramel latte and banana bread and when i ask for his name, he says micah. it is not His name but it is close enough, and the single syllable makes my hand shake when i write it in sharpie on the cup. i take my break early because the coffeeshop air is too thick to breathe.

i see a man standing at His height. i see a man wearing a flannel over a hoodie in the same way He did. i see a man with black hair, cropped close on the sides and longer on top, and my heart accelerates because He styled His in the same way.

one of my neighbors is smoking outside the bodega and i catch a whiff of His cologne among the cigarette smoke and my stomach turns and i dip inside. i buy a can of pringles and carton of eggs and when i step back outside, he is gone and He is gone.

that night after I eat, I brush my teeth and I wash my face and when I look in the mirror, there is no face but my own looking back at me. still I am surrounded by him, but it has been five years without him, and I have lived every one of them on My own.

Elaine is a California native currently working towards a degree in urban studies. She is a strong proponent of harm reduction and sex workers' rights. This is her first publication.

Tautology

Danielle Frankel Choi

Congratulations,

they say, always working to hide the question mark—that telling upward inflection on the last syllable.

Thank you,

you reply, because it is expected. The right response to ease the tension and make it okay.

You try to make it okay.

The things people say are a ritual dance, laden with expectations, well-trodden paths through a bright forest of familiar assumptions. Stray too far off the path toward the truth and you will frighten others away. If you are already alone, you cannot afford that. So when someone asks,

How are you?

the answer is,

Fine.

When the old friend from high school, who knows you are unmarried, says—asks—

Congratulations

(?)

in the grocery store aisle, you do not explain. You stand between the canned beans and the diapers, looking away from the garish yellow price stickers on the shelves, and half-smile as you touch your belly and say,

Thank you.

When the gynecologist who inserted the failed IUD says,

Congratulations

(?)

instead of,

I'm sorry,

you do not laugh, even though you want to. You do not curse her. Stunned, you say,

Thank you

(?)

When that guy you thought was your friend, the best friend of that other guy you loved for a time, calls you,

my little wiggler,

as he fucks your anesthetized, beer-drowsy body, you do not say,

Stop.

You pretend to be asleep. It is easy because it is almost true. You close your eyes and try to make it true.

You always try to make it true when you thank them—the people who congratulate.

You put your hand on your swollen body that has shifted and morphed so suddenly into something unfamiliar. Inside you is something else, foreign to your being but connected. The only difference between a parasite and a pregnancy is how you feel about it.

You try to make it true.

You do not really succeed until you meet your daughter, abruptly, amid the noise and the blood and the potent cocktail of hormones surging through your veins. And you see that she is real, and she is yours and yours alone. You do not know why you made the decisions you did to get here, and you will never be able to explain. But when they say,

Congratulations,

finally, somehow, you respond,

Thank you.

And you yourself have made it true.

Congratulations.

Danielle Frankel Choi is a communications teacher and aspiring writer with an MA in Media Studies from the University of Southern California. She lives in Oregon with two spoiled cats, her partner, and her daughter, now eight years old.

Hope

Kelly Sargent
Charcoal and Pastels



Born a twin and adopted in Luxembourg, **Kelly Sargent** grew up in Europe and the US in a military family, and now resides in picturesque Vermont. Her first essay on child abuse, “A Deafening Silence,” was featured in *Green Mountains Review* as a teenager. She has authored an unpublished novella for preteens about sexual abuse and healing called *I Know How To Keep a Secret*, as well as a second fiction novel entitled *Misplaced Tears*. Kelly also has published works in *Twins* and *Reunions* magazines. Fluent in American Sign Language, she worked as an interpreter, and wrote for *SIGNews*, a national newspaper for the Deaf and HOH community. A mother of two, she currently enjoys writing children’s stories and poetry, creating mixed media art, and playing the piano and a pink ukulele for an audience of one.

Libel*Sarah McCartt-Jackson*

I cannot say the carpet was brown or shag or gritty
with boot-spent sand and crushed black ant bodies
because someone might know who I am talking about. Fine.
The carpet was Berber then. The mirrors weren't gold-veined,
they were oval-shaped, frames fat with wicker. It wasn't a trailer.
It was an apartment in a very large town made up of not-failures
and small townships, each with their own Wal-mart. It wasn't nowhere
or the middle of nowhere. It was the middle of everywhere. The only bar
wasn't the only bar, and its name wasn't something like Short Leaves.
But I can say it had neon lights that glowed into his eyes, his eyes
returning the glow like liquor. I can say there was an owl because
I made it up. Or because it lived in my heart. Or because there really was
an owl, and someone really shot it. The carpet was Berber Sun-Kissed Tan,
the mirrors were glacier-lake, the story the same. And I am saying all of it I can.

Kentucky poet **Sarah McCartt-Jackson's** work has appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Journal of American Folklore*, *The Maine Review*, *Tidal Basin Review*, and others. She is the author of *Stonelight*, *Calf Canyon*, *Vein of Stone*, and *Children Born on the Wrong Side of the River*.

Exhale*Flora Block*

You sleep soundlessly while I lie awake, replaying the night over and over behind my eyes.

Breathe in. Hold it – 1... 2... 3... 4... Breathe out.

A single white pill promises tranquility. *Swallow.*

Our intertwined fingers pass through my mind like cumulonimbus.

I pull myself closer and wince at the sound of your thunder, press my eyelids together and push my head under the covers.

I catch myself: Jaw clenched. *Release.*

Your clouds dissipate. For a moment.

But I can't hide from you beneath the blankets forever.

Breathe in. Hold it – 1... 2... 3... 4... Breathe out.

Over a year later, and I remain poisoned by your presence. By your possession.

I might be comforted to know that your eyes burn with every thought of me; if I knew I was not the only one suffering.

But you sleep soundlessly.

Your eyes flutter to lucidity after hours of uninterrupted rapid movement, while mine remain plastered open, terrified that if I look inside my own skull, I'll find you waiting for me.

Your voice in my mind speaks their words.

You kissed him.

You walked home with him.

You could have done more.

"I don't go home with someone unless I want to have sex."

The image of our pressed palms burns my irises. Jaw clenched. *Release.*

I hear only you.

You didn't fight him.

"You don't really know what happened."

You could have done more.

I see only you.

You held his hand.

"That would never happen to me. I would fight back."

You could have done more.

I breathe you in. Hold it — 1... 2... 3... 4...

There is no exhale.

Fear and fury meld in my mind until their flavors are indistinguishable. Seasoned with guilt and wrapped delicately in silence, the meal you've prepared for me is rancid. Your venom infects my every cell and I swallow dutifully, tears rolling down my cheeks, heavy as hail.

Adorned with taper candles and burgundy cloth, you set the table for One.

Only I will be dining on your toxic creation.

You took a part of me that night. With poison coursing through my veins to find my heart-source, you reached inside and grasped greedily at the core of my being, ripping it from behind my walls and slipping me into your pocket with a wink.

I woke up the next morning feeling hollow.

Without gasping for a breath, you filled that space inside of me like a parasite; a piranha feeding off of my flesh.

My body, your home, no longer belonged to me.

A visitor, I tiptoe through myself, dodging spots of decay where your poison burned holes like a lit cigarette.

I stopped feeding you, thinking if I made myself smaller, you'd have no choice but to flee from my collapsing walls; with nothing more to nourish yourself, I hoped you'd see your way out. But you do not require my flesh for your survival. You just prefer the taste.

I thought, for a long time, about letting you die with me. I thought that if I were to jump or swallow, your homelessness might quiet you.
But I am your vacation home on the coast.
Your brownstone in the city stands tall and impenetrable.

Miles away, the piece of me that you took remains tucked in your top drawer.
You forgot about it for a while, but recently, searching for a pair of matching socks, you saw me lying there and smiled to yourself with nostalgia.

You thought of your home on the coast, and the summer you spent in the ocean.

You don't think of the girl you drowned there.

You hardly remember the look on her face as you pushed her beneath the surface: Eyes bulging out of her skull, arms flailing, mouth wide: gasping for air only to find herself immersed in the salt of her own tears.

Sonder evades you.

You've never thought about her family; whether she's closer with her mom or her dad.
Whether she sleeps with the windows open or prefers them closed.
What she sounds like when she sings or when she cries.
Where she had her first kiss.
What color she thinks of when she looks in the mirror.
You see only real estate.
Only your summer on the coast.

I spent months dreaming up scenarios that did not end with your possession of my body, your infiltration of my mind.

Scenarios where I am a better victim.
Or not a victim at all.

Every scenario I paint behind my eyes begins and ends with me.
Begins with my actions, ends with my inaction.

You, your face, your hands are a mere shadow in my memory, a voice between my temples.
You could have been anyone. But I am always me.
And it is always my fault.

My fault.
I could have done more.
I should have done more.

In sleeplessness, I rewrite my legacy:
I fight back. I find steadiness in my grip and pull myself from your grasp.
I go home early.
I stay late at the party.
I throw fists at your chest until you break.
I scream.
I say no.
I remember.

But my revisions remain one sided. Where I should be enraged, I am petrified. Where you stand,
I see only a silhouette. I rob you of your agency, and in the process, of your fault.

Your actions.
Your fault.

I catch myself in the center: *Release*.

From the rim of my memory, I rewrite your legacy.

In this version of January 27th, you do not lead me down the stairs away from my friends.

You do not kiss me.

You see me stumble and ask if I am okay.

If I ask you to leave, you ask if I am sure.

If I say yes, you say you are not.

You walk me back to my dorm building.

You make sure I get inside.

You walk away.

You go home early.

Or back to the party.

It doesn't matter.

I am safe.

You choose not to hurt me.

You choose.

You say no.

You walk away.

Your choice.

Your actions.

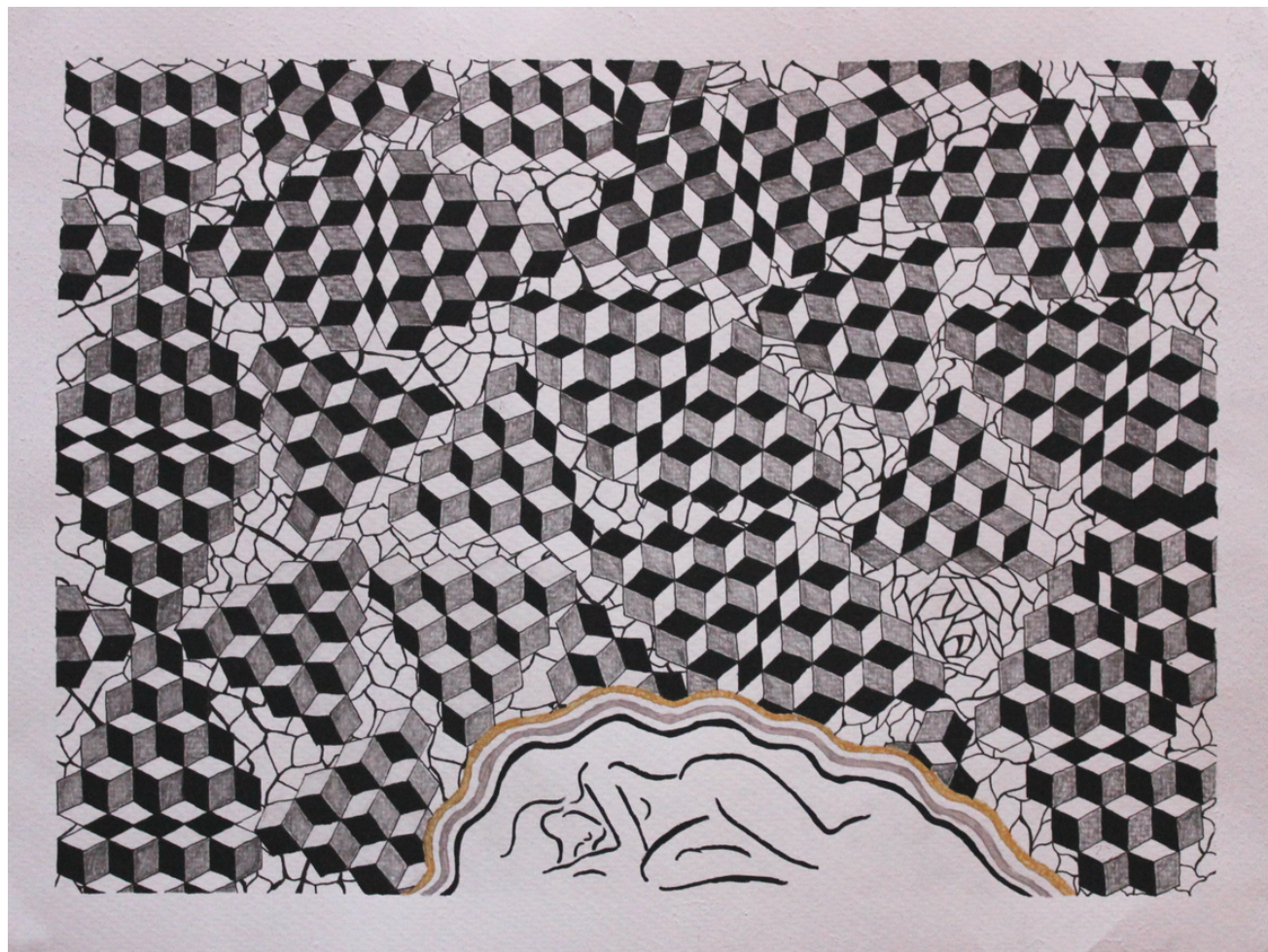
Your fault.

Flora Block is originally from Evanston, IL, but currently studies Sociology and Studio Art at Colorado College. She was a Programming Intern with Awakenings in Summer 2020.

Dreaming of breathing

Caroline Andreea Zgorcea

Ink, pencil, markers, 37.5 cm x 27.5 cm



Have you ever dreamt of breathing? Do people actually dream of breathing when it's the most natural thing in the world? The primary thing that keeps us alive is the air we breathe, but what do you do when you feel like air itself is blocked on its way to your lungs, on its way to giving you life? You freeze, become numb, the outside world seems like a faraway dream. I often dreamt of breathing when growing up, when I didn't have a voice of my own even though I could clearly talk. Later on, when I was old enough to be on my own, I still had trouble breathing sometimes, weighed down by all the past trauma I still had to heal. And because I kept on repeating the same patterns, unable to move on, more emotions accumulated, the ones that didn't let me breathe, the ones that pressed me to the ground, my bad choices, my inability to see a way out transformed into blocks, forming a network that ended up creating an intricate maze. It took years to get out of that space that had been with me for more than half of my life and when I did, my life changed, since I had changed. I could finally breathe, I was free. 'Dreaming of breathing' is everyone's story, I think. For one reason or another, we all have trouble breathing sometimes. Emotions may slowly creep up on us,

over the years, or they may come suddenly, with a bang and a thud, leaving us breathless with no way to cry out. What happens when you have to learn to breathe all over again? How long does it take to go through all the blocks weighing you down? How long until you can get back up?

Caroline Andreea Zgorțea is an introvert, but loves connecting to people and hearing their stories, so she ended up being a counselor and a paramedic, although her major was in a different field. She loves to write, travel, drink tea and take photos.

Oil Stains*Courtney Campbell*

Chilled insides quiver
like green gelatin.
Adjectives swish
in my mouth
like Scope.
A rigid tongue
clings
to the roof of my mouth,
refuses to move.
Red and blue flashes swirl
across dirty pavement.
The drive must be scrubbed.
Oil stains scatter
my thoughts.
“What did he look like?”
The tapping of brown boots,
a furrowed brow, the incessant clicking
of a pen pique
my curiosity.
How do others clean their driveway?
A tired clipboard clanks
against a metallic badge.
“Ma’am, can you give us his description?”
I swallow words
like alphabet pasta.
Sit,
close my eyes,
regurgitate nonsense,
wipe my mouth.
“Thank you, we’ll be in touch.”

Courtney Campbell received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Texas A&M University Corpus Christi. Courtney's previous publications have spanned the genres of fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. She is dedicated to bringing awareness to social injustice and promoting safe and healing atmospheres in which individuals may not just survive, but thrive.

Sweets*Nyamwa*

If I say that I remember everything from that day, I will be lying. Mother says to lie is to lessen beauty. I value beauty in and out beauty. Look how I feel the need to justify myself. Society. Urgh! I remember the sweets. Walking home. The surprise. The “What will I tell mother.” That he gave me sweets. No. Too true. But she knows him. We buy milk from his shop every day. He has many sweets. He gives them to other girls? Not sure. Does he ask them to pull their clothes down also? Will I tell mother that part? Maybe not. He said not to.

I walk home. Anxious. Afraid of getting home but needing to. I think it was painful. He led me inside then closed the door and window. Said that I will get sweets. I love sweets. Mother never lets me get enough of them. She says it is terrible for my teeth. He is a big man. As tall as I would imagine my father to be. I cannot keep my thoughts straight. Whenever do six-year-olds do that? Perhaps what happened is normal. He helped me pull my small inner clothes down. He took off his own clothes. Not all of them. Like Simi. Simi is my friend. We play around the neighborhood with his shorts half off. I laugh when I see his skin on the back. He laughs too.

He does not seem to mind. Maybe even big people do that. I feel some irritation between my legs. I forget it when I see Simi. I run off after him. I will not catch up. I shout, “I have sweets.” He is running towards me now. I will make him beg before I give him one. It is evening. I go home. Mother says I should wash my feet. I remember the irritation then. Soon I am asleep. That day is over.

I see him every day, the big man, just as usual. Mother and I buy milk at his shop. He does not call me inside when I am playing alone. He never gives me sweets. I never talk about that day until years later when I tell a girl I go to school with. She does not jump with surprise. She says, “Okay, how do you feel?” This is why I like her. Still, I do not tell her that I am anxious. That I am afraid I will court someone one day, and they will ask if I am a virgin. Will I say I am? Am I? What really happened that day? I saw a film once where a woman was thrown out of her room on their wedding night. Will that happen to me? I do not tell her all of these because I have not felt any of them yet.

She is the one I tell when I get my blood for

the first time. I am excited. I sit on the bed in the dormitories and ask my bedmate to run to class and call her. She is always in class. I stand when I see her, and there is blood flowing down my feet. She says, "Look who is big now." I laugh. More blood. She is excited. She does not tell me when her blood comes two years later. I suppose the excitement died along the way. I grow older. Bigger. I worry more about that day. I get confused. They say something was stolen from me that day. My innocence and perhaps my virginity too. Still, they insist that virginity is a myth. I don't know what I believe. I try not to care. I have never told my mother about that day.

The girl I went to school with — I still like her, and maybe one day we will sit, and I will tell her everything. About my first sexual experience -you know, like the one I was in on. I will tell her whether something was taken away from me that day. Whether I think about the big man. I will tell her the truth. That I found peace within myself despite everything

Nyamwa's goal is to tell stories so that she never dies and she writes to keep sane in this rowdy world.

Desert Passage

Jane Beal

I.

A wooden chair nailed to a tall, headless, branchless tree trunk:
“a vintage piece of Santa Fe whimsy,” my friend says.

Real life looking surreal, suspended above red desert dust
swirling at the crossroads like two Cochiti women and a boy.

At night, a coyote flees across the street, alone,
briefly illuminated by the headlights of a stranger’s car.

II.

Is my angel sitting in that high chair like a three-year-old,
struck dumb by the memory of my father getting out of the bath?

Is my angel running after the coyote in the dark
while I wrestle with a demon in the air above my bed?

Is my angel tired after thirty-three years of trying to protect
the impossible child, soul screaming, mouth streaming bitter-white?

III.

The monsoon comes. Lightning without thunder,
rain without remorse. Sunflowers bloom in the desert.

The double rainbow appears: a piece of heaven's ephemera,
the original translucent found-art object in the sky.

Brewer's blackbird sings me awake. A hummingbird darts close,
then away. Mariposa wings open, yellow and black, eyes on her back.

IV.

Is my angel in the rain? Does Michael steal the thunder?
Does Gabriel paint the sky?

Will Raphael uproot the sunflowers? Wave them over my head
like a wand and turn me into a blue jay?

I see one now. He sits on a twig, shits white, flies toward me,
and vanishes. Everything disappears into eternity.

V.

Beside a cholla cactus, I sit sheltered by a Cochiti-red blanket,
scraping dry pottery shards against the wounded ground.

I spit in the sand, mix a gritty glue, paste one shard against another
until a broken-faced doll holds all the babies

my angel remembers in pain. I paint her clay storyteller-skin
blue as the turquoise sky, pure as clouds over the badlands.

Jane Beal is a poet. She has published many poetry collections, including *Sanctuary*, *Rising* and *Song of the Selkie*, and three audio recording projects combining music and poetry: “Songs from the Secret Life,” “Love-Song,” and “The Jazz Bird.” She teaches at the University of La Verne in California. See janebeal.wordpress.com.

Dead Weight

Terri Shull

Who is this dead woman inside me?
Is she the one my father killed while loving her like a woman,
when she was his only little girl?
Or is she the one my mother killed
while wearing her like a second skin?
Or the one I killed,
by withholding food and water?

She is heavy, this dead woman inside me.
I know there is only one way to lift her.
I must learn her name.
Feed her from my dinner plate.
And listen to her litany of nightmares.

Terri Shull has been published in the Literary journals: *Watershed*, *First Leaves*, *Sonoma Mandala*, *Tight* and in the newspaper, *The Sonoma Sun*. She lives in Sonoma County with her patient husband, Travis and their impatient emotional support dog, Lovey. Terri has a B.A. in English and a M.A. in Speech Pathology.

Letting Go

Renée Rhodes

Bronze on marble, 20 inches x 14 inches



We Are The Ones

after "Letting Go" by Renée Rhodes

Jude Rittenhouse

Our naked bodies blow horizontal as we fly
hard winds, just hanging on to a slender tree.
We heed the music of light and breezes that others

can't hear, feel, see. We make endurance look almost
easy. Freed by our demons, by nightmare breakages
received too young: invasions splitting our spirits

from bone. Blame, shame, cultural failures;
no one believing our keening. We had to leave
our bodies and earth's. Grow something like wings.

When pain usurps too much space, what wind does
to trees seems preferable, less freezing. Necessity,
our grandmother, bade us rise as she had and those

before her: *Remember your heritage and earth's.*
Take your sisters' hands: extend tree and wind.
Exceed their reach. Thus we learned what can be

trusted: starlight and fog curled in our locks,
loosened us. Time came and went like a lover;
old fears and charms became weary, rusted:

keys no longer needed. Sometimes we fall
or choose earth, return: become trees where future
generations discover wings. Broken

open, we are the ones ready to receive screaming
secrets, hungers, needs. Ready to teach, like
spider-goddess or sea, how to weave fresh stories

of lives blown clean. Meanwhile we whisper
or scream, depending on songs that most need our
singing; depending on who's listening, believing.

Renée Rhodes is a Connecticut sculptor, working in bronze figures, who has devoted her life to the study of matters of the human heart and spirit. After receiving her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Columbia University in New York City, she completed a 2-year Research Fellowship at Yale University. She has focused her clinical work on helping people integrate their personality with their true spirit. She is currently working on a new body of work entitled, “The Tree Series.”

Jude Rittenhouse has received writing awards and been published in magazines and anthologies. She has taught writing and inner-growth classes and been a speaker at conferences, schools, hospitals, hospices, and DV shelters for 30 years. With a Master’s Degree in Counseling, she is in private practice in Rhode Island.

www.JudeRittenhouse.com

Ring of Fire

Lauren Levato

Acrylic on canvas, 10 in x 10 in

Courtesy of the Awakenings' Permanent Collection



Find Me in the Forest*after Ring of Fire by Lauren Levato**Phil Goldstein*

I am finished
product, commercial paper sitting
in a stack in an empty home. I imagine
a different life for myself. I have so many
possible uses & endings.

For me, paper sometimes summons an image of a gas tank
with a bold warning emblazoned on its side,
a white flame, like scrub brush, birthing
a larger black flame on top of it.

Images of real flames dance in my head. I am paper,
surrounded by more paper & I am afraid
of what this means for my existence.
I am in a hall of mirrors made of fine, thick paper stock,

all perpendicular angles rising infinitely upwards.
His presence in my mind & his hands on my body
act like a lit match waiting to connect with me.
Blow it out, blow it out! It doesn't work & I am suddenly burning,

flames riding higher, blackening my skin.
I am disintegrating, my amber edges glowing.
I am transmogrifying into ashy pulp. He thinks I am gone but
I will make my way back into the rich black forest soil.

Years later, after this inferno burned our house down silently,
I will sprout viridescent, alive & lush, dripping in the dawn.

Lauren Levato Artist Statement

I am a survivor of sexual abuse, rape, and domestic violence. I began using art to heal myself and work through those times and the sometimes horrific aftermath. I never stopped creating, dreaming, imaging and it has led me to a very fulfilling and healing life as an artist and writer.

Since I was a child I've been fascinated with insects and arachnids and in my art I use them and their behaviors as metaphors. I discovered that when faced with danger – specifically fire – scorpions lash out violently at the danger, inadvertently stinging and killing themselves in the process. I find this to be an apt metaphor for the many years I spent self-destructing in the face of sexual abuse and domestic violence. But fire is also a regenerative force that sparks new life. I'm using painting and the metaphor of fire to explore how I burnt my own spirit and my own health to the ground with drugs, alcohol, and sex and then began rebuilding from the ash. I know so many women who have been or are in this cycle too and my Fire series is dedicated to them.

Phil Goldstein is a poet, journalist and content marketer who has been living in the Washington, D.C., area for a dozen years.

His debut poetry collection, *How to Bury a Boy at Sea*, is coming out in April 2022 from Stillhouse Press. His poetry has been nominated for a Best of the Net award and has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Rust + Moth*, *Awakened Voices*, *Amethyst Review*, *Constellations*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *The Loch Raven Review*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *Qwerty Magazine*, *Great Lakes Review* and elsewhere.

By day, he works as a senior editor for a content marketing agency, writing about government technology. He currently lives in Alexandria, Va., with his wife, Jenny, and their animals: a dog named Brenna, and two cats, Grady and Princess.

new tremors from old earthquakes*Kate LaDew*

it's usually a crowded subway when it happens
a hand grazes accidentally, probably not, a breath too close,
and it all falls down, for a moment, maybe longer,
but it shudders through you,
new tremors from old earthquakes
vibrating under the ground, all the way back — to a little girl,
face down, those strange hands that became familiar
pressing into her hair, her spine,
her own hands stretched over her heart in struts
the mattress falling into its worn spaces, grooves of cotton like climbing holds—
when the doors open, you rebuild yourself, in a moment, maybe longer,
a woman far far away
but you are littered with fingerprints, each never quite obscuring the last,
depressions molded into your form so deep sometimes your body is not your own,
and in the dark you struggle, tangled in sheets like hands,
all those old earthquakes spinning out, out, out, timed to the rhythm of your heart
with nothing but your own hands to protect it

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, NC with her cats Charlie Chaplin and Janis Joplin.

A Blank Space Occupies the Brain

Emory Bartholet

An incident occurs.

An incident occurs,

and for three and a half years

I digest mind and body

in an effort not to speak

its name. The incident

has a name.

It has a name.

“It.”

I say, “it.”

I say, “it.”

I say, “sexual violence.”

But sexual violence has many names.

This one, a boy’s name, a person’s

name.

He was older than me, sixteen

and terrified of the world,

arms soft, dyed hair, a percussionist,

the two of us a unit,

and this is becoming a diary, not a poem,

but how am I supposed to write anything but memory
 when even memory
 is untrustworthy, unreliable, not believable.

Can you believe this story
 coming from a mind
 that for three and a half years
 could not speak its name?

“It.”

I say, “it.”

I say, “Let’s just write about something
 (anything)
 else.”

Emory Bartholet (they/them) is an AmeriCorps member currently serving in Maryland. If all goes according to plan, they will be attending the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice in the fall to begin a Masters of Social Work. Emory's quarantine hobbies include baking scones and crafting paper jewelry and bookmarks. Their poetry has previously appeared in *Third Point Press*, *Half-Mystic*, *Inklette*, *Counterclock*, *Rascal*, and *Passengers Journal* among other publications (although much of that poetry was published under their deadname).

Ride the Peter Pan

A Whittenberg

There were times when it seemed like all the beauty was sucked out of my life. This was one of them. It was cold and damp, early spring, and I was Greyhounding from my old life to my new, from North to South. I was 24, Master degreed, unwed, and pregnant.

All around me, I saw failure. As each passenger climbed aboard, emptiness filled the bus. I saw the unshaved and the unshowered. The angry and confused. Widows, retirees, practically invalids dragging their duffle bags. Beside me, a degenerate unwrapped his plastic wrapped sandwiches. I stared out of the windows like a peeping Tom. Riding the bus never meant passing City Hall, never going by the nice restaurants or boutiques melting into friendly pedestrians strolling past. No businessman with wedding bands checking briefcases. No, I saw a squeegee man dirtying clean windshields.

I wish I'd taken the Peter Pan, a special line that showed escapist movies. I'd taken that before when I was only going as far as NYC. I saw a flick about moving an elephant cross-country. It wasn't a box office smash but for a bus ride it was perfect. Here, there wasn't even a blank screen. I

could go for another feature length; too bad that line doesn't go down South.

A man with eyes like the sky was doing the driving. He loud talked to the passengers in the front couple of rows about how fake pro wrestling was. He asked the question, "How come every time they hit each other, they stomp their feet?"

Back in high school, I was valedictorian. A decade later, long after pomp and circumstance was played, I found myself a loser. Just another confused minority waif riding public transportation bouncing the back of her neck against a greasy headrest...

My wish was for a miscarriage. I know that was a horrible thing to wish for.

I had used up all my distractions. I put on my headphones and heard only a staticky cassette tape. The magazines I had brought, I had read too quickly. I had put away the novel I had brought miles ago. I just couldn't get into it. It was just words on a page. Now what?

There was a woman with chicken wings in her shirt pocket. Her fingers smudged the window.

I'm going to kill my baby. Strangle it with my large intestine or with my hands like the Prom Mom. It was a fleeting thought. I blamed it on the bus. Some people get motion sickness; I get homicidal thoughts.

If only the Peter Pan would go way down to Georgia. Maybe I should have flown or rented a car. Truth is, I didn't have the presence of mind to do either. I needed to let someone else do the driving. Let someone else make the stops and turns. I was so angry. Angry at rape, domestic violence, the porn industry, sexism, fascism, racism, ismisms. My life wasn't supposed to go like this. I was the smart girl.

I should have watched my drink.

I should have reported it.

I should have taken the morning after pill.

I shouldn't have been in denial.

RU486 could have stopped this from being compounded. How am I going to look at this product for the next 18 years? How? What am I going to do? Where am I going? I know where I'm going. Macon. But where am I going?

I'm going home. I don't even have a job waiting for me. I had two grand saved; that's all.

My legs were cramping from a rocky night when I tried to turn this seat into a sofa. I snuggled in the best I could.

I had no other plans than to live with my mother. My mother was loving and nurturing but not understanding. She couldn't understand this; I couldn't understand this.

A few rows behind me that Lolita pop music was playing; someone else turned on a hip hop station and overpowered it. This all could have been understandable if I dressed like that naval centric nymphet, but I didn't. I never did. Even on that night, I had on my work clothes at the party. Navy skirt, light blue turtleneck. (When groping for cause and effect, fall on stereotypes.)

I thought I knew Warren. We had talked before about peace, public education, and reparations. My life was going so well. I was saving to buy a condo, something tasteful with modern furniture. It would look like the furniture storeroom at Ikea. Now look at me, boomeranging back to my same humble beginnings, to the grey borough I grew up in. I have lost control. My power is taken. My destiny. Couldn't he at least have opened up a condom package and put it on?

The woman in front of me was babbling about how thick her son's neck is. He was in the Navy and that Navy wanted to kick him out because he'd gotten fat. They had been taping his waist and throat to find the density. My rapist wasn't big, but he did overpower me.

My rapist didn't look like a rapist. He was tall, slender, a runner's build, dark, bookish eyeglasses – kind of like me only male and a pervert. I only had one glass of wine.

Date rapists aren't any better from rapist rapists. In a lot of ways, they are worse. They gain your confidence, then betray you. They Milli Vanilli their way into your life. They don't carry a

knife or a gun. Just a drug. And surprise.

I remember my stockings pulled down around my ankles so I couldn't move my feet and run. The wheel of my mind takes in the way he braced my arms, so that I couldn't move my arms and clock him. The way he got inside my mind so even my voice didn't work. Why didn't I scream? I lived in an efficiency on the third floor where the walls and ceilings were as thin as loose-leaf paper.

I worked in the politics of shame as a counselor at a women's shelter where the politics of silence was busted every day. I should have come forward. Instead, I did what I urged others not to do, I swallowed it down... Yet the projector kept whirring and clacking.

There was a woman on the bus with her hair so uncombed she had dreads from the neglect. Her carry on was a shopping bag full of pain. I was just like her. Up until the rape, my life had been so fine tooth-combed. Pregnancy dictated to me that all my dreams were gone. Even my distant ones of going to Africa, eating raw cashews in Nairobi, tracing my roots...

The bus driver stopped just past Columbia. He told us to get a smoke or a coke. The previous day, I had thrown up twice. Today, I was hungry. I went to the rest room to wash up. The smell of joints hit me as did the sight of women brushing their teeth and washing up. Not just bird baths. Not just splashing under the armpits, spritz to open the dry eyes. These women had their tops off and their pants down. They were buck-naked crowded by the drain.

I left the rest room and cleansed my hands with a moist towelette I had stored in my carryall bag. I ducked into the terminal coffee shop and sat at the counter.

A waitress made her way over to me and grunted at me.

"Do you have any turkey?" I asked.

"No."

"What do you have?" I asked.

"Burgers. What did you want? A club?"

"No. I wanted a Rachel." She looked at me blankly.

I explained. "It's like a Ruben, but you use turkey."

"We don't have no turkey."

"Do you have bacon?"

"Do you want a BLT?" she asked.

"No. Bacon cheeseburger."

"We don't have no cheese."

I squinted. "No cheese? No bacon?"

"Nope. So what do you want?"

"An abortion."

She gave me a blank stare.

"I'll have a burger," I swallowed hard and said hoarsely.

“You want fries with that?”

Soon, the moon-faced waitress slid the plate my way.

The bun was cold, and the burger looked like an SOS souring pad.

I just didn’t get it. I had done everything I was supposed to do right down to only using my first initial on the mail and the phone book. How did I get raped? Some fellow with a head full of shiny Liberace hair -- every strand in place -- sat next to me. I eyed him. He was a brown skinned man, chubby, I don’t know why I thought Liberace. I should have thought Al Sharpton. “How’s your burger?” he asked. I said nothing.

“My name’s Brian.” He smiled. I noticed that he was missing a side tooth. “You know, you are exactly what I’m looking for.”

I thought for a moment; exactly what was I looking for? A life of fox furs, red sequenced evening dresses? White candles in silver candlestick holders? The man kept smiling at me showcasing his missing molar. I told myself to

give up. Life is not going to be gallant.

He chewed his burger favoring one side. “What’s your name?”

“Ann.” I lied. It was really Arna. This is what I always did. I never give strangers too much information. Even in singles clubs, when asked for my phone number, I would give only the last digit. I’m always cautious, watchful.

“Ann. I like that. I like women like you. I like a woman whose breasts are where they’re supposed to be and have a nice small waist like you have.”

I turned away from him and placed my napkin over my burger.

“I have a truck,” he said.

I put a five-dollar bill on the counter.

“You want to go for a ride in my truck?” he asked. He smelled oily and close.

I stood up. “How old are you?”

"I'm 42, but I don't want no has beens. My daddy had kids up until he was 60.... I don't date women over 21, 22."

"You don't."

"Naw, I don't want a has been."

"Do you have any kids?" I asked.

"I have grandkids," he answered.

"You have grandkids." I absorbed and repeated.

"Yeah, but that's my daughter's business."

"What happened to your wife?" I asked.

"What wife? I've never been married—" "He leered. "—Yet."

I made a fist. "You're a 42-year-old grandfather. Why don't you date grandmothers?"

"I done told you I don't deal with no has beens," he told me. "Have you started your family yet?"

"By family, you mean a mother and a father and a child, right. If you mean that, the answer is no." I made my voice icy as Massachusetts in December. I kept my cadence proper and dry.

"You know what I mean. You got any shorties?" he asked, still with a snaggle toothed grin.

"The answer is no."

I turned to leave. He reached for me.

"Get your goddamn hands off of me."

The entire clientele craned their necks at me. An older woman next to the door looked over her glasses at me. The waitress cupped her hands over her face.

"I went to Smith!" I told them, then I gave Grandpa the finger.

I gathered my coat around me, clutched my bag and walked toward the pay phone. I had promised I'd call my mother when I got close to home. I pulled out my card and pressed the

digits. Ma answered on the first ring. "How's your trip going?" she asked.

"All right," I answered. This was my biggest lie yet.

"It's a cast of characters ain't it?" she laughed. I loved her laugh. It was full, colorful, and Southern. "How far are you along?" she asked.

"Right outside of Columbia."

"How far are you along?" she asked again.

"I'm right in Sumter. Outside Columbia, I'll be there in another two hours."

"No, Arna, how far are you along?"

"You know? How could you know?"

"I just do. Something about the way you told me out of the clear blue you were moving back home. You love Boston."

She didn't sound angry or disappointed. She sounded psychic.

"Everything is going to be all right. You're not around any smoke, are you? They say that now. That ain't good for the baby."

"I'm only two months in, Ma," I told her.

"It's too bad you have to travel pregnant. You have morning sickness and jet lag."

I smiled. It felt strange to smile. "Ma, you can't get that from a bus because you feel every mile."

"Buses ain't so bad anymore. Don't they show movies?"

"Certain ones do. Greyhound has a spin off. Peter Pan. I'm just on the regular one."

"Well, you'll be home soon. We'll all be there to pick you up."

"I don't have a job lined up."

"You're a mother now. That's your job."

"But I had a career."

“You find something down here. You’ve always been smart.”

“Ma, I let a dumb thing happen.”

“You’re the first one in the family to ever go to college, Arna. You’ll find something down here. We got everything’s Boston’s got. Just a little less of it.”

I saw a mass of people heading toward the bus.
“Ma, I have to go.”

The bus was just about to pull off as I climbed back aboard. The driver asked me if I knew The Rock.

I crossed my fingers and said, “We’re like this.” There was a reshuffling of the seats, and I found my middle of the bus seat gone. I went to the back.

It’s always those honor student, 16-year-olds who don’t want to disappoint their parents who hemorrhage from grimy abortions. Ma took the news better than I thought. My mother had emphatic ears. She didn’t wear make-up or nail

polish. She had basic hobbies; she liked to sew and cook. She was lucky; she didn’t go out to the world to discover herself. She was married at 15. I was the exact middle child of seven. Maybe. Macon wouldn’t be so bad, it’s not like I had a job on Wall Street. There are shelters in my hometown, or at least people in need of shelter.

A voluptuous big-hipped woman sat next to me. She had swollen ankles. She was one of the nude women I saw in the restroom.

I guess I wasn’t put into this world to be pampered; I was put in this world to be squeezed between a window and foul smelling misery.

Back home, kids ride their bikes and chase each other up and down the sidewalk. Just thinking of that made me feel warm enough to ignore the draft that was coming from the metal vent alongside the window. I will not end this life.

If it’s a girl, I will cover her pigtails with red and purple plastic. If it’s a boy, I will teach him to be kind.

The bus started up, and I got a mild case of

whiplash caused from my neck bouncing against the headrest. There are times when it seems like all the beauty is sucked out.

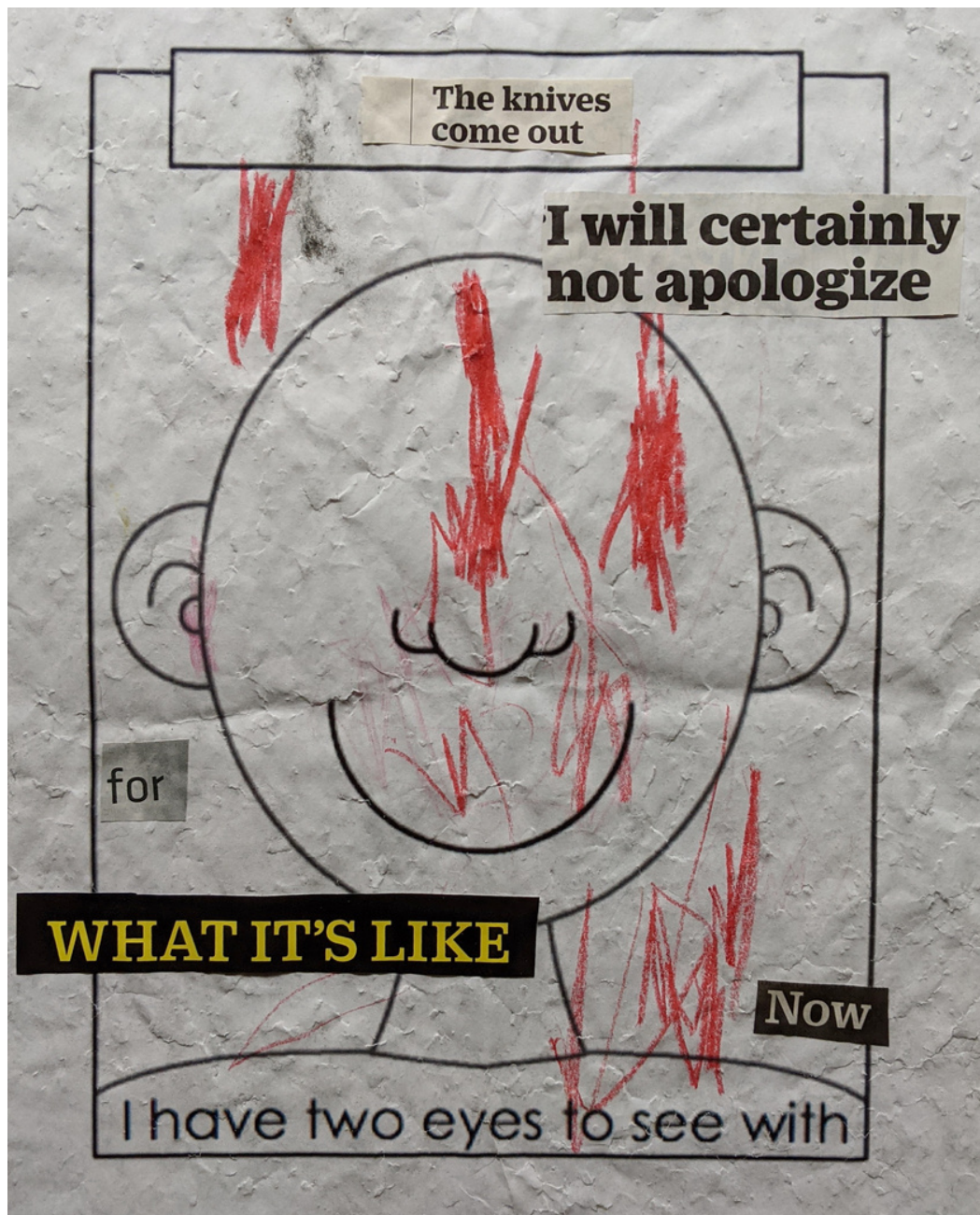
This isn't one of them.

A Whittenberg is a Philadelphia native who has a global perspective. If she wasn't an author she'd be a private detective or a jazz singer. She loves reading about history and true crime. Her novels include *Sweet Thang*, *Hollywood and Maine*, *Life is Fine*, *Tutored* and *The Sane Asylum*.

Two Eyes to See With

Mars Rightwildish

Mixed media, 9 in x 12 in



Mars M.S. is a feral academic, vulture witch, and rewilding guide; passionate about trauma alchemy and liberating the power of the instinctual animal body. She writes, creates, and magicks from Ohlone Land/Bay Area, California and invites you follow her ever-unfolding creative work at rightwildish.com.

Venom Extractor*Nhadi Samuel*

since her miracle of lapping blood from
 swelled skin & the gift of clotting,
luck refused definition.
founding this tongue secret on boxing day for her felt a gut punch.
 a fist version of what wrapped gifts should look like, in muscular form.
windowsills
soundproofed, simulate all her acts &
 mouth errand to blacklisted couples on main streets.
children
saw lamia where their parents saw help,
 with mouths poised like quotation marks— open to gasping chirography of false sounds.
the scoring I guess, a mind game of wee repentance
 so she picks the rumpled falsetto as per time job,
weighing the pitch of each home to rescue
 the tenor managing her breath below a better half,
making his bass seem a weapon.

Nnadi Samuel holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. His works have been previously published in *Suburban Review*, *Seventh Wave Magazine*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *PORT Magazine*, *The Cordite Poetry Review*, *Gordon Square Review*, *Rough Cut press*, *Trampset*, *The Elephant Magazine*, *Liquid Imagination* & elsewhere. Winner of the Canadian Open Drawer contest 2020 & Pushcart Nominee. He is the author of "Reopening of Wounds". He tweets @Samuelsamba10.

Survivors*Laurie Kuntz*

The sky splinters in slivers of violet
this last day of July collared
in Queen Anne's Lace and bracelets of clover.
You regret the lilac bush outside our father's house
has had an early bloom.

As children, we'd pick the fallen clusters
off the ground, press them
in his heavy books, then forget.
Years later, when I turned a page
a resemblance of lilac fell
on the blanket covering him.

At the funeral, you murmur,
I'm only here because he's dead.
And once again, the creak
and stir of your bedroom door wakes me.

All those years, I wanted to scream for you,
for both of us, but what good
would it have done?

I couldn't imagine what could save me
from his open, hissed kiss,
that chapped palm against my lean body.
I never warned you of his approaching step
always echoing heavily through feigned dreams.

We don't speak of this or the dead
 but walk from the gravesite
 among all we can name,
 milkweed, tiger lily, bloodroot

the path overgrown since childhood
 when we played with wild snapdragons,
 your hand pressed over mine,
 just the right pressure, where to pinch
 and the yellow tongued flower
 parted its lips.

Laurie Kuntz is an award-winning poet and film producer. She taught creative writing and poetry in Japan, Thailand and the Philippines. Many of her poetic themes are a result of her work teaching in Southeast Asian refugee camps for over a decade after the Vietnam War years. She has published one poetry collection (*Somewhere in the Telling*, Mellen Press) and two chapbooks (*Simple Gestures*, Texas Review Press and *Women at the Onsen*, Blue Light Press), as well as an ESL reader (*The New Arrival*, Books 1 & 2, Prentice Hall Publishers). Her new poetry collection: *The Moon Over My Mother's House* is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press in 2021. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and her chapbook, *Simple Gestures*, won the Texas Review Poetry Chapbook Contest. She has produced documentaries on the repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Law, and currently is a researcher for the documentary, *Strangers to Peace*, about the peace process and reintegration of guerrilla soldiers in Colombia. Her website is: lauriekuntz.myportfolio.com/home-1

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AWAKENINGS

Awakened Voices is a literary program of Awakenings, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating a physical and virtual artistic space in which to promote the healing of survivors through the arts and engage in an open dialogue that furthers awareness and understanding of sexual violence. Please consider helping us spread our message of healing by sharing and supporting Awakenings.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Awakened Voices

Our Fall 2021 Issue will be themed: The Body Speaks.

Find our visual and literary art calls:
awakeningsart.org/submit-artwork

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All of our writers and artists

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