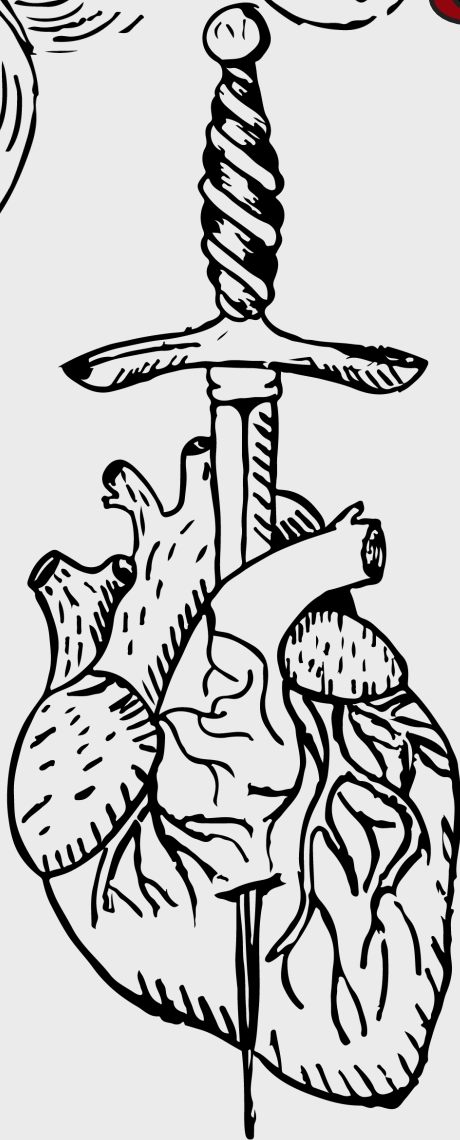


Harbinger

2023



Love and Other Fatalities

Harbinger

2023

n. har•bin•ger [här•bin•jer]

a person or thing that comes before to announce
or to give indication of what will follow

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Contents

Fiction

Stockholm in Indigo | 7

Baylee Johnson

The Bubble | 12

Em Louraine

Work of a Body | 17

Zoe London

Winner of the 2023 Pittman Prize in Prose

Candy | 30

Darden Taylor

Dairy Dream

Burgers Exposed | 41

Abbey Heller

A Girl Walks Home

Alone at Night | 52

Ruby Hewerdine

Lifeless Matter | 54

Jessamin McSwain

Patients | 58

Julie Wiley

Coming Home | 60

Jack Hayes

Genesis | 68

Jessamin McSwain

Dear Reader | 72

Abbey Heller

Space Oddity | 76

Em Louraine

Nonfiction

No Curtain Call | 32

Zoe London

Poetry

Jordan Davis

Ferguson Protests, 2014 | 22

Mercy | 24

Winner of the 2023 Pittman Prize in Poetry

Jack Hayes

Uneducated Tryptych on the

Mundanity of God | 46

3 a.m. | 47

Ruby Hewerdine
Tar | 67

Zoe London
Accismus | 78
Riposte | 80
Howl | 82

Interview

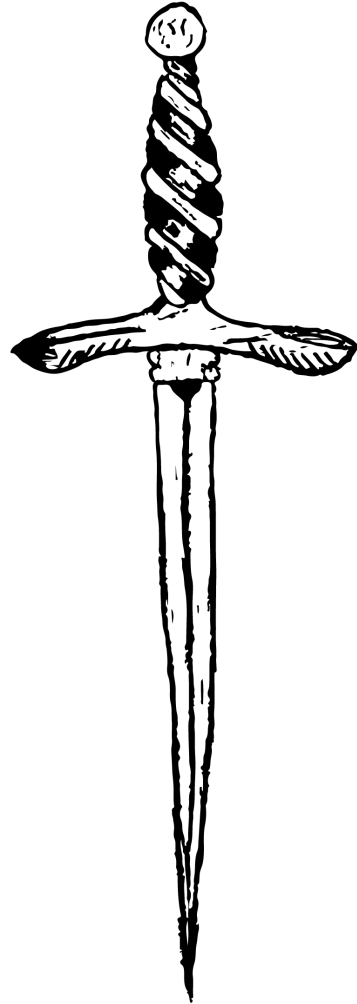
A Conversation with
Scott Garson | 26
Editor of *Wigleaf*

A Conversation with
Morgan Kail-Ackerman | 48
Designer of *They Call Us*

A Conversation with
Kate McIntyre | 64
Editor of *hex*

Art Feature

Luminaries of Female
Literature | 36
Baylee Johnson



Foreword

Love and Other Fatalities

In Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, love and fatality are linked through a complex series of events: after assuming that the other is dead, the star-crossed lovers both take their own lives. While most modern theatergoers would not categorize the play as purely a romance (entrenched in political conflict and commentary as it is), it nevertheless has cemented itself in the cultural zeitgeist as an iconic love story. *Romeo and Juliet* has forever linked these two dissonant ideas of love and death. But were the young lovers' fates truly predestined or do we have a choice when dealing with life's two most significant ordeals?

Let's start with love. Is it a choice or a feeling? Phrases such as "falling in love," "love is blind," and "love at first sight" imply that love is an involuntary emotion, but many tend to argue that being lovestruck is not all there is to it. By contrast, there's a badge of honor to calling love a choice, especially when it means choosing to love—to stay by someone's side—after the intensity of romance has faded. Some prefer to make a distinction between love and infatuation, suggesting that the latter is fleeting while the former requires an active choice.

While the subject of death is more difficult to tackle, we seldom think of it as a choice. Phrases like "death trap" and "kiss of death" drive home the point of death being untimely, out of our control, and yet the question of death is far from simple. While Romeo and Juliet choose death over a life without their lover, in the Shakespearean history *Antony and Cleopatra*, the heroine who is devastated by the loss of her true love chooses death to evade Roman capture. There's an implicit question to be found in both plays: similar to our choice (or lack thereof) to love; do we also play an active role in our own destruction?

While there are no simple answers when it comes to love and death, our explorations of these experiences are woven into countless works of art and literature.

In *Harbinger 2023: Love and Other Fatalities*, our magazine explores love through a variety of genres, literary forms, and lenses. “Stockholm in Indigo” by Baylee Johnson depicts a listless artist and their companion, while “Work of a Body” by Zoe London utilizes metafiction techniques to look at a repressed love only expressed through written erotica. In Jessamin McSwain’s “Lifeless Matter,” the monster of Frankenstein seeks out his creator in hopes of being granted a companion, displaying the desire for intimacy that all of us hold.

Death, by contrast, is expounded upon with the same amount of care in this issue. “Ferguson Protests, 2014” by Jordan Davis paints a vivid portrait of picking through a beloved city that’s been left in ruin by systematic injustice. Her poem “Mercy” is similarly delicate yet raw in its retelling of a suicide attempt, paired with stark imagery of racially-motivated violence and its effect on the narrator. “A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night” by Ruby Hewardine tackles fear of death—with a twist. “Space Oddity” by Em Louraine explores the moments leading up to death, and “Coming Home” by Jack Hayes looks at the aftermath of losing a spouse.

Death and rebirth end up being two sides of the same coin in our spring issue, both the literal death found in science fiction—like Jessamin McSwain’s monster in “Genesis”—as well as a death of identity as depicted in Julie Wiley’s “Patients.” However, a metaphorical death ends up offering a positive solution in “The Bubble” by Em Louraine, where the protagonist leaves behind their old name to become their authentic self.

Harbinger 2023: Love and Other Fatalities is an honest, thought-provoking collection of prose, poetry, interviews, and art. Please enjoy this intimate look at two sides of the universal experience of being human, as well as how they intersect to inform our destruction and our rebirth. ~ Z.L.

Stockholm in Indigo

Baylee Johnson

I woke up early this morning. There was nothing beyond my windows, only solid blackness. Thunder rumbled and car engines droned. The most beautiful places had come to me in sleep but had since drained from memory.

I padded down the hall toward the sounds of pacing, the faint creak of floorboards, and hushed mumbling from a darkened room that was not my own. I paused and then left them alone, thinking it best.

In the kitchen, I put on the coffee and dropped bread in the toaster. Thunder cracked and the kitchen lights flickered. I glanced at the coffee maker. The green light was still on, and steam puffed from the machine. When the toast popped up, I decided to check on Stockholm. I knew they didn't want to be bothered—they never do—but against their wishes, I knocked on their door.

“Come in,” the voice called.

The room was dark except for a dim light from the phone propped on the desk. Shadows fell across the unmade bed, and a figure sat at the desk with a paintbrush in hand. A small canvas sat in front of them. Their phone played jazz from a local radio station.

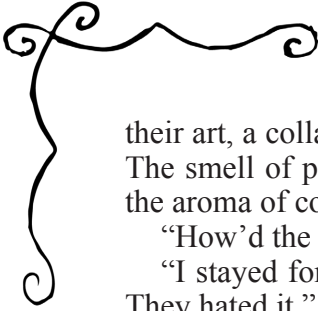
“You're up early,” I said.

“I haven't slept.”

“Same thing you've been saying for weeks. Sleeping in the afternoon too. I brought coffee.”

“I see that. On the desk. I'm busy.”

I did as they requested while my eyes gravitated toward



their art, a collage of precise strokes of gray and dull green. The smell of paint overwhelmed the room and mixed with the aroma of coffee grounds.

“How’d the exhibit go?”

“I stayed for an hour then left. The looks on their faces. They hated it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, I can tell they hated it. When they look at my work, they just see messy strokes.”

Their features—dark hair, dark eyes—were illuminated by the light of their phone.

“You sound like her. She never really cared for all of this.”

“Don’t say that,” they replied.

“I mean it. You saw the ribbons. Won so much but was never happy. What are you trying to do then? Make art for yourself?”

“If that was the case, I wouldn’t bother to submit my work to shows.”

“What’s it all for, Stockholm?”

“It doesn’t matter.” They twirled the brush between slender fingers and then placed it in a cup of murky water.

“Do you see the value in it, or do you support me so I’ll bring in money?”

They watched me carefully, and I knew they expected an answer. “You know it’s not for the money. I just want you to be happy. Is this a trick question?”

“I just want your answer.”

“The value is through whatever story your art tells. I’m not an artist, you know that. Why do you always ask me these things?”

“Then if the story is unclear?”

“The charm is in figuring it out. To make them think.”

“Sit down. I dislike when you hover.” Their eyes moved back to the canvas.

I sat on the edge of their bed and listened to the rain. It was really coming down now.

“You’re not happy,” I said. “You never seem happy anymore. When did it happen, Stockholm?”

“There is no story in these paintings.” They sighed and then leaned back in their chair. “There isn’t any value in art anymore. It never matters. Nothing tells stories. You just create for the sake of creating.”

I didn’t know what they meant. “I’m sure there is.”

“There isn’t. It’s the absence.” They paused and rolled their tongue against the inside of their cheek. They did this when deep in thought. “Exhibits are such a waste of time. You don’t really think I’m like her, do you? Don’t answer that.”

“Stockholm,” I began, but my words felt dry in my mouth.

“They want to capture the soul, but I can’t do that. I don’t

think there’s anything left for me to paint. All I can provide is what is no longer there. What then? What stories do I tell?”

I wanted to tell them of their genius. How brilliant their lines were and how delicate their touch was. How despite the dull colors, every work was vibrant—just like them. But I said nothing.

“I want you to give my paintings to my father. I’m tired of looking at them. There’s no room in this flat anyway. It’s suffocating. I’m drowning here.” They frequently bemoaned their career, but this time it seemed different.

Stockholm got up from their chair and took the cup of water and brushes to the bathroom.

“I was named after a city I’ll never go to.” Their voice bounced off the bathroom’s tiled walls. “I’ve never been to Sweden. I wanted to once, you know. I’ve been to Berlin and met a few pretentious fuckheads from the gallery. They still think we’re friends. I ought to block their numbers.”

I remembered that trip. I didn’t go with them, but we shared many phone calls. It was the last time I heard them be

“They want to capture the soul, but I can’t do that. I don’t think there’s anything left for me to paint.”

expressive and warm.

“You always stay in your room. I don’t see you anymore. I’m living with a ghost,” I said, unsure of why. Where had the words come from?

Stockholm stared at me from the doorway of the bathroom. Their mouth was a straight line, and their eyes were overcast,

But when was it
that they’d stopped
smiling? It was
getting more and
more difficult to tell.

like the sky outside. They pulled a sheepskin jacket off the back of their chair and mechanically slid their arms into the sleeves.

“Then I’ll go out today,” Stockholm said.

“It’s so early. Are you sure you don’t want breakfast?”

“Not hungry. Coffee’s a meal anyway. Don’t waste food on me,” they replied. “In fact, I might be out for a while.”

Stockholm fixed their gray eyes on me. They flashed like the brush strokes on their canvas. They pulled a scarf from the depths of their closet and wrapped it loosely around their neck.

“I’m going out today,” they repeated. “I may be longer than normal. I need inspiration.”

“If you’re thinking of people watching, most of the cafés don’t open until ten. It’s still early.” I knew them well. That was how they usually obtained their ideas, even if they never enjoyed them.

“I know that.”

“If you want something to eat, I can make it. You don’t have to leave. Sleep in.”

“Don’t make me dinner tonight. I doubt I’ll be home for it. I told you, I’m not hungry.”

“Then why visit the cafés?”

“I’m not. I’m taking a walk.”

I followed them out of the room and down the hall, the light of their phone fading as they put distance between us. At the front door, they grabbed their umbrella.

“I figured out what artist you remind me of,” I blurted out.

“Who?”

“Edward Hopper.”

Their face went blank, their expression unreadable. “My art looks nothing like his,” they said. “It never will either. It looks like nothing.”

I knew them well. I had watched them throw out paintings or punch holes in them out of frustration. They’d torn out hair and shredded cigarette packs. But when was it that they’d stopped smiling? It was getting more and more difficult to tell.

“No, not your style.” I paused. “Are you going to start over again?”

Stockholm looked at me with their blank, distant eyes. “Yes, I think I will start over. Somewhere else.”

I didn’t know what their words meant, and I wondered, again, when had their words stopped making sense? “Don’t catch a cold,” I said weakly.

“I won’t.” Without another word, Stockholm closed the door behind them with a final click of the lock.

How long would it be until they returned?

The Bubble

Em Louraine

On the outskirts of town, there used to be a bubble.

That's what I called it at least. I don't know what it was, just that it was there. It could have been anything: a vortex, a portal, a fairy circle, anything. All I know is that there was a threshold, and once something crossed the line, it disappeared. I don't know if it's even there anymore.

I discovered it when I was on a walk. I lived out in the sticks, where the people are sad and happy cows roam into your yard. There wasn't much to do out there, except for walking.

The roads were made of rocks, and the trees were tall and protective. There was a house every mile or so. Behind the houses stretched rolling blankets of green grass, with black and white and brown dots that let out the occasional, sonorous "moos." I always said hello to the cows when they got close to the buzzing fences. They never said anything back, but that was okay.

I was out longer than normal on this day. The sun was setting, but my feet weren't slowing, so I kept moving forward. I had reached a part of the countryside I had never been to before, and it was both exciting and nerve-wracking. If I let the sun get too ahead of me and get enveloped by the night, I knew I wouldn't be safe. People go missing out here. There was a new missing person on the news every week. Some I recognized, some I didn't. Frightening both ways.

The sky had turned dusk by the time I stopped. A single bead of sweat slid down my back and I shivered. Something was off.

Ahead of me, on the opposite side of the road, was a house, at least three stories high. I had never seen a house that large. There were two third-floor windows above the front door. It resembled a face, a face that was staring at me.

The air was buzzing, but there were no electric fences anymore. There was just me, the house, trees on all sides, and the knowledge that none of those things are supposed to make noises like that. The buzzing raised the hairs on my arm and the back of my neck as if there was electricity in the air. Despite having been in the hot sun, everything felt chillier.

Behind me came the sound of scattering stone. I looked behind me. A cat approached. It was a very cute tabby with no collar, but I knew the rules out here. The animals have no rules.

“Watch out, buddy,” I murmured to it. “Something’s weird.”

The cat acknowledged me but kept walking, like cats often do. As it sauntered past, I watched it vanish before my eyes. First the head, then the front legs, the torso, the back legs. Before I could do anything, the tail was flicking into non-existence, and the cat was gone. I hadn’t imagined it; I wasn’t mistaken. There was no more cat.

I scrambled over to the closest tree and broke off a branch. I couldn’t remember where the cat had started disappearing, so I inched the branch out, watching the end of it. The leaves started to melt away, followed by the twigs. Soon enough, the branch was only a few inches long. When I tossed it into the air, the thing vanished.

“Weird,” I muttered.

“Ain’t it?”

I whirled around and saw a tall skinny man dressed in tattered brown clothes. I had never seen him before.

“Who are you?” I asked stupidly.

“Somebody who’s just passing by,” he replied. He had an easygoing smile, but I didn’t trust him.

“You know what this is?” I asked, jabbing a thumb at the open air behind me.

“Mm,” he said with a nod. “It’s mine.”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.”

“It makes things go away,” he said. The air got even colder, and I shuddered.

“I noticed,” I said, my voice a whisper. “There was a cat.”

“Yeah, I get a lot of wandering animals.” The man sighed. “They’re fine though, if you were worried.”

“A little.” I shifted my weight from foot to foot. “Where do they go?”

“Back to where I’m from,” he said. I knew I didn’t want the answer to the next automatic question, so I kept my mouth shut. “Is there anything you want to make go away?”

For some reason, I started thinking about it. There were plenty of things I wanted to disappear: mosquitos, taxes, a handful of people I knew. But I didn’t think that was how the bubble worked.

“Does it have to be something physical?” I asked.

“What do you have in mind?” The man smiled widely.

“Um, my old name?” I asked.

“Is there
anything you
want to make
go away?”

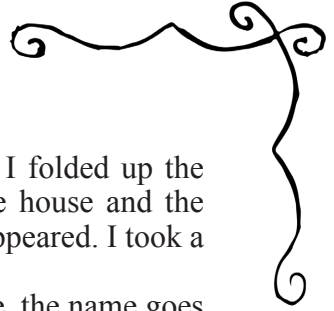
The man took another step toward me, his smile growing wider. “Your old name? Do you have a new one now?”

“I do,” I said, squaring my shoulders. “An old name for the person I’m not anymore.”

“Ah, I see,” the man said. He nodded and crossed his arms. “A fellow shapeshifter?”

I laughed and then said, “Something like that. Can I?”

The man thought for a moment and then nodded again. He reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil, as if he somehow knew ahead of time what I would ask for. He tossed the two items to me, and I caught them. With the paper pressed against the palm of my hand, I wrote my old, dead name. Five letters that made me shudder worse than the cold air. Five letters made me want



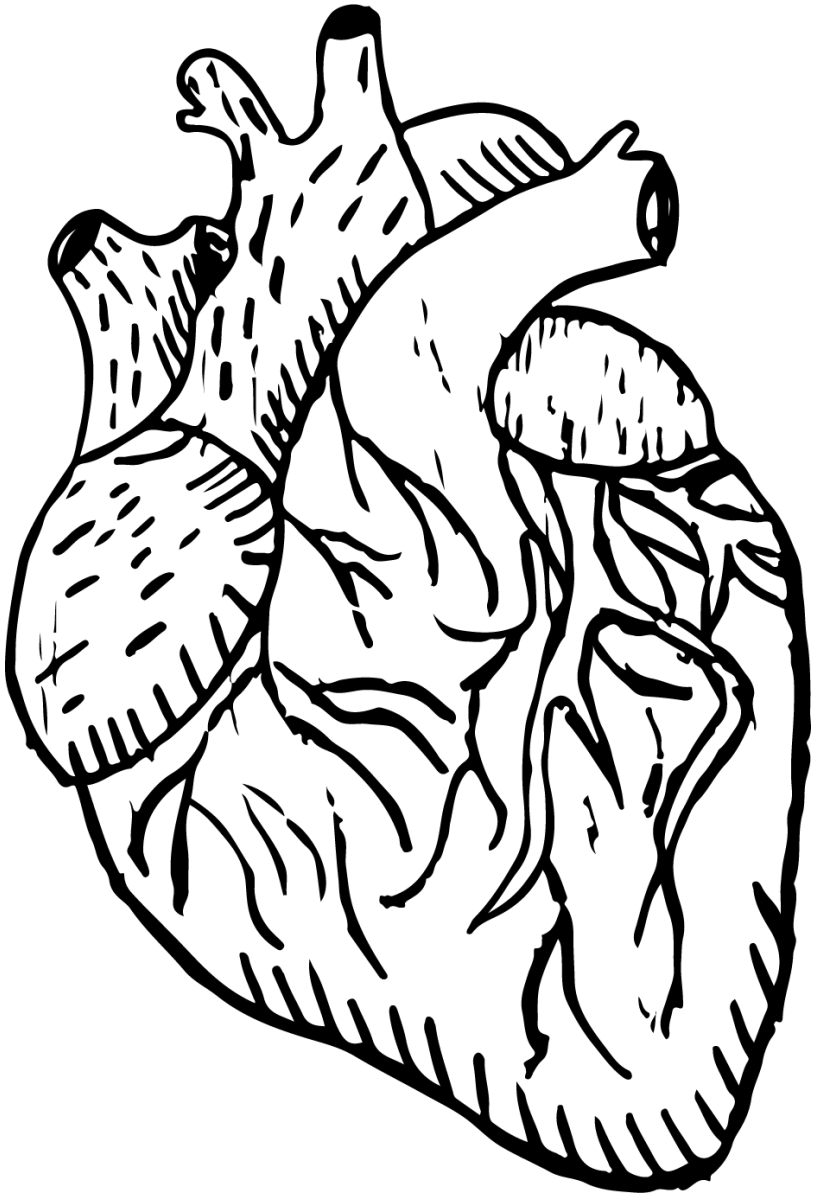
to crawl out of my skin.

But I finished the word with a flourish. I folded up the piece of paper and turned back to face the house and the place where the cat and the branch had disappeared. I took a deep breath and rolled my shoulders.

“So, if I throw this piece of paper in there, the name goes away too?” I asked, turning toward the man, but he wasn’t there anymore. As if he had walked through the bubble himself, he had vanished.

I took another deep breath and threw the piece of paper. In a single second, it was gone. And I knew she was gone too.

I turned around and started walking back home. I was scared, I was grateful, I was weirded out. But I was still alive; I was still there. Air was rushing through my lungs; blood was flowing through my veins like a river. I am still alive; I am still here.



Work of a Body

Zoe London

“What’s the point of this?” asks Body.

She kisses Author long and feverish, tongue pushing past parted lips. The plum-colored duvet wrinkles under Body’s knees, as she straddles Author on the bed. Author almost calls it their bed, but it’s not. It’s Author’s room, and her bed, too. Body is a guest.

“This is how I get my first drafts,” says Author. She comes up for air long enough to gasp an answer, nothing more. “Can you be a bit rougher? The male lead is supposed to be a jerk.”

Body kisses her again, pushing her down to lay flat on the bed. “Good?”

“Something different.”

She pins Author’s wrists above her head and insinuates her knee between Author’s thighs. Author grinds against her, lets herself chase the friction. Her mind is foggy, but not too foggy to write this down later. This isn’t what Author wants; it’s for her female lead. “With some edits, it’ll work.”

Body leans down and kisses her again. She makes desperate noises—ones that don’t really fit Author’s stoic, domineering male lead—but she lets Body kiss her like that anyway. She must always edit her work afterwards, and this is one of those fixable details.

Body lets go of her wrists, and she runs her hands through Author’s hair, fingers getting caught and tugging on her curls. Good, that’s a good detail, it brings verisimilitude to any love scene. Author lifts her hands between them and unbuttons

Body's shirt, committing the mechanics to memory. Body undresses her as well.

"How does this help you?" asks Body, mouth near the hollow of Author's throat.

"It's how I achieve realism."

"But you write heterosexual erotica."

"Girl-on-girl is steamier," says Author, and she cries out when Body touches her ribcage, then her tits. "So, I base it on that. That's how you sell books."

Body kisses her collarbone. Author pulls off Body's shirt, unfastens her bra and lets it fall onto the bed.

"I don't like how you say girl-on-girl," says Body. "Call it what it is."

"Sorry. What should I call it?"

Author flicks one of her nipples with her thumb, since that keeps a paragraph of foreplay from dragging on without anything interesting happening. Author repeats the motion, but this time with her tongue. No, her foreplay is far from boring. It has dramatic shape, sweat, and movement—the works. Body moans.

"Fuck, it's fine," she says.

Author thinks about touching her, so she'll make that noise again. She likes when Body's voice becomes a whimper. But her male lead would never sound like that, so there's no literary value in hearing it.

"Next scene," says Author.

Swinging her leg off Author, Body takes off her pants and helps Author sit up. Author wears a skirt, so Body doesn't have to take it off. That's the neat thing about skirts—they flip up so easily. Readers love when the female protagonist gets fucked while she's still wearing a skirt—so Author lets Body flip up hers and put her hand between her legs.

"Shit." She twitches with the rhythm of Body's fingers, in and out. Fingers curl inside Author, and she bites her lip, so she doesn't moan. Author never feels this way when she has sex with men. All things considered, then, it's good that

Body has become the hands and mouth of her male lead. She gives Author plenty of inspiration to draw from. Her editor always tells her that “seeing stars” is an unrealistic cliché, but Author knows better. She’s seen them.

Author leans back on her elbows, and she stares at Body, beyond the negative space between her wobbly knees. Body’s lidded eyes are fixed between her legs. It makes Author anxious, but it makes her happy. It makes her wet.

“Strap,” says Author.

She announces it like you’d announce a gift on Christmas morning. As an erotica writer, Author is Santa, and perfect penetrative sex is the gift that every horny housewife expects from her. Body pulls her hand away. Author sits up and reaches for the bedside cabinet, but Body grabs her wrist.

“Wait,” says Body. “Let me do something different.” Her eyes don’t meet Author’s own; rather, she scans Author’s skin and hones-in on her breasts. Author doesn’t necessarily mind. After all, her female lead wouldn’t mind if the male lead sized her up like a piece of meat. She’d find it hot. More inspiration.

“Such as?” asks Author.

“Go down on you.”

Author frowns. “That’s not the scene I’m writing.”

“I don’t fit that scene.”

Body lays down on her stomach in between Author’s thighs. (Author needs to make it clear in her internal monologue, she *lets* Body do this. She had the opportunity to push her away, but no, she lets Body settle in the space between her legs.) Body speaks, but her face tells a different story. Author has written a million scenes like this before with cryptic characters who never say what they mean. Body’s face tells the whole story: *Look at me and don’t ignore it.*

At least, that’s what Author assumes she’s thinking. But

She must always edit her work afterwards, and this is one of those fixable details.

how could she know, really? Body isn't one of her characters. Harder to predict, harder to control.

Aloud, Body says, "If I go down on you, you'll be able to write it better."

"Is that so?"

"Straight women can't. For one thing, their men are never able to find their clits."

"Good point," says Author. "Go ahead."

Body dips her head and puts her mouth to work, as a body does. She traces patterns with her tongue as her hands become involved. Author tries to inventory every detail so she can write it down later. If she didn't hyper fixate, with the intent to recreate it after she's orgasmed and gotten dressed again, then she might have to lay still, let her mind descend into white noise, and feel all that she feels.

Body eats her out, and her own body does that involuntary thing that readers love because it implies a loss of control: she shakes. Her thighs tremble in Body's blunt-nailed grasp. When Body moans against her clit, Author feels the sound slink up her spine. She moans, and then she gasps, and then she whines, and then she cries out. She realizes that there aren't nearly enough words for all the sounds you can make during sex—but that's a problem for her editor. Author just needs to focus on keeping her legs spread and her mind open. She's nothing if not open-minded.

"Fuck me, Daddy," she says. "Fuck me harder, please, Daddy." It's not good dialogue at all. It's not meaningful or even particularly sexy. But for some reason her readers love it, so her editor insists that she write it. Author says it aloud now, tests out the words, experiments with volume and tone so she can describe it better. There's something exaggerated about her words, something that keeps the moment from being grounded.

Author comes without taking Body's strap—just her mouth and tongue. That's okay. She'll rewrite that part later for the male lead. It'll make for a perfect scene.

Coming down from her high, Author feels Body move out from between her legs. She looks at Body's face—her wet mouth, her damp cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" asks Author.

Body doesn't scramble to grab her discarded clothes like usual. "I don't like pretending to be something I'm not."

"It's so I can write the scene. That means it's pretending. Right?"

Body looks at her. "Do you really believe that?"

"Yeah."

"It's only pretending because we have a dildo, and you call me Daddy."

Author sits up and crosses her legs. If only she could hide behind paper and pen, or a laptop, or all her books like a flimsy, paperback barricade.

"I don't love you."

"Okay," says Body.

"You love me, and I need you to write," says Author. Her voice strains, like the sounds they made earlier. She's going hoarse. "It's not anything more than that. I told you as much. It's mutually beneficial, but this isn't what love looks like."

"I know what you think love looks like. Believe me."

Author doesn't respond. She's far better at dialogue than she is at conversation.

Body swings her legs off the bed, but she sits there and doesn't get dressed. Author gets the feeling she won't be leaving any time soon—and she doesn't have the heart to kick her out. Not tonight, not when Body's face expresses true feelings:

I'm not a male lead.

I'm a woman between your legs.

I want you to write a story, the story that is real, and not write me out of it.

Author pulls on underwear and a shirt, then she stumbles to her desk next to the bed. She sits down, opens her laptop, and starts typing. The faster she writes everything down, the easier it will be to forget.

Ferguson Protests, 2014

Jordan Davis

We walk to your favorite convenience store
in its abandoned state.

The cremation, once wood and paper, is
now sprinkled with shards of glass.

The roof, formerly high and mighty,
sits low on a singed foundation.

The destruction is displayed on global flatscreens,
but we see our refuge going up in flames.

Ashes become one with the wayward wind
in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri.

“When will this end?” we ask as
we observe what was left from a battle of penance.

The gray pavement is stained scarlet in
an attempt to cleanse an unrepenting offense.

But there’s a crowd, no longer constrained,
unleashing rage, plaguing our city carbon black.

With my hands hidden in my pocket,
I kick rocks and rubber bullets on the side of the street,

and when we return home to the quiet small drive dominated by oaks,
the underlying tensions weigh heavy on bare branches.





Mercy

Jordan Davis

In the ground below me,
a medical monitor sounds a fatal warning.
I'm on the fourth floor,
where bodies are free from physical infirmity
but conned to a self-imposed habit of thinking.

“What brought you here?”
an apathetic psychiatrist asks.

I recall the woven strands of fiber
hanging loosely around my neck
and the wooden stool,
one step, predicting life or death.

I said a prayer:
“Reserve a place in Heaven for me?”
and in response to my despondency,
the internal hymn of guilt rang out
as strands of fiber caressed my neck
from my own doing.

Those who came before me
had their black bodies hung from trees
bare naked for white ruffians to see.

In despondency,
I felt the cries of my ancestors.
The fragility of their lives should have been a desire for mine,
but like the oppressors, I strangled their cries.

Before I let my body fall free, I asked,
“Will you reserve a place in Heaven for me?”
Beneath the heaps of cries of
a failed attempt,
my ancestors rejoiced from the Heavens, chanting,
“Child, not yet.”

A Conversation with Scott Garson, Editor of *Wigleaf*



Scott Garson edits Wigleaf. He is the author of a book of microfictions, American Gymnopédies (Lit Pub Books). His first full-length collection of stories, Is That You, John Wayne? is forthcoming from Queen's Ferry Press.

Ruby Hewerdine: Tell me about *Wigleaf*. What kind of work do you publish and when did it get started?

Scott Garson: We're an online journal of very short fiction—under 1,000 words. Technically that's our only criteria for submissions: if it's under 1,000 words and it's a story, we're potentially open to it. We got started in 2008, which is before many magazines were online. You couldn't just have the idea one day and have a journal started by nightfall. There were no "prefab" journals at that point; you had to code it to get one. So, *Wigleaf* is still a hand-coded journal. Since 2008 we've gained a readership and won a lot of best micro-fiction awards, best small fiction awards, and we're a 5-time Pushcart winner, which is unusual for an online journal.

RH: You're an editor for *Wigleaf*, as well as one of the original creators, is that correct?

SG: Yes, I'm the founding editor, the acting editor, the web designer, graphic designer, managing editor, and I run the editorial staff meetings. I do everything, but now we have an internship at the University of Missouri. The students who get selected are great. They help the magazine stay young.

RH: Speaking of the interns, what's the internship process like? How do they apply and what do they do?

SG: They send me a letter of interest—if they happen to know me then it helps [laugh]—but even if they don't, we discuss what they like to read so I can get a sense of whether they would be a good editorial fit. Every semester I have two groups: one group of returning interns and a group of new students. The new group goes through a four-week training period where I introduce them to the aesthetics of the journal and the ethics of being first reader of a submission.

RH: How does the submission process work for *Wigleaf*? What's the acceptance rate?

SG: We have a 2 to 2.5% acceptance rate. Our submission platform only allows us to take approximately two hundred submissions a month. Each submission might have as many as four micro-fiction or two flash-fiction pieces in them. Each intern reads about twenty submissions a week. They send what they're excited about to me, and then at the editorial table we discuss possible acceptances.

RH: What sort of things might make you consider a piece good enough for publication?

SG: All the stories that make it to the editorial table are quite good. We don't have a defined measure for what a story would need to do or be to be accepted. The only thing we insist upon is being surprised. The experience of the story must be a new and exciting one for us.

RH: Have you noticed change in literary attitudes toward flash fiction?

SG: More and more print journals are now interested in flash-fiction. Because of the boom in online interest, you see more and more writers experimenting with it. Almost every serious young writer in an MFA program is going to experiment with flash. To give you a comparison, when I was in graduate school, I wrote flash in secret. The form just was not done. It wasn't regarded as "real" writing. You couldn't show it to anybody in your program, certainly not your teachers. But things have really changed.

RH: Wow, so you got in on the ground floor of a rising trend.

SG: Yes, it's turned out to be the case.

RH: Do you know how many visitors you have to your website?

SG: It varies. We average a few hundred visitors a day. There are days when we get thousands; it depends on what we have posted. This is part of what makes running a magazine so fun. You get to see in real time how you're doing, when you're succeeding, and when the work you're choosing to publish is hitting with readers. The other thing we have that really influences our numbers is the Top 50. The *Wigleaf* Top 50 is an annual project that surveys other online literary magazines and draws flash-fiction from their pages to promote and spotlight their work. This has become a big deal. When that goes live, our numbers go through the roof.

RH: Speaking of audiences, have you noticed any communities forming around *Wigleaf*? Frequent commenters? Submitters?

SG: Yes. The easiest way to notice that is through Twitter. There's been a *Wigleaf* neighborhood full of people who

read the magazine regularly and help us publicize stories when we post them.

RH: That's really cool. If I'm not mistaken, *Wigleaf* is totally free, yes?

SG: It is. No paywall. There will never be a paywall.

RH: So how do you go about fundraising?

SG: We do have a patron who helps with funding. I could do more fundraising, but it takes time that I don't necessarily have.

RH: Has *Wigleaf* gotten a lot of media attention since it was launched in 2008?

SG: We have. We've been mentioned in the *Paris Review*, which was exciting. Most of the attention we get is online. I can't count the number of interviews I've given like this one, which is great; I love getting to spread the word.

RH: Well, I've certainly learned a lot. Thanks so much for the interview!

Candy

Darden Taylor

“I found it in the garbage.” I held out the palm of my hand. In it, there lay a foreign object. It resembled an egg of some sort. Perhaps candy. It was difficult to tell. I was holding it out for my mother to see.

“Why is it glowing?” she asked, perplexed. I could see on her face that she had not come across anything like this before despite her daily work with vaginas.

“Perhaps it likes you.” I paused. “Is it a vulva?” I was embarrassed to ask, but I had to know.

“What? Absolutely not.” My mother looked stern, even a bit disappointed. Like I was stupid or something. I probably was at the time. “No, honey. This has nothing to do with a woman’s body.”

“Hmm. Okay.”

“You found it in the garbage? *Our* garbage?”

I shrugged again. “Um, well, maybe I found it in John’s room?”

“John’s room? What would John be doing with something like this?”

As she asked this, the vulva began to grow spikes. They were blunt at the tip, like a Koosh ball. It tickled my palm. I laughed. Mother startled.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Put it down!” she exclaimed.

I felt an urge to wrap my fist around it, make it mine. I could not bear to part with it; after all, I had found it in the garden. What could be the harm of something from the garden?

I shook my head. “It’s only growing up. I believe it just

entered teenagerhood.” Helpless, the vulva seemed to need me to explain its evolution.

“Teenagerhood?” My mother drew her eyebrows together and edged closer to me. She did that sometimes when she became overwhelmed with curiosity. It was how she ended up working with vaginas.

“Yes, teenagerhood. Don’t touch it.”

“Why?”

“It will cocoon soon.”

My mother sighed, exasperated. “And just how do you know this?”

“It told me when I first found it in the orchard.”

“Well, return it. I don’t want it here.” She crossed her arms in a gesture of finality.

I looked down at the scared vulva, its little body quaking. It would hate the streets—it much preferred the warmth of my home. Still, I could not disobey the woman who stood before me, and so I gave her a simple nod. “As you wish,” I said.

I walked down the hallway, past John’s room and our garbage can by the front door. Through that front door we went, passing through the garden and beyond the orchard. Together we ambled through winding walkways and deep valleys. We passed through gnarly forests and crossed giant rivers. By the time we reached our destination, the vulva had matured into adulthood, though it still hadn’t cocooned. I placed it on the highest tree on the highest mountain where it glowed brightly.

Returning home without it was the hard part. I’d lost my friend. I’d wanted to see how she would turn out, what sort of children she would’ve raised. But now it was clear that we would never see each other again. I suppose that to love something, you must let it go.

No Curtain Call

Zoe London

I fidget in my seat, hoping no one can see me in the near darkness of the Shubert Theater. There's an inherent self-consciousness to sitting in a theater for three hours, almost as if *we're* the ones onstage and not cast in the shadow of anonymity. My leg is falling asleep. I try to settle myself, phone and purse clutched carefully in my lap. I'd be mortified if I dropped them during the last scene.

Still, I'm entranced by the Broadway production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It's the first one I've ever attended. As a Kansas girl in New York City, I am enamored with millions of people milling along the streets despite only being able to afford McDonald's and having to suffer the stench of the F train.

There's no music as Celia Keenan-Bolger begins her last monologue. This state of magic—a suspension of reality that's only born inside a theater—grips us all in the moment. I'm twenty years old, and I want to be an actor. It's as though my past and future are captured within this moment. I'll remember it forever.

Stomping in the lobby. Muted voices. I strain to hear them. Plenty of actors have made their entrances from the audience, and this is no different. Why does my gut churn, then? It's nothing, I assume. Just the climax of the production. Goosebumps raise on my forearms, which I attribute to the visceral power of theater.

The theater doors burst open. I turn my head at the sound. Every person in the audience does, I think, since the

production has trained us to look over our shoulders and see actors spilling down the aisles. We are immersed in this world of Scout, Atticus, and Maycomb, Alabama, not in the Shubert Theater, not in New York City, not in a world where we exist.

But I still exist. And I look over my shoulder, and I don't see any actors. Everywhere I look there's chaos. Everyone is running or crawling over seats. There's pushing and shoving and screams about a gun—gunfire in Times Square—banging on the doors to let them in—*please help us*—I'm screaming.

Everyone runs toward the stage. Why are they running in this direction? This isn't an exit; it's a dead end. I drop to the floor, Playbill and phone clutched to my chest. I was so excited to be in the second row. The woman sitting next to me rushes past me, stepping on my hair, fingers, toes. I'm being trampled as several people follow her. They're less like humans to me and more like pairs of disembodied footsteps.

I was stupid to hide on the floor. Everyone cries out at erratic intervals, and it's so loud. I am going to die.

It's as though my past and future are captured within this moment.

The stairs to the balcony are right next to my seat. I came to the show with my friend Emy; she's already fled upwards, just like everyone else in my row. It's a sea of bodies, but I'm small. I push myself into nooks and crannies, past people who can't squeeze their way up the stairs like I can. It's like swimming through quicksand, like a nightmare where you need to run but your legs work in slow motion.

I accidentally shove someone to their knees as I sprint up the stairs. I look down and see it's an old man. He cries out in pain. A younger woman grabs his shoulder to steady him. She looks at me, anguish lining her brow. *What's wrong with you?* she would probably ask me if conversations could be heard over the stampede.

As I stumble up the stairs, I recognize Emy's voice amidst the noise. She is on her phone, crying. Her voice shakes as she says, "Mom, I don't know what's happening. I don't know if I'm going to die. I love you. I'm so sorry."

I wish I could call my mom, but my phone is on the floor under my second-row orchestra seat.

Our cramped staircase up to the balcony goes silent, even as the cacophony of sound rages throughout the theater. Maybe this dichotomy of silence and deafening noise is my own means of self-protection. Heavy breathing, choked-back tears, creaky stairs. All eyes are wide with terror. There are footsteps approaching too quickly. My face is pressed up against a man's tweed jacket. It smells like sweat.

We all turn when a man speaks from the bottom of the stairs.

"A motorcycle backfired in Times Square."

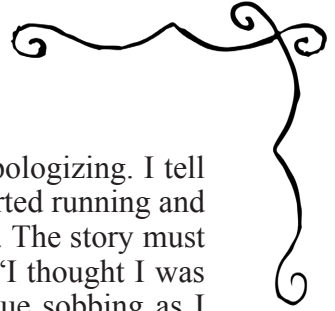
That's all.

One by one, we're polite and orderly in our descent. A few people awkwardly chuckle. Others straighten their jackets and skirts, visibly shaken as they stomp back to their seats. There's a collective sigh of relief, but my heartbeat doesn't return to normal.

There's an announcement over the speaker. *Apologies for the commotion. We will not be completing the performance tonight.*

I find my phone beneath my seat where I left it. It's not broken. I find my keys and purse, too. My Playbill is ripped and marred with footprints, so I grab another that's stashed in an empty seat. I don't know why I want the souvenir.

Emy grabs my hand as we exit the theater. I can't remember what I was supposed to do after the show. Walking toward the train makes my chest tighten, makes me lose my breath, makes my eyes blur with tears. Every shadow, every noise, every face is now someone carrying a gun. I turn on my phone. I have a few texts: "enjoy the show!" sent before I threw myself on the ground. I wonder if this event will be in the news.



I finally call my mom.

“I’m so sorry.” I don’t know why I’m apologizing. I tell her that there was a noise, that everyone started running and screaming, that we thought it was a shooter. The story must sound flimsy to anyone who wasn’t there. “I thought I was going to die,” I choke out and then continue sobbing as I walk around Times Square.

Mom is glad I’m alive, which feels hollow now that I know there was no danger. It was somewhere between real and imagined, in my head and in the heads of everyone there, like a simulation of death. I didn’t see my life flash before my eyes. I could only think of running and then dying.

A friend calls to check on me. I feel like I need to make light of the experience: I’m safe, everyone is safe, there was no gun. As I’m talking to him, I start to decide how I’ll tell this story to my friends when I return to school in the fall. Not as a party anecdote, but a shameful explanation for why I flinch at noises in class. Why I can’t sit with my back to the door. Why I ask my therapist about the effectiveness of active shooter procedures, or if I have PTSD. While I didn’t live through a shooting, my muscle memory tells me otherwise.

After the show, Emy calls an Uber, and we end up at her friend Hayley’s apartment in Harlem. We eat mac and cheese on a pull-out bed. Hayley cracks jokes, and Emy laughs as they relive old times. I can’t bring myself to join in the fun.

My Playbill is undamaged by the mass panic, and I will glance at it months later pinned up on my bulletin board at home. You’d never know what happened or realize the fear tucked within its thin pages. That night doesn’t get a curtain call, and when people ask about the Playbill on my wall, I don’t tell the story.

Luminaries of Female Literature

"I was inspired to create this series of portraits of female writers because each one of them were pioneers of their genres and supported progressive values in literature. They are luminaries of literature for their contributions, whether it's being the first published black woman in America or authoring the first trans story. These stylized portraits were created digitally using a drawing tablet. I used a brown-beige monochromatic color palette to keep the piece cohesive. I hope my artwork can act as a way of paying respect to these dedicated and creative women."

-Baylee Johnson



Phillis Wheatley & Black Artistry



Mary Shelley & Science Fiction



Zora Neale Hurston & Folklore



Virginia Woolf & Female Sexuality

Dairy Dream Burgers Exposed

Abbey Heller

Weston throws open the door of the Dairy Dream entrance and then pauses, scanning the lot for Ruby's white SUV. When she pulls up alongside him, smoke and rock music float from her open window. He tugs open the car door and throws himself into the seat beside her.

"Drive," Weston says.

Ruby opens her mouth to talk but is cut off by shouting from behind the car. A sweaty, balding man is running toward them, holding a towel to his forehead. It's Ted, Weston's boss. She once again opens her mouth to speak.

"Nope. No time for questions. Just drive," Weston demands.

Ruby throws her half-smoked cigarette out the window and slams on the gas. She looks over her shoulder a few times before turning down the music.

"So, are you going to explain, or do I have to guess?"

"It's nothing."

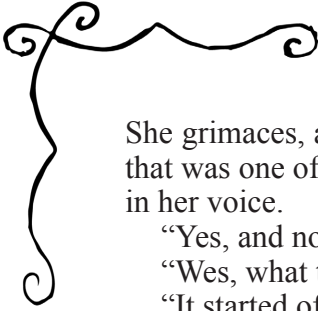
"So, Ted limping, holding a bloody rag to his head, and yelling at us is nothing? That sure did seem like something to me."

"I guess."

"You guess." Ruby brings the car to an abrupt stop and stares at Weston.

"All right! I'll tell you. Do you remember that headline in the *Willow Woods Tribune* a few months ago? The one about a place where I might or might not work?"

"You mean the one about the burgers being human flesh?"



She grimaces, and Weston nods. “Wait, please don’t tell me that was one of your stupid pranks,” Ruby asks, a bit of fear in her voice.

“Yes, and no?”

“Wes, what the fuck does that mean.” She deadpans.

“It started off as a harmless joke.”

Hot oil splashed onto Weston’s arm, the pain causing him to inhale sharply. Ted glanced over but didn’t say anything. A sharp beep from his headset returned Weston’s attention to a customer.

“Hey! I’ve been waiting *forever*. Anyone there?” the customer yelled over the intercom.

Weston winced at the ear-piercing sound and then pulled off the headset and threw it on the counter.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ted asked.

“Taking my fifteen,” Weston stated simply.

Ted picked up the headset and shoved it into Winston’s chest. “You can take your fifteen *after* you finish all your orders.”

“I don’t need this shit!” Weston yelled back and threw his headset.

When he stormed out the front doors, a news van was parked across the street in front of Goodwill. A woman with pristine white-blond hair and a shimmering red pantsuit held a microphone and directed the camera person into position. Weston walked over.

“This is Linda Jackoby reporting from the Eastside Goodwill that was broken into early this morning,” she said blankly into the camera.

Weston waved, catching the reporter’s attention.

“Excuse me, can I help you?”

“Is this really the type of news that people care about?” he asked.

“Oh, you have a newsworthy story, Dairy Dream boy?” She smirked at him. The camera person coughed to cover up a laugh.

“We fry the fries and nuggets in the same oil?”

“That’s all you got kid?”

“No! No, that’s just the beginning. We also use something other than beef for our burgers.”

“This is the middle of nowhere. Everyone puts filler in their beef.”

“Not filler; humans,” Weston blurted.

Linda grabbed the collar of Winston’s work shirt and pulled him close. “Get me an inside look at your freezers. You won’t regret it.”

Weston nodded and she released her grip.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Weston called to her as he ran back across the street to the Dairy Dream parking lot.

“This was a great talk, but I have to get home for dinner so I’m going to leave now.” Weston makes a move for the door handle as Ruby sparks back to life and hits the lock button.

“You are not leaving now! What did you think was going to be the result of this?”

“Shit, I don’t know! I was playing around! I was angry at Ted and found an opportunity to get back at him. I didn’t know it was going to go all the way to the coroner!” Weston’s chest huffs up and down for a few beats before Ruby talks again.

“I don’t understand how it went this far. We’ve talked about this fiasco for months and you never thought to mention that you made it all up?”

“I knew you’d react like this, so I didn’t say anything. I also thought it was funny at first. I mean you should’ve seen Linda when I brought her in after hours.”

In the early morning light, the empty Dairy Dream looked ominous. Weston stood at the doors twirling his keys and whistling while he waited for a *Willow Woods* van to pull up. He glanced at his watch and then opened his phone to check

the last message that was sent by Linda. The message read: “4:30-5:00 a.m. DD invest. Don’t be late.”

The message ended with a knife emoji and a pair of creepy looking eyes. Weston looked at the time again, and then at exactly 5:10, the news van came to a halt along with another car he wasn’t expecting.

“What the fuck!” he said to Linda as she got out of the van.

“Good morning to you, sunshine!”

“We agreed on 4:30-5:00 and just you and your cameraperson.

The other car’s door swung open and out came another woman dressed in a long puffy jacket, wire-rimmed glasses, and her hair pulled into a bun.

“Let’s get this show on the road. I have a class to teach in less than an hour,” the woman with the puffy coat grumbled as she walked toward Dairy Dream.

“Who the hell are you?” Weston stopped her before she could reach for the door handle.

The woman pulled a badge from her coat pocket. “Chief Medical Examiner Tuley.”

Weston scanned the parking lot for any additional cars before ushering them inside.

The inspection took 15 minutes to complete. Tuley bagged up a few frozen patties, while Linda and the cameraman got footage. Weston kept an eye on his watch and periodically peeked out a window to make sure Ted was nowhere in sight.

“All right I’m done here,” Tuley said and placed the bags into her jacket pocket.

“Cool, now leave before my boss gets here,” Weston said as he practically pushed the whole crew out the door.

“That doesn’t answer the question of what was happening when I picked you up earlier.” Ruby lights a cigarette and gives Weston a pointed look when he doesn’t respond.

“I thought it was obvious.” He shrugs. Ruby raises her

eyebrows and waits for a better answer.

“Ted found out and then came after me. I accidentally whacked him in the head.”

“Right, like you’d actually stand up to him.”

“Fine. He came after me and slipped. Happy now?”

“That’s more believable.”

A ping comes from both of their phones. Ruby reaches for her phone first and scans the message. Her mouth drops open. Weston watches her and then scrambles for his phone. Linda has sent a link to a news story. He opens the link and begins to read.

“Dude, what’s happening,” Ruby says without looking up from her phone.

Weston scrolls through the article until he finds a picture of Chief Medical Examiner Tuley holding one of the patties she confiscated. Under the picture is Linda’s interview with her.

L: Chief Medical Examiner Tuley, please tell us what you found.

T: I took samples from the Dairy Dream on the Eastside because there were rumors about the use of human meat. At my lab, I did some testing. The results weren’t what I was expecting.

L: What were the results?

T: The first batch came back as positive. At first, I thought something had contaminated the samples, so I went to the Dairy Dream and bought a fresh burger to test.

L: The results?

T: Positive. Every single burger I tested contained meat from humans.

Ruby turns to Weston who continues to read for a few seconds before looking up at her. Ruby is smiling. “Finally, something exciting happens in this town,” she says.

Weston gives her a disgusted look.

Uneducated Triptych on the Mundanity of God

Jack Hayes

I.

Glowing
cell tower blinks blue
through the thick mist and the rain
this is an angel

II.

Without asking
life's a miracle
one that i don't remember
ever praying for

III.

Unpunished
as it all falls down
i wonder what i did wrong
the answer: nothing

3 a.m.

Jack Hayes

as i jump from thought
to thought
stone to stone
your name washes in and out
like the tide
soft as sea foam
i hear it like shifting sand
whispered on my exhale
into the dark quiet of my room
salt on my tongue
and in my fantasies

A Conversation with Morgan Kail-Ackerman, Designer of *They Call Us*



*Morgan Kail-Ackerman has always been a storyteller, avid reader, passionate thespian, and expressive dancer. Her work as a writer and playwright explores love, feminism, fantasy, and queer relations. She currently lives in Chicago where she is working on her second novel and the 12th edition of her feminist literary magazine, *They Call Us* (www.theycallus.com).*

Zoe London: How did you get involved in the literary arts and, specifically, literary magazines?

Morgan Kail-Ackerman: My background is in English and theater, which equips me to run a literary magazine like *They Call Us*! I studied English Literature at DePaul University in Chicago, where I worked on *Crook and Folly*. I also spent most of my college career studying feminist literature and creative writing. I got involved in the literary arts because I met some fantastic people who were studying the same things. I met two writers, along with an artist, through dance, writing, and theater, and the four of us came together to create a literary magazine. We thought as writers and artists that we could use our artistic abilities to create change, so together we joined our skills to launch *They Call Us*.

ZL: What sets *They Call Us* apart from other literary magazines and makes it special?

MKA: We use our platform to raise the voices of other authors and writers. Although our team writes and creates art for *They Call Us*, we wanted this to be a place where we could lift up other feminist voices through both our magazine and our quarterly, *Coven Congress*. Men have always been afraid of women coming together and talking, so that is exactly what we do. *They Call Us* is also special because of our name. We decided to have *They Call Us* as our title and switch the adjective for each edition of the zine, so that we could have themed issues. We love that we can switch the name of our zine to reflect our current concerns.

ZL: Tell me about the beginnings of *They Call Us*. How did your team meet, come up with the concept, and start working on its development?

MKA: *They Call Us* began when I was catcalled three times in two days. When that happened, I knew that I had to do something, because I was exhausted from being a woman in the world. Thankfully, I had people around me who wanted to do the same thing. From there, the other creators, Megan Harris and Kailah Peters, helped us shift into gear by making sure that the zine happened. We made sure that this wasn't a dream, but instead a reality.

ZL: What is your role within the magazine's team?

MKA: My role has switched as our zine has developed. I am one of the founders of the zine, and the idea originated with me. When we first started, I began as one of the editors, along with KP. Recently I took on the design work, and KP is now the editor. We also have our illustrator, Asko, and our social media manager, Meg.

ZL: Did you set out to create a feminist magazine or did the magazine naturally evolve into one?

MKA: We set out to create a feminist magazine. We wanted

a place where we could bring together feminists from around the world. We wanted to provide a place to talk about everyday instances of sexism.

ZL: How does your publication cycle work? How often do you take submissions and publish new issues, and who and where do your submissions typically come from?

MKA: We have quarterly cycles and release four editions a year. *They Call Us* editions are themed around one topic (fairytale, abortion, the workplace, religion, and many more). Everything but the foreword is from submissions, including the art. We normally get over 100 submissions for each edition: sometimes over 200 for a popular topic.

ZL: *They Call Us* is an online-only publication. Would you like to release print copies in the future, or do you prefer the online format?

MKA: We would love to release print copies in the future. A big part of *They Call Us* is the fact that anyone can access our magazine, even those who can't afford it. So, if we released print copies, we would also have the zine free online so that it is accessible to anyone.

ZL: Themes for previous issues have included motherhood, domestic violence, and the role of women in religious texts. How does your team choose the theme for each issue?

MKA: Themes are based on an aspect of feminism that we haven't touched upon. We really love how we choose all the different editions because there are so many facets to being a gender minority in the world.

ZL: What has been the most rewarding aspect of running a literary journal?

MKA: It is that we inspire people. We get hundreds of

messages on social media about how inspiring our zine is. And, of course, people are happy when we can publish their work. We have published over 200 artists and writers over the course of our eleven editions.

ZL: What has been the most difficult aspect?

MKA: Bigotry is a problem. We are quite active on social media, and it makes us frustrated that a lot of the comments we get are from men trying to shame us. It is hard to make change in the world, and even harder when people can hide behind their computer screens and anonymously attack feminists.

ZL: Outside of working on a literary magazine, how else is English and creative writing a part of your life?

MKA: I am a writer, currently editing one book and drafting my second book, and a 5th-grade teacher.

ZL: You've mentioned that you recently finished the second draft of your novel, and you're hoping to get it published. How exciting! Could you tell me more about that project?

MKA: My book is called *Soul Shapers*. It is a story about four women who come together in a magical patriarchal world to fight back against their discriminatory ways.

ZL: What do you see as the future of *They Call Us*—in terms of content, theme, and the publication as a whole?

MKA: We are doing our best to expand *They Call Us* and are also working on a podcast. We will have more news about the zine coming soon!

ZL: Thank you so much for your time, Morgan. It was so insightful to hear about the exciting work you're doing on *They Call Us* and beyond. We wish you all the best.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night

Ruby Hewerdine

Lucy's quick steps echoed on the sidewalk as she pulled her coat close, trying and failing to fight off the chill she'd been enduring for months now. It was June, and even though temperatures had reached a record high, she'd only grown colder.

After finding a barricade of police cars and eager spectators blocking her usual route, she took an alternate way home from work. She overheard an officer talking about a dismembered body that had been found in a dumpster behind an office building. The image weighed heavy in her mind as she passed by abandoned storefronts, seedy bars, and the occasional heap of blankets and skin that, if inspected, revealed a sleeping human form. Every noise—every hissing alley cat, every raccoon writhing in a dumpster, every distant siren—gripped her heart with fear. Her blood felt ice-cold, though she couldn't tell if it was her nerves, or her current condition.

Somewhere behind her a door opened and closed, interrupting her introspection with the heavy scent of alcohol and the sound of unsteady footsteps following her. She didn't dare turn around and instead kept her gaze fixed on her feet as she prayed for nothing to happen.

Her prayers went unanswered as she heard a slurring voice behind her, mumbling something about a pretty thing like her being out late at night. A rough hand grabbed her left wrist, stopping her in her tracks. Reflexively she turned, and her other hand moved on its own accord toward her assailant.

The last thing she saw before her vision went black was the fear in his eyes as her hand grasped his throat. The next thing she knew, she was standing in a nearby alleyway, her tongue gliding over her newly pointed teeth. They tasted like metal. A scream rose and died in her throat as she saw the man's body lying on the ground in front of her, and his head lying a few feet away. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked down at her bloodstained hands. It was the third time this month.



Lifeless Matter

Jessamin McSwain

I was not born. I was created in the dark laboratory of a man who was under the delusion that he was God. I wonder how many unhallowed graves he unearthed, how many charnel houses he deprived, before he finished his crude experiment. I like to imagine my father did the deplorable deed himself, but it is more reasonable to believe that he paid others to complete the task.

The biting winter wind nips at my flesh. I cannot feel its sting. I am a patchwork of liars, cheats, and criminals. I am the assimilation of many, yet I am no one. Perhaps my femur once belonged to a psychotic lunatic at the gallows, or perhaps it belonged to an estranged mother left bloodless on the street.

I will soon have the chance to ask my father this.

Upon my creation, my birth, he abandoned me. He wept in terror at his own transgressions of the natural order. I, his undesired monstrosity, his meticulous titan, was meant to be beautiful, even more enticing than I had been in life. Sutures hold together my yellow, jaundiced skin. He laughed at the face of God when he attempted to create perfection from the already dead. He enacted a ritual he was unprepared to conclude. He has forsaken my existence, leaving me unintelligible and idiotic.

But I have not forgotten. I am almost upon him.

I have no name because I am unnamable. I cannot walk among the people. My behemoth size consumes space and draws their attention. Why give a child a name when it is

unwanted? Those who see me never exclaim the same title. Creature. Fiend. Specter. Dæmon. Devil. I am not human, but something analogous to them and my wretched creator.

I remember her, the one who showed me benevolence. The girl was dying when I pulled her from the water. The waves would have taken her had I not found her. When I held her close to my heart, I felt something I had not yet known. Intimacy. Warmth. Companionship. She clung to me, her savior and protector. I could be for her what my father was not for me. I relished the dream of a family of my own. Would she accept me despite my hideous nature? Would she want me?

The pain destroyed the dream. I knew then that I would never be welcomed in the houses of men. I brought her from the cusp of death, and all I received in return was the blinding pain from a firearm. She already had a father who despised me. The girl did not need me, but I needed her. I need someone or something to join me in my unlife. But I will always be alone because I am not a man. I am nothing but lifeless matter.

I am nothing but
lifeless matter.

I know my creator is here in the frigid solitude of the Alps.

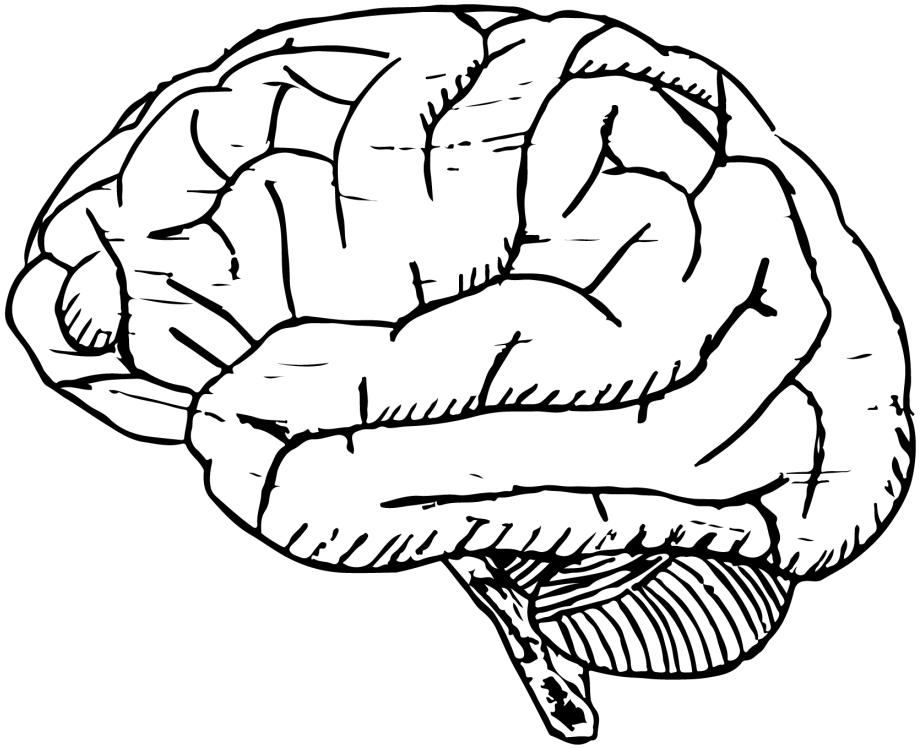
I have often thought how easy it would be to relinquish myself to the cold embrace of the sea. A young boy might find my cadaver and claim me as an anathema of the brackish waves. In death, I could become something greater: A story. I could be a cyclopean beast from the depths of the sea, a cautionary tale for sailing in storms. The boy will tell his father and show him what's left of me. But upon his return the waves would offer me their solace, dragging my soul back into their strange embrace. If only my father had admired me.

Every day I hope my body will collapse and end my hellish existence. I am a corpse with a mind. My existence is torture. I cannot have what I want most. But what is it I want? Is it death? Is it revenge? Or is it love?

Alas, I cannot divulge what has not yet been decided. There is something I mean to do. For months I have searched for my parasite of a father. He has made himself scarce, hiding at the peak of isolation, to flee from me. He abandoned me before knowing me. He stole my chance at the tenderness of a mother's embrace, of the soft touch of a lover, and of paradise eternal. I have no love for I am unlovable.

I am alone, but not for long. I can see my creator at the summit across a sea of ice and snow. The maker will now meet his creation. He will hear my long, strange tale. He will know what I seek most—what will provide me with paradise. He will give me love. He will understand and offer his child what it wants most.

I will make Frankenstein play God once more, and he will create me a lover.



Patients

Julie Wiley

I can't be trusted to walk because they say it will cause more problems if I try. More problems for them, I'm sure.

The nurse rolls me to the x-ray room. *It's just a checkup* is what she whispers. I think her name is Kathy. Well, Kathy, you're right. It is just a checkup—they're checking up on my lungs to see if they have forsaken me. They want to see if I am beyond hope. If so, they'll move me to the Death Wing. That's what happens if you don't come back from a "checkup." I don't know the ward's real name, but Death Wing seems appropriate enough. If you go there, everyone stops trying: the doctors, the nurses, even the patients. Jenna always predicts who won't come back, and today she wouldn't look at me.

Kathy has a silver cross hanging from her neck and greets the doctor with a bright smile. How can she smile working here? Maybe that cross helps her even though this is a godless place full of screams and impending death. I greet him with a *hello Dr. D*. The D stands for Death. He knows this and scowls.

Most of his patients are going to die. He knows it. I know it. Jenna knows it. Why wouldn't she talk to me? Am I next? She could have at least said goodbye. No. It's fine. I am going to miss those kids though.

The staff don't like me being around the kids. I suppose they're afraid I'll infect them, perhaps with my personality. They're certainly not worried about the disease spreading. When it comes to that, we are all on the same sinking ship.

As for my personality, it is too late to worry about it.

The two monsters, Emma and Ty, visit me almost every day. I'm proud of their cunningness. How they manage to ditch the nurses is beyond me. Sometimes I wonder if they really are sick. I can hardly get up while they run around, peeking around doors with their wicked grins. Lately, when they stop by my room, they've been moving more slowly and breathing heavily. Their skin is pale, lips russet, and they're nothing but bones. I'm afraid that soon my little cherubs won't stop by anymore. I hope I'm gone first.

The Death Wing might not be so bad. At least I won't have to suffer one of those "surgeries" to "treat" the disease. The doctors are fond of their experiments to find a cure that never seems to work. I've heard that the patients who undergo their procedures are never seen again.

Kathy leans over my shoulder, her silver cross smacking across my cheek. *Have hope*, she says. Hope. Like it's magic. What are four letters really going to do? Save me? Save them? Having those four little letters in my mouth won't stop blood from coming out. Having *hope* etched into my bones won't keep me from collapsing when I stand. Plugging my ears with hope won't stop the screams of my fellow patients from echoing in my brain.

But, I do have hope. I hope for a lot. I just don't hope for miracles.

Coming Home

Jack Hayes

My husband, Gabe, came from a family of deeply religious Southern Baptists. They never liked me, and he didn't speak to them much after we married. He kept his faith though, and I was willing to accompany him to church on holidays. He never expected me to come with him every Sunday, and I never would have expected him to stop going for me.

My Gabe was a "no sex 'til marriage, big church wedding, 'til death do us part" true believer. I loved him anyway. It wasn't a point of contention; I wouldn't have dreamt of leaving him over something silly like that. And his friends from church were always kind to me. Especially after the accident.

We tried for a long time to get pregnant. Gabe had always wanted a family, more than anything, and after marrying him, I warmed up to the idea. But luck wasn't on our side. I think Gabe started to feel defeated about it. He stopped initiating things in the bedroom, and I think he even spoke to his minister a few times about it. He felt as if he'd done something to make God punish us with a childless home.

But eventually, I became pregnant. I'll never forget how happy Gabe was when I told him. He picked me up, spun me around, then immediately started fretting that he was going to hurt the baby. I just laughed. I couldn't have been more than a few weeks pregnant, but Gabe was already cautious.

We turned the guest room into a nursery. We poured over baby-name books. Gabe's family reached out to us, and his friends from church threw me a baby shower before my

friends offered.

We were happy. Any hesitation I had about raising a child melted away. I finally got how wonderful it was to see that little jellybean on the ultrasound monitor and know it would become our baby.

Gabe was even happier than I was. He was going to be a daddy. It seemed like every night he'd have his hands on my growing belly, talking to it, telling it how much he loved it. He told me how he'd never leave, and if he ever had to, he'd find his way back to us. We would be a family no matter what.

Of course, you don't always have a say in that.

One night when I was five months pregnant, Gabe didn't come home from work. I called the school and asked if he was working late, but they said he'd already left. I called the police. They thought I was a hysterical pregnant woman fretting about nothing. *Oh, he probably just went out drinking with friends, it's a Friday night, he'll be home soon.* But Gabe wasn't like that. He would never have gone out without calling me first.

The police promised to keep an eye out for him. I couldn't file a missing persons' report 'til 24 hours had passed. And I'm sure they thought I was just being anxious. But in my gut, I knew something was wrong. Me and the baby both did.

We were right. I was six months pregnant when they found his car in the river that runs alongside town. He'd drowned. The police didn't spot his car sunken in the mud when they searched the first time. A father and his boys were out fishing when they found Gabe.

I don't have the words to explain how I felt the months following his death. I was empty. Our home was empty. People came by with empty words and empty comfort. I couldn't believe he was gone.

Gabe's minister came by to offer reassurance. He said that the congregation would help me through this difficult time. He said Gabe was always giving to the church, and it was time for them to give back. He said Gabe was waiting for me

in Heaven, an angel watching over me and our child.

After the funeral, the flurry of activity and condolences at our home slowly diminished. Who could blame them? What more could they do? I think I just made them sad. Poor girl, widowed with a baby on the way, and so young, too.

Gabe's family seemed mad at me for not trying to connect with them after his death. It wasn't like I was keeping them from seeing the baby; I was just aware that the baby was the only reason they spoke to me.

But they were there when Baby Sophie was born. Even with the wound of Gabe's death still fresh, having her in my arms was joyful and I cried happy tears.

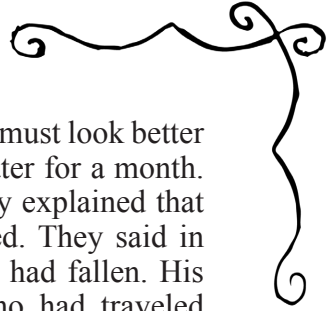
The two of us did our best without Gabe. My heart ached to think of her growing up without her daddy, and it ached even more thinking about what a good father Gabe would have been. I tried to reassure myself by repeating what Father David had said that Gabe was watching over us in Heaven. I had never embraced religion as a source of comfort like Gabe had, but maybe now it could help.

A few months after Sophie was born, I got a call. At first, I thought it was a cruel prank. Even though the voices of the police had grown familiar to me during Gabe's disappearance, I still didn't believe it.

They said that they had found Gabe. Five months after we'd buried him, they'd found him again. Or at least they thought it was him. They wanted me to come to the station to confirm it, for the second time.

I didn't understand at first. Did someone dig him up? Who would do something that awful? But, no, that wasn't what they meant. There was an old farm outside of town where high schoolers partied. A few officers had been breaking up one of the parties the night they found him lying face down in a field.

When I went down to the station, leaving Sophie with a neighbor, they warned me that his body was badly damaged. I



told them that I had seen it before. Anything must look better than a body that had been submerged in water for a month. There was an exchange of glances, and they explained that his body didn't look like that. Not drowned. They said in their forensic jargon that it looked as if he had fallen. His injuries were consistent with someone who had traveled many miles before hitting the ground. It appeared as if my husband had just dropped out of the big blue sky and landed in the middle of an empty field.

I saw the body. I don't have the words to describe it just like I couldn't find words the first time Gabe died. These deaths left a hole in my brain where vocabulary resides. But it was him. He was wearing the same clothes he died in the first time.

Small town cops are good at making things disappear if they need to. And they did when I asked. We arranged a private burial. No family. No friends. No media. I didn't want all that attention again.

Nobody needed to know.

The police still call me with theories. I've stopped humoring them. I've given it a lot of thought myself. Long nights with Sophie give me a lot of time to dwell on it. I think I've got an idea of what happened—not that I'd ever say it out loud. I'd sound off my rocker.

Gabe always believed in Heaven. So, I believe he was up there, and maybe he leaned a little too far over the edge of one of those clouds when he was watching over us. Or maybe he was keeping his promise. Maybe he broke out of paradise and was on his way home. If he'd gotten it right that night, maybe when I opened the door, he would have been standing there with a sheepish smile on his face and a halo in his hands.

"Hi, honey," he'd say. "You'll never guess where I just got back from."

A Conversation with Kate McIntyre, Editor of *hex*



Kate McIntyre is a past managing editor of the Missouri Review and past editor of the Worcester Review. She is the author of Mad Prairie (UGA Press 2021), a linked story collection that won the Flannery O'Connor Award. She is an assistant professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). Website: katemcintyrewriting.com

Julie Wiley: What led you to become an editor for *hex*?

Kate McIntyre: My co-editors and I launched the magazine because we weren't aware of other distinctly literary journals that published only flash speculative fiction. We created a journal we wanted to read. By the way, everyone should read *hex*: You can find us at hexliterary.com, @hexliterary on Twitter.

JW: How would you say working with *hex* compares to other literary magazines?

KM: *hex* is run by friends who have known each other for a decade, well before we started the journal. We joke that our group chat turned into our editorial chat. We have similar aesthetics, and we all trust each other's taste. We all also worked for the *Missouri Review*, and we've modeled a course at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, the school where two of us teach, on *TMR*'s internship in publishing. During the course, students help us to evaluate submissions and participate in project teams.

JW: How do you feel about things becoming more digital? What are the pros and cons?

KM: This is a great development, in terms of accessibility. Everyone can read *hex* for free. Everyone can submit their own work to *hex*, for free. Lots of people read *hex* because it's so easy to access. I love how *hex* can be run for practically no budget. As soon as you start printing physical books, you are weighed down by the costs, by storage, by shipping, by more complicated budgeting. Running *hex* in a virtual space allows us to focus on the writers and the work.

JW: What do you get out of being an editor?

KM: I get to read a lot of work by writers I admire, and I get to give these writers a platform, so more people will learn about their work.

JW: What sort of content is *hex* looking for?

KM: *hex* publishes flash literary fiction and prose poetry with broadly defined speculative elements (sci-fi, horror, and fantasy; the surreal, the uncanny, the weird). Our sweet spot is at the nexus of literary and genre fiction.

JW: Tell me about the process of editing a literary magazine?

KM: *hex* publishes a new piece weekly, on Tuesday mornings. In the week before, one of us formats the piece and sends a proof to the author for review and approval. On publication day, we spread the word about the piece on social media. Decisions about what to publish are made collaboratively, in our group chat. We maintain an iCal with accepted pieces scheduled four to five months ahead. We open for submissions every few months.

JW: What elements do you like seeing in writing?

KM: I like voice-driven writing that makes me feel something

immediately but also shifts the way I see the world. I like humor. I like novelty in form. I like “unlikeable” protagonists.

JW: What is the most common mistake you see in submissions?

KM: I resist thinking about “mistakes” in this context. It’s hard for folks to send out their work, and I don’t want to suggest that anything our submitters do is wrong. We do get submissions that don’t fit the focus of our journal, because they exceed our length requirement, or because they aren’t speculative. These pieces will find better homes at journals with different editorial focuses.

JW: What kind of writers does *hex* look for?

KM: *hex* is especially keen to consider work by BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ writers, writers with disabilities, and early-career writers. We believe *hex* is at its best when we can cultivate a lively and diverse mix of voices. This mission is too important to leave up to chance, and it’s our duty to constantly consider which voices are missing from the *hex* conversation.

Tar

Ruby Hewerdine

There is a mass of bubbling tar inside of me,
scalding hot and sticky, thick scum seeping
through my pores, infecting everything I
touch, everything I eat, everything I see.
I can feel it growing most on bad days, but
sometimes, I think it grows when it's bored,
filling all my limbs one by one for its own
amusement, scorching them from the inside.
On good days it might shrink, scaling back
like the tide. I can feel it draining, shriveling,
drying out. The burning secretion subsides,
but the residue remains, thick and dark.
I try to keep it weak, but still, it overtakes me.
Nothing can keep it from rising, filling, burning,
until it decides it's had enough, and retreats back
into the recesses, leaving me charred, exhausted.

Genesis

Jessamin McSwain

It was dead. Its body was smooshed against the blacktop—blood, guts, and flesh stuck in the rigid ebony teeth of the street. I only noticed the creature, the thing, because it was surprisingly large. I knew it hadn't been there that morning.

Every day I walk this street to work, crunching acorns beneath my feet and watching the trees slowly succumb to autumn. The branches hang over a curving black road flanked by tall bushes and nice rustic homes with driveways extending in all directions. It was when the leaves of the massive maple tree turned red that the insectoid-like creature appeared on my way home from work. Its head resembled a praying mantis, all sharp angles and bulbous eyes. It even had the strange spiked, contorted forelegs of the insect. But the thing was too big to be a praying mantis.

I hugged my cardigan close against the cool autumn wind. I made sure no cars were coming and crossed the road to the blood splattered remains. Why weren't there any buzzards or crows? There were always scavengers picking at the remnants of roadkill. On the other side of the street there was no smell, but as I got closer, I regretted my decision. The thing smelled worse than death. It filled my nostrils, and I felt the urge to vomit.

The hindlegs and torso of the creature were non-existent, lost in the accident that killed it. What had killed it? The crushed entrails suggested that a car must have hit it. But something of this size would've put a large dent in a vehicle. Why hadn't I seen the damage on any of the passing cars and trucks?

“Oh God.” I gagged and stepped away from the thing. I started looking for a vehicle in the ditch. I walked a mile back toward work, scouring for any sign of a wreck, but there was nothing.

As I made my way back up the road, back to the corpse of that *thing*, I noticed something I hadn’t before. The cicadas had stopped buzzing, the crickets had stopped chirping, and the songbirds had fallen silent. I hesitated. Was it this quiet before? I cautiously rounded the bend in the road, scanning the blacktop for the corpse. It was still there: all gruesome destruction and mangled limbs. Its bulbous eye twitched. Its twisted forelimb thrashed. The thing that had once been a praying mantis dug itself from the carcass, discarding parts of its useless exoskeleton. No. The bloodied, mucus-covered thing crawled from the inside of the other creature. It crept toward the edge of the road away from the remnants of its mother. This time, I vomited.

When I recovered, a smaller creature, alone and shivering on the blacktop stared back with its sorrowful black eyes. It lay on the border between the thick undergrowth and the dangerous blacktop. It made a horrible ear-raking sound.

“What are you?” I spoke aloud without intending to.

It pushed out one small limb, dragging its legless body a few inches closer to me.

Instinctively, I stepped back.

For each step I took, it slowly changed. It was so subtle I didn’t notice. It seemed to transform in the blink of an eye, although I knew that wasn’t true. Finally, I stopped. Whatever this creature was, it was trying to reach me because, like a very ugly duckling, it thought I was its parent. I let it approach, endeared by its little black eyes. Every time it moved, a pitiful whimper emanated from the creature. Finally, after several agonizing moments, it reached my feet and sniffed me as I stared in disbelief.

It had become vaguely humanoid. As awe washed over me, I didn’t realize it had touched me. It had placed its grasping

forelimb beneath the hem of my jeans and touched my bare skin. Startled, I pulled from its awful touch and burst into a sprint. But I couldn't go far. My curiosity wouldn't let me.

Gasping, I considered the thing on the blacktop, less than ten feet from the corpse it had pulled itself from. It had completely changed. Its twisted forelimbs had become short and stumpy, and it had grown legs. That sharp angular

But I couldn't go
far. My curiosity
wouldn't let me.

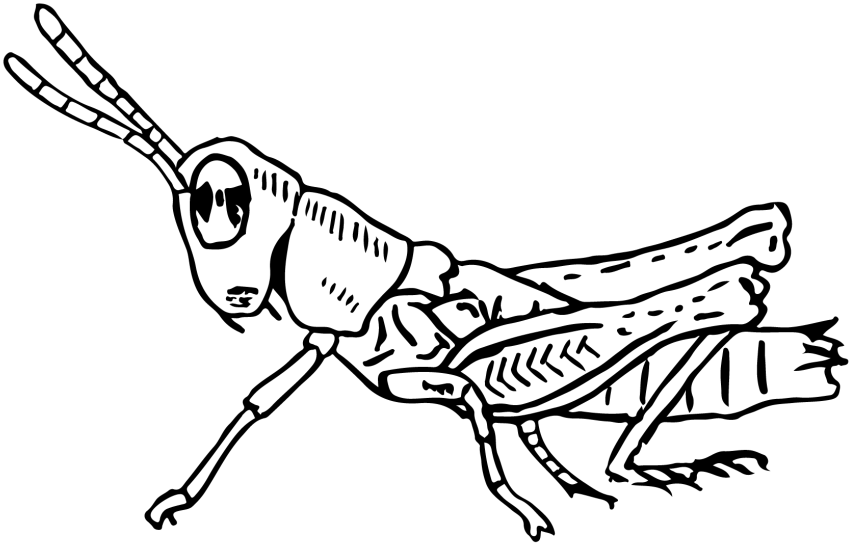
head resembled a toddler. The thing that I witnessed being born from a cadaver now looked like an infant—a human child. Its eyes were still black. It reached out two stubby arms and cried; its mouth turned in a frown. The orphaned thing wanted me. It was tragically lonely and strangely adorable.

What if someone came by right now and saw I abandoned a crying child on the road? They wouldn't know where it came from. They would assume it was a fae child that I had abandoned. They would think ill of me. I crouched in front of it, watching it shiver as a cool breeze wafted down the road. I couldn't leave it here by itself.

When I made it home that evening—later than usual—my neighbor was on her porch enjoying the sunset with a book in hand. I smiled as she looked up.

“Beautiful child,” she said as I held the infant in my arms. I had wrapped it in my wool cardigan. Only I could see past its newly grown dark hair mimicking my own. Only I could see its unnaturally black eyes. Only I knew that it wasn't a child.

“Thank you,” I said, “Her name is Eris.”



Dear Reader

Abbey Heller

Dear Reader,

The story you are about to experience isn't your typical tale. You have the decision to choose where the character goes and when the story ends. So, if you become attached easily, choose wisely. Good luck.

Background: Emery is in a room. She's handcuffed to a wall with no obvious way out. The room is barren except for a door, a window, and an ancient rug covering the floor. Light shines from under the door, but nothing can be seen from outside the window. Her mouth feels like sandpaper, and her wrist is on fire. She looks to you for help. You have two options.

Option #1: You direct Emery to stay put and not struggle. She obeys. Footsteps come from outside the door. The door's lock clicks open, revealing a backlit, masked figure. Emery glances around. You stay quiet. The figure closes the door, enveloping the room in darkness once again. Emery can hear the footsteps nearing her and tries to move toward the wall. She hits her head and yelps in pain. The figure stops in front of her. She looks up to see him holding a platter with food, water, and painkillers on it. He sets down the platter and exits the room. Emery looks to you for help.

Will you tell her to

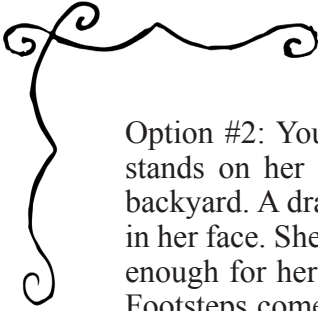
1. Eat, drink, and take painkillers?

2. Shove the platter away?
3. Or break the dish to use as a weapon?

If you go with #1, Emery will snarf down the food and drink the glass of water in one gulp, leaving the pills to dry swallow. The figure comes back a few days later with more food, water, and painkillers. This cycle continues for weeks or months until one day the food tastes different and the water feels like sludge going down her throat. She chokes on the pills. Eventually she throws up. The food has been drugged. The figure suddenly appears and uncuffs her. She is dragged from the room, up the stairs, and into a backyard. In the yard is a pit. You direct Emery to not struggle. She stays still as the figure places her into the hole and buries her alive. She dies.

If you go with #2, Emery will throw the food away. In the process she cuts her wrist against the cuffs. Her wrists start to bleed, but not enough to harm her. The figure doesn't appear for another few days. This time only water is brought. Emery looks to you for approval, but you shake your head. She knocks over the water, spilling it on the rug. It absorbs quickly. The figure doesn't come back. Emery slowly dies of thirst.

If you go with #3, Emery scrapes the food off the plate and breaks it against the wall. She cuts her wrist against the cuffs and her palm against the jagged edges of the broken plate. She grips the shard like a lifeline. The figure comes back a few days later. Once close enough, she lunges forward with the plate, stabbing the figure in the arm. The figure lets out a roar and grips her shoulders. She is thrown against the wall, hitting her head and knocking her out. She comes to in a backyard. A pit stretches out before her. She is now completely bound in rope. The figure kicks her into the hole and buries her alive. She dies.



Option #2: You direct Emery to look out the window. She stands on her tiptoes to look outside and see a fenced-in backyard. A draft comes from the window, blowing cool air in her face. She tries to push open the window. It slides open enough for her to stick her hand outside. She grabs a rock. Footsteps come from outside the door. You tell her to close the window and act like nothing happened. The figure does the same as option #1.

Do you tell her to

1. Use the rock against the figure?
2. Use the rock on her cuffs?
3. Or stay put?

If you go with #1, Emery will hit the figure in the head with the rock when he bends down to give her food. The hit isn't enough to knock him out, but enough to stun him. She kicks the figure's kneecaps. Groaning in pain, he falls to the ground. She searches his pockets for a key. Instead, she finds a pocketknife. She uses it to pick the lock on her cuffs, but she's inexperienced and it takes her too long. The figure recovers enough to grab the knife. They struggle until the figure gets the upper hand. He stabs Emery through the heart. She dies.

If you go with #2, Emery will wait until the figure leaves to hit the rock against the cuffs. After a while the lock clicks open, freeing her hand. She sobs in pain and triumph. You direct her to the window where she once again pushes up the glass. The window gets stuck halfway open. It's not enough room for her to shimmy through. You tell her to close the window and use the rock to break it. She does. Glass rains down around her, cutting her face and hands. She pushes herself up the wall and out the window. Stray pieces of glass rip her clothes. Blood flows from a wound in her side. She stands in the backyard. A looming fence guards the space from the

outside world. She looks for a gate. The gate is locked. You tell her to jump the fence. She does. Once over the fence, the neighborhood around her is revealed. She walks down the road until she finds an elderly couple walking their dog. She begs them for help. Police and an ambulance are called. Emery is safely transferred to a hospital where she makes a full recovery.

If you go with #3, Emery will meet the same fate she did in option #1.

Reader,

Now that you have come to the end of the story, are you happy with what you chose? Did you end up saving Emery, or did you let her suffer until the very end?

Space Oddity

Em Louraine

There was nothing I could do.

After years of studying, test taking, moving from state to state, country to country, rising, falling, finding my place, and working, you would think I would figure out something to do to help myself. But I couldn't. Because there was nothing.

In fact, I was surrounded by nothing. When I drifted to the porthole, outside there was only black. Before that there had been pinholes of white and yellow light from stars very far away. When I grabbed the handles next to the window, I could turn myself and see the bigger blue dot that was Earth. If I pushed down on the railing, I would be able to see the even larger white dot that was the moon. The ship was tiny in comparison. I didn't remember the last time I had felt so small.

Now, size didn't matter. I just was. I was floating in the middle of a thin-walled rocket. I couldn't hear ground control when they realized I was veering off-course. I don't know if at some point they had told me where I was headed. Their shouting sounded like white noise. The noise turned to faint static as I floated farther and farther away.

Part of training included "What to Do When You Lose All Connection to Earth and You Have Nowhere to Go but the Deep Vastness That Is Outer Space." Well, it was titled something more official, but that's the gist of the class.

Step One: Don't panic. Check. I was surprisingly calm provided I didn't think about how much oxygen I had left

in this tin can. Or about how far from home I was. Or about how much I missed my wife. Did they get my last message? To tell her that I loved her. Well, surely that was the least they could do.

I never expected to be the person who students learn about in their classes. You never really do expect to be the person you're warned about. Maybe if I had expected such a thing, I would have studied harder and learned more than just step one. Though I don't think there's much else to do aside from step one and then wait to die.

If I had expected such total blackness, I would have been more appreciative of the view. I don't know where I got sucked to, but there was really, truly, genuinely nothing but absence. No more stars. No more Earth. No more moon. No more screaming from ground control. I think that before the static faded out completely, they got caught in some sort of loop. Either the machinery malfunctioned, or the people all the way down there thought repeating the same thing over and over would result in something different. The repetition drove me insane:

“Can you hear me, Major Tom?”

“Can you hear me, Major Tom?”

“Can you hear me, Major Tom?”

No, I couldn't. I wished that I could.

Instead, I was floating completely weightless with nothing supporting me, nothing pushing against me, nothing.

There was absolutely nothing.

In fact, I was surrounded by nothing.

Accismus

Zoe London

i.

and if i let it come to me
and i turn my head away from the light
and i roll my eyes
and i shrug at the words
and i don't turn red
and i don't look at all
and i don't come
and i don't kiss with eyes closed
maybe
it'll come to me—
i would prefer it like that.

ii.

it's a lot easier to not—don't you think?
are you a friend of that disinterest
did you know that
in the place of eager love,
a mask or a facade,
you can slip your coat off
and i can fuck you
within an inch of wanting me
you don't have to want me,
did you know that—
i would prefer it like that.

iii.

i don't care if
you can come over or
you're not in love with me
at least text me when you get home
i don't know if
it's okay, it's okay
i love you
to let it slowly kill you
and what of the above is
true
i don't know—
i would prefer it like that.

Riposte

Zoe London

notice me like a weapon,
i need you to
look.
i know it's childish
like a bully on the playground, i
would express myself
maturely
if i ever grew that tall
but i never grew that tall—
it doesn't run in my
cold blood,
so i'm forced to resort
to little cuts,
ones that beg for
your approval. i don't
have practice
in things like communication, conversation,
reconciliation—did i
ever tell you
i've never wanted a rematch
against anyone but you?

so let's be mean
because your hot anger keeps me warm
and if my third strike doesn't
strike you down
it's an invitation to come back,
come back to me,
i promise i'll hit softer
every new year. i'm still
learning
that the ones i push away,
the face that earns my aggression
is the one i see
in sunlight
and when i sleep.

Howl

Zoe London

torn from my throat
ragged, raw, sandpaper sigh
shapeshifts into a whine;
friction, rock back and forth like
a landslide
in my gut and my chest
heaves, and you—
rocking in and out
each time with a noise
that i hear with the
tips of my toes and my
private pulse.
the ugliest kind of music
spills from lips
at your feet and
in my bed sheets;
percussive like confession
is the rhythm of our
uneven song.



Contributors' Notes



Jordan Davis is majoring creative writing and is a member of Stephens Life Magazine, Black Women Enlightened, Sigma Tau Delta, and is the Vice President of Poets of Infinity. She is an avid reader of African American literature, particularly the work of Langston Hughes and James Baldwin.



Jack Hayes, a senior digital filmmaking major, has had their horror fiction appear in Harbinger for the past three years. This year's short story is slightly lighter than past years. They also have branched out into poetry. Jack is currently working on their senior short film and volunteering at the True/False film festival. They are a member of Sigma Tau Delta.



Senior Abbey Heller is a digital filmmaking major and creative writing minor. This is their second year as the editor-in-chief of the Citizen Jane blog, which publishes content that takes a feminist look at film. Being an active member of the film community in Columbia, Missouri, they have worked on local sets, volunteered as a camp True/False counselor for two years, won the New Script Showcase, and the Max Ornlès Guiding Light award. This will be their first publication in Harbinger.



Ruby Hewerdine is a junior English major and women's studies minor, a member of the Harbinger staff, and a recently inducted member of Sigma Tau Delta. She is an avid consumer of horror in all forms, which is reflected in her two pieces, "Tar" and "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night." She is excited to have her first publications in Harbinger.



Baylee Johnson, a sophomore English major, plans to pursue a career in scriptwriting after graduating from Stephens College. Her interests include film, art, and horror fiction. She also enjoys art as demonstrated in her feature "Luminaries of Female Literature." This is her first publication in Harbinger.



Zoe London is a junior creative writing major and vice president of Stephens' chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. She recently presented her fiction piece "Unbeingdead" at the society's national convention. She is also president of Poets of Infinity. Upon graduating, she hopes to publish fiction and poetry focused on queer experiences. This is her second publication in Harbinger, and she is thrilled to serve as this year's editor-in-chief.



Em Louraine is a senior English major and a new member of Sigma Tau Delta. They hope to continue to work in the field of literature as an editor at a publishing house, as well as create their own stories in the horror, fantasy, and sci-fi genres. This is their first official publication of any of their work, so they are excited to continue this journey!



Jessamin McSwain is a senior creative writing major and art history minor. She is the recipient of the college's Creative Writing Scholarship. She is the acting president of Stephens' Sigma Tau Delta chapter and attended the society's international convention again this year to present her piece, "Dark Waters." Jessamin will be attending Lasell University's Solstice Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program post-graduation.



Darden Taylor is a sophomore English-Creative Writing student. Her short story, "Candy," was published in this year's edition of Harbinger. Her work on the Harbinger internship team includes editing, compiling material, and coordinating their launch party. Otherwise, she engages with the writing community by staying committed to her classes and participating in the yearly event NaNoWriMo. She hopes to publish more soon, through Harbinger and other literary magazines, while writing her first book.



Junior English major Julie Wiley comes from a military family. Her work often focuses on the complexities of family life and the meaning of home. She is the secretary of Sigma Tau Delta. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and sketching.

Artist Statement

The rich and exciting work of prose and poetry in Harbinger 2023 lives up to its theme, "Love and Other Fatalities." The word love expresses warmth, tenderness, and passion, but as the creative work in this edition of Harbinger suggests there might also be a dark and deadly element lurking on the fringes. Something or someone might be hiding in the shadows. The inspiration for the cover and interior images came from the tarot card, Three of Swords. This card represents the combination of extreme emotions such as love and hate, pleasure and pain, and calm and instability. By using this image on the cover, I hope to convey the belief that many of us continue to hope for love despite knowing it might end in pain.

-Kate Stevens

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