

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's legs from the knees down. They are wearing grey, slightly worn-in jeans and white sneakers with white laces and soles. The person is walking on a grey paved surface, possibly a sidewalk or street, with a white painted line visible in the lower left. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

Forgive Forget, or Fuck off

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see. hear. heal.





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INTRODUCTION

We all heal differently. Many of us are told we must forgive and forget. Some of us find that impossible. But most of us know what anger feels like. Hence, “Fuck Off.”

This issue was originally published in a blog post format and was updated to this format in 2022.

CONTENT WARNING

The following issue contains material on the topic of sexual violence and other topics that readers might find difficult.

The intention behind this content warning is to prepare a reader so they can choose to bravely engage with potentially activating material, even if this doesn't always feel comfortable. May it also serve as a reminder that a reader can pause and take a break from reading. The stories will be here, ready when the reader returns.



Compassion Sits

Jeri Fred

and peaks its head around the hearth
replacing a silver branch
with a warm ember
in the valley finally comes to rest
the swirling water an adulterated
flame of youth and fatigue hues into
soft cherry and balsam rising
from drink of a forgotten whiskey
the autumn of September sweats
down to a jonagold apple
October curls it black with dew



ISSUE 3:FORGIVE, FORGET, OR FUCK OFF

No Apologies

Jean Cozier

Forgive and forget. We hear these words used together so often that by the time we're old enough to really think about what they mean, they've already been hardwired into our brains. As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse who is also a professional writer, it's been almost impossible for me to separate the plain, everyday meanings of these words from the enormous weight they carry for me as I struggle, daily, to heal my wounds.

Words have power. All my life, words have been my tools, my weapons, and my livelihood. I have a very extensive vocabulary, and I can talk grammar until most people run away screaming. But I can say, with conviction, there is no word I struggle with more than "forgive."

The first sexual abuse survivor I knew intimately was in my first counseling group. At the time I joined, she was struggling with the decision whether or not to ask her step brother, who'd abused her as a child, to take part in her upcoming wedding. Her family, naturally, was all for it. Can't you just forgive him, they asked her over and over again. At this time I wasn't aware of my own history, yet I remember clearly wondering how any family member who cared about her could even ask this question.

Oprah Winfrey has talked about "scrambling eggs for her abuser." My version of this happened every time the family member who'd abused me visited my hometown when I was there as well, usually during the holidays. My mother and my aunt would constantly remind me how much he wanted to see me, and insist I make time in my schedule to visit him. This situation came to a head during one visit home when I said "yes" to an invitation I should have said "no" to. I was tired of saying no to my mother. It was Christmas time. Surely, I thought, I could manage one evening at a party with him. It wasn't the first time I'd seen him, and I thought I would be OK.

I wasn't. I woke up the next morning in a panic attack so bad my husband had to grab my leg to keep me from jumping out my upstairs bedroom window. I wasn't trying to kill myself. I was just trying to breathe. To this day, I wonder how many suicides are the result of panic attacks. Maybe they're not trying to kill themselves either – they just want some air!

Forgetting, for me, is not an option. I have a very good memory – some of my friends think it's photographic but it's not, especially as I age, but even though most of what happened to me took place between the ages of 8 and 13, and some

details are hazy, I will never forget. I don't want to.

I will also never forgive. And I have stopped apologizing for it. I guess it all boils down to semantics, and like I mentioned earlier, "forgive and forget" is just too hardwired in my brain. To me, the word "forgive" means "saying it's OK." And it's not, and it never will be.

Believe me, I've argued this with plenty of people. I've heard all the arguments. I know I'm supposed to forgive because it will empower me, and take away the power the abuser had over me, etc. etc. Phooey. I'm plenty empowered, and he has no power over me. Never did. Can't always say the same about my mother, but that's how it goes.

I've had people tell me that I'll never find peace of mind without forgiveness. I once had a "motivational speaker" here at the Gallery who told me that once I found forgiveness, I would never think about the abuse again. Phooey and more phooey. My peace of mind is just fine. And I'll never stop thinking about the abuse. Don't want to (see above) and since my life's work is helping other survivors find healing through creative expression, if I did forget, I'd cut off the source of some of my best writing and healing. I

didn't exactly say "Fuck off to that speaker, but if I ever see her again, I think I will.

So what have I found? All my life, I've rejected easy answers. "Either/or" scenarios are for people too lazy to think of alternatives. So while "Fuck Off" is always appealing, I've found a fourth answer. For me, it's acceptance.

Acceptance means knowing oneself, down to the bone, and being comfortable with who you are. It means remembering, and understanding, and dealing with, psychological trauma. It means being aware that what happened, happened, and while it should never have happened, it went into making me who I am, and why I do what I do. And since I'm happy with both, I'm at peace, and I accept the past, the present, and whatever comes in the future.

I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I'm not exactly proud of it, but I accept it. It's made me who I am. And I like myself just fine, thank you very much.

Jean Cozier is the Founder of the Awakenings Foundation, and the author of the book "Dear Judith" as well as the upcoming poetry collection, "Heavy Metal".



I Am a Woman

Rebekka Brennan

What do you see when you look at me?

This broken, fragile vessel

Of a used up fragrance

That radiated

Confidence from my pores

Yet somehow

The scent no longer

Lingers on my wilted frame

You see, I am a woman.

I am a woman whose

Stomach has a pit as

Deep as the earth's core,

The one you tried to throw me into

With this R, A, P, E

You did over me,

A vain attempt to steal my dignity

Shattered pieces on the ground

You threw me on

You see, I am a woman.

I am a woman that

Knows and understands the

Pain of being entered into

Without permission

No willing confession


Of so easily stripping my pride

Like tossing trash by your side,

When I'm truly a treasure



You see, I am a woman.
I am a woman who
Will never willingly give in
To a defeat I did not choose
Or stand by to be abused,
By your belief that you have the right
To say, do, or try anything,
That might fulfill your lustful desires
To try me out like new tires
On a test drive,
You see, I am a woman.
I am a woman born to fight,
For her right to say no,
And when that is not respected,
I will not be destroyed
Nor will my soul turn void.
Too many people need to see
That respect is not just a commodity
But a right in all reality,
You don't own me.
In fact you would not exist without me,
You see, I am a woman.
I am a woman all
To familiar with violations,
Or societal stereo-types and stipulations
On my behavior.
My dress, my walk, my talk,



Or anything else
That might welcome
This R , A , P, E you did over me,
In fact there's one 1 in 3 of me.
So turn to your side, see your mother,
Look behind you, face your daughter,
Then what's left is a statistic that
Could be your sister who screams,
Don't you see? I am a woman.
I am a woman with
Many names, many ages, many races,
Both rich, poor, and in between,
My face well-known, and hardly noticed.
Like Chaka Khan "I'm Every Woman"
It's all in me.
And I will stand in solidarity
Against the R, A, P, E
You did over me,
And while you stole some sacred pieces we
Refuse to shield our tears,
You need to see, that
Your hungry power meant to destroy me
This vain attempt to steal my dignity
Was unsuccessful
Because you see
While I am broken,
I am healing.
Once a victim,
Now a survivor.
I am a woman
No longer silent,
I am.
Free.

Forgot to Forget; Chuly, Prieta, Pitufa

Mari Ortiz

Often, I imagined myself to be Laura Ingalls, of Little House on the Prairie, adored by her father, Charles. He wouldn't beat his daughter for looking out at the world, out at no one and nowhere.

On those days, I would sit on his beloved brown leather ottoman and pee all over it. The warmth of it running down my legs, down the seams, and onto the creaky springs. I found pleasure in private, subversive acts like this.

a few years ago, he looked me in the eye and said of my mother "she is mine".

I looked him back in the eye and replied, "you can have her".



Happy New Year

K. Guidi

2015 – Happy New Year, the year I decided would be the year I told any man I felt deserved it “To go fuck themselves,” this was my empowerment.

My voice was and has been changed forever, forgive, and forget, no one ever forgets the memory of an abuser; the abuse from the hand, fist, mouth, tongue, body that touched when they should not have, or spoke with bullets that leaves a gaping hole that heals within measure over time, but never heals in the mind, nothing is ever completely forgotten by whom, me, you, them – the scars do they ever truly heal?

For, me, To me- it is like a tree bearing witness to where there once was a branch and now – the knot, a tree knot, where a branch has become injured and dies while attached to the tree, a loose knot will form, the knot carried in the gut, but in the tree a dark plug of dead decaying material is formed and over time it comes loose and slowly disperses to become a toughened trunk of wood, but left with a scar, a hole- empty, tough and broken, was anything forgotten, forgiven, or just remembered as rotten and now released- “fuck off” and yes forgiven in measure, in time, with time- Now able to decay given away into the earth so that a new memory may bolster

and blossom with intensification and awareness of its own strength, this is our voice- it should not be FORGOTTEN.

Fuck Off

Leah Zieger

Yes, my god, please, please fuck off.

I can't think of a better way to put it. Just fucking fuck off. Leave me alone, don't ever talk to my family again, and please keep me out of your thoughts. That really is all I want.

I think...

It's been almost three years now since I last faced my abuser. We were in a courtroom, and I was testifying about how he had broken into my house and threatened to kill me, about how he had raped me when we were together and how I wanted him to go to prison. He was sitting not four feet away from me, but wouldn't look at me. His parents, on the other hand, couldn't keep their scowling, accusatory eyes off of me. As if the fact that their son was a misogynistic, abusive, psychotic asshole was somehow my fault. They stared me down like I was a piece of garbage that needed to be thrown out. But he wouldn't look at me, because he knew I was right.

And I was right. He was a misogynistic, abusive, psychotic asshole who did break into my house and did rape me many, many times. And all I wanted was to see him put away, behind bars. All I wanted was for him to fuck off!

But now, three years later, I am forced to reevaluate.

Now, I have moved away to go to college. Now, I have found dance as my outlet and form of communication. Now, I have healed, for the most part, and am ready to heal others. I founded an organization called The Sunflower Project my sophomore year of college as an attempt to use dance to turn the ugly truth of abuse into something beautiful. I even made a documentary with my father about my experience with my abuser, and plan on showing it to as many people as I possibly can. I am public with my survivorship. In some weird ways, I'm even proud.

So now that I am on the other side, preaching to the world about the dangers of abuse and how to avoid it, get help, get out, blah blah blah... now that I am more than three years removed from the darkest moments of my life and can look back on it with appreciation for who it made me today, should I still be so angry? Is it at all healthy to hold on to anger when all you long for is to let go of it all? No, that's pretty obviously not healthy. Even I know that. It's just not that easy. We all know that.

Okay, so we've established that I shouldn't be angry anymore. I mean, he did serve his time and all that. I don't really even care if he's sorry,

because he's gone, and it doesn't matter. Shouldn't matter. Won't let it matter...

But even if I do manage to stop being angry, should I also just forget? "Forgive and forget," right?

On occasion, it's good to forget. It's freeing, really, to forget the entirety of your past and become open and willing to be present. It feels as if you're a new person—finally, that person you've been telling yourself you would be with every New Year's resolution, every shooting star, every life evaluation in the middle of the night. Suddenly, things are fresh. Things are beautiful once again. Every minute detail is persistently staring you in the face and demanding to be noticed. And you notice all of them, with awe and a feeling of inspiration. The smiles people share on the sidewalk as you drive by creep onto your face unconsciously. Sand in between your toes is no longer a nuisance but a revelation of sensation. Upon a still moment, you don't find restlessness, but serenity.

Forgetting is part of life's cycle. We must breathe out old air to make room for new, or we won't survive. We must release old memories, especially those we aren't particularly fond of, and inhale new experiences and new things to

remember. Forgetting is purely taking a deep breath. Necessary for survival. To forget is to expand upon the entrance of new into life.

Some memories are easier to forget than others. Memories can be sticky. They grab hold of a part of you and won't detach themselves. They fix on a piece of you like a parasite, drinking the very blood of your soul until they have had their fill, only to return once the nutrient supply has been replenished. They fuse to your thoughts, welded on with a gumminess that is all but impossible to scrape off. If you do happen to unfasten these leeches of memory, the residue from their previous bond is so persistent, so unrelenting, that it seems impossible to ever be rid of it all.

This is when forgetting is a victory. When you have defeated the internal enemy of a thought, an inkling, and have survived the conquest with other pieces of you still intact. It's a fight to forget these specific memories. It's an uphill battle and the odds are stacked against you but you keep on keeping on and ultimately, you win. The sticky memory has been unstuck and you are free.

But freedom is relative.

"Forgive and forget." Well, first I have to



forgive, in order to get to the forgetting. And how the hell am I supposed to do that?

I think forgiveness is not for the offender, but for the offended. Forgiving somebody doesn't really do much for the person who is getting forgiven, but it can work wonders for the person doing the actual forgiving. So I hear, anyway, because I haven't forgiven him yet.

It's a thought that will bounce around in my head from time to time. I entertain the thought for a hot second and then become disgusted that I would ever find forgiving him the least bit attractive. It's not right I think. He doesn't deserve to be forgiven.

One day, not too long ago, I saw him.

I was in the driver's seat of my car, and I looked briefly to my left as I pulled up to a red light. He was driving in the opposite direction, listening to music and nodding his head up and down. He didn't see me. He was acting like a normal person—something that completely took me aback because for the last three years of my life he has been this evil monster bad guy that has become a sort of character. Something you might see in a Disney movie until of course, the princess conquers him. I thought I had done that—conquered the evil monster bad guy. In my


fairytale imagination, he had melted or gotten eaten by an alligator or something along those lines and he had been conquered. He was a fictional character who goes away when you turn off the TV.

But there he was, being a person. A three-dimensional, moving, breathing person who has relationships with people in this world—talks to them, interacts with them, maybe even is loved by them. No longer could I pretend that my heroic bucket of water had gotten rid of him. No longer could I pretend that he was fictional. He is real. Very, very real. I had to face that.

But still, that doesn't mean he deserves to be forgiven. He doesn't deserve anything. Not from me at least.

But here's the thing... I deserve it. I deserve to have forgiven him, because I deserve to live my life free of any and all ties to him. I deserve to not have to hold on to any of him. That includes any feelings of hate or spite or anger or disgust he has brought into me. I deserve to not be hateful. I deserve to let go. I deserve freedom.

So yeah, he can fuck off. And no, I won't forget. But yes, yes yes yes do I deserve to forgive. We all do—every survivor on this planet deserves to not have to have their evil monster

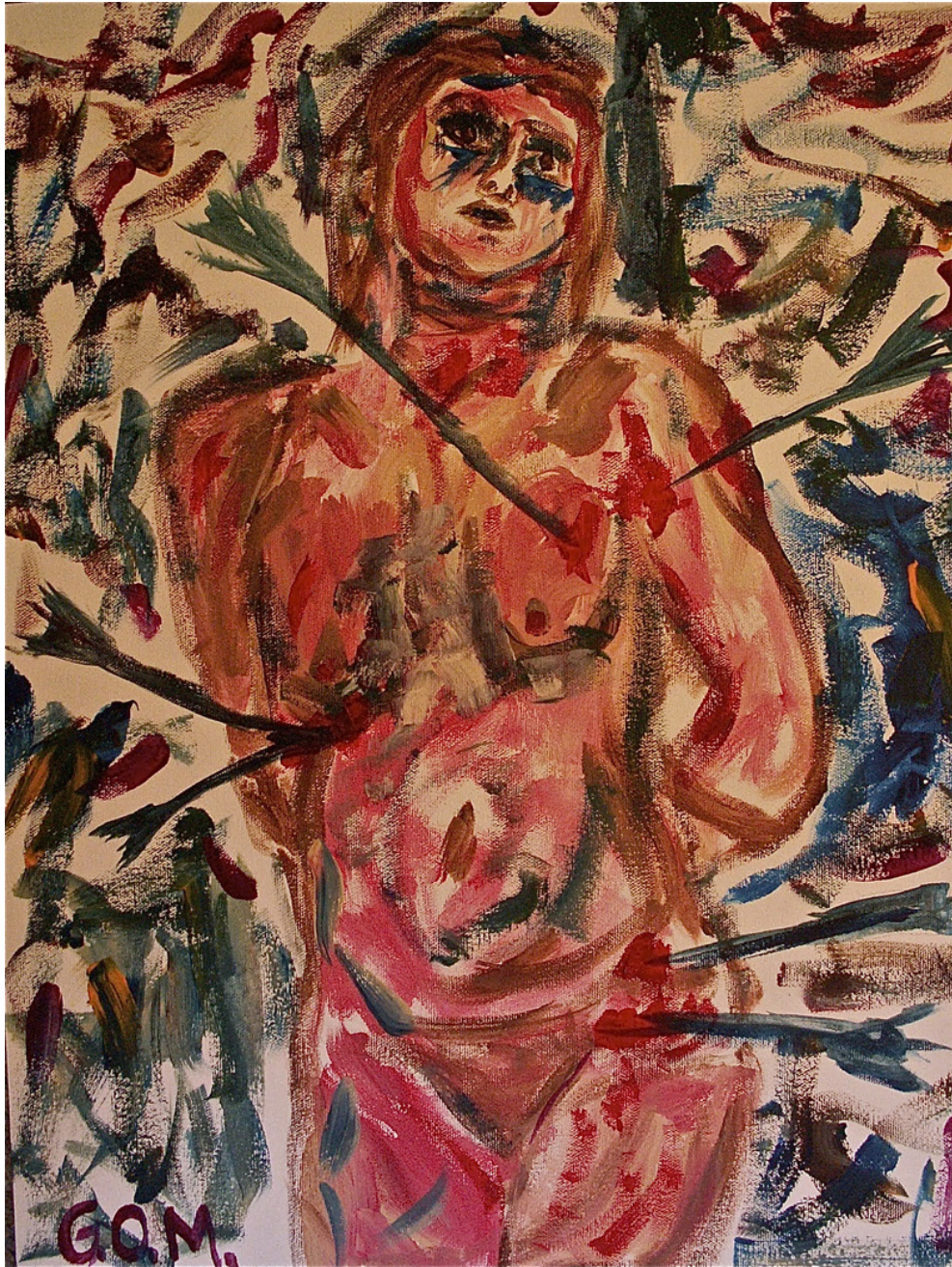



bad guys hold onto any part of them. Survivors deserve to be happy and not hateful. Survivors deserve to forgive. It's an immense power we are given, and it's an immense sensation of relief, gratitude, and freedom when we finally decide to use it.

Leah Zeiger is the founder of the Sunflower Project. Read more about her work and her film at towardsthesun.org

Acceptance

Veronica Wanchena
Acrylic on Canvas
16 x 20





"My grief lies all within; and these external manners of lament are merely shadows to the unseen grief that swells with silence in the tortured soul."

– William Shakespeare

This quote from Shakespeare about grief is one that resonates deeply in me. It communicates something for me that I could not articulate myself. I tried to depict in this painting both the seen and the unseen wounding and grief in my being.

The effects of abuse on my body were visible and deeply troubling. They took years to heal, yet they were only a shadow of what the abuse did to my mind, my soul and my heart.

This painting came out of the place of profound acceptance in me. It came out of the acceptance that it was that bad, that I was very wounded, and that it would take every fiber of my being to recover.

I learned that by accepting what is, I could find the peace I need to carry on my work of recovery. Learning to understand my own grieving process, learning what worked and what didn't work for me, and accepting every aspect of myself became enormously freeing for me.

The dawn began to rise in this acceptance of what was, what is, and what may be.



ISSUE 3:FORGIVE, FORGET, OR FUCK OFF

Untitled*R. De Santos*

When I was nine, I sat, afraid, in a confession booth in the church I had been unwillingly dragged to nearly every Sunday of my life. The same church where I had been forced to sit and listen to the prayers and preaching of people I thought were full of shit. I always felt alone in those hours, sitting among the prayers of thanks and trust in this imaginary sky person who had a plan for all of us. A plan that, for me, included sitting among the people who abused me while some soft-spoken man with terrible fashion sense preached about how much this God guy loved his children.

I did my best to be a good Catholic. I prayed as often as I could, believing that all I needed to do was ask and I would be saved. And if I wasn't, then it was my fault. Rescue never came, and if anything, the abuse I experienced increased.

So there I sat like I did every Sunday, trapped in a smelly dark booth while the soft-spoken fashion disaster waited patiently for me to confess what by now I'm sure he expected to be a very long list of the various sins I had committed. I could always hear the annoyance in his voice when he realized it was me. The kid who always asked questions and never just accepted things. That Sunday, I ignored my sins, and instead spent

the next minutes explaining in detail the abuse I was experiencing and who was doing it. I don't know what I expected. If I expected to feel better, getting it off my tiny shoulders, or if I expected the man on the other side of the dark booth to kick open the door in a fit of holy rage and avenge my pain. Neither happened. I felt smaller and smaller, as he sat in silence turning over in his mind what I said. A few tense moments went by before Father Worst-Dressed finally spoke. He leaned close to the window that separated us, and asked me to forgive him and the ones who hurt me because there was nothing that he or anyone could do to help me.

From that day on, I thought of forgiveness as a weakness. I felt I had accepted and agreed that it was okay to hurt me. That it was okay to leave me vulnerable and re-victimized over and over. Giving people who harmed me an invitation to repeatedly chop away pieces of the walls I was struggling to build — walls to contain the pain they kept causing.

It has taken me years to learn that forgiveness is many things, but it is never weakness. It's something that I do every day. Sometimes it's a conscious decision, but often it's automatic. It's an important factor in how I manage

relationships with the perfectly-flawed people that I love so much. Accepting and understanding that their malfunctions have little to do with me. It's learning to forgive my nearly perfect wife when she forgets to call or text to tell me for the 100th day in a row to tell me she'll be late, because if I didn't I would always be frustrated and angry with her, even though everything she does is for our family. Or when she forgives me for the 102nd time for leaving my pants on the floor and not in the laundry even though I know when I drop them there that it drives her fucking nuts. She knows those things are weird coping mechanisms that help me feel safe in our home.

I don't forgive people because I'm okay with the damage their personality glitches can sometimes cause. I forgive them because I love them, and because I'm selfish and it benefits me. Forgiveness allows me the happiness I deserve with the people I now call family.

I've learned the difference between forgiving those who love me and excusing those who intentionally hurt me. I don't forgive that priest who left a scared little girl alone to face the monsters, just like I don't forgive the monsters. Forgiveness, for that scared little girl in the smelly dark booth, is finally acknowledging and

placing responsibility where it truly belongs. Wiping her hands of the idea that she was responsible for what happened at the hands of monsters. Her hard-won forgiveness is not for their benefit. Instead, it is the process of forgiving herself for ever thinking she had any role or choice in any of the abuse that happened to her or the people she failed to protect.

She deserves to be free of the guilt that has often been crippling and destructive. That little scared girl grew up to be the strong and obnoxious me that will never forgive or excuse any of them ever again. They don't deserve it. As far as I am concerned, they can all fuck right off the edge of a cliff. She forgives me for all the time I wasted blaming her for the things that happened, and I forgive her for all the nights she refuses to let me sleep.

Forgiveness is a selfish act of empowerment, and a beautiful statement of self-love that I'm slowly learning I deserve.

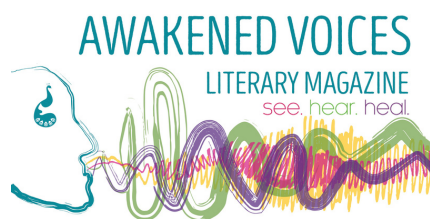




AWAKENINGS

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.

Awakenings' mission is to provide survivors of sexual violence with a trauma informed, inclusive art-making experience that encourages healing.



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JUDITH'S CIRCLE