

ISSUE I | MARCH, 2026

BUBBLE & FANCY

AMPERSAND QUARTERLY

INTRODUCING *BUBBLE & FANCY*

Within the curling tendrils of the sun, hydrogen cations fuse to form helium, releasing a storm of energy that fuels our star for millennia. At *Ampersand Quarterly*, we believe that the fusion of the written word has equal potential in fueling human innovation. *Ampersand* was founded to unearth the the tender navigations within the fabric of the world, and the liminalities present in the in-between. Coming into the first issue, we are excited to engage in the musings of a field of talented writers and artists.

"Summer day cereal staining milk
rainbow ripples, screen door slammed
every hot breath
for the admittance of toads which sister keeps
to teach her kids the value of the grotesque—"

Micah Cozzens' "Verify You Are Human" begins with a series of contrasts—life & death, ecstasy & the grotesque, joie de vivre. From this piece, *Ampersand*'s Issue 1 begins an exploration of the multitudinous life within both the everyday and the dream state.

In Daniel Umemezie's "We All the [Night]," the speaker exists in a stage of instability, exposed to the brutal workings of the world around them. In Abby Houston's "Farmer's Market With Grandpa," colors spill out in a vibrant collaging of joy and childhood fancy. We find ourselves

imagining our days spent alone in rainy parking lots, or in a bustling market with an elder, or amidst memories that mix jubilation, sadness, regret, and delusion.

"Every year around this time, in the late afternoons when shadows seem to stretch forever without breaking"

Issue 1 journeys through various unfoldings of memory and nostalgia. In Evan Tungate's "Untitled (Every Year Around This Time...)," the narrator illustrates his playing with mud in the river. Even though the childhood tale is constructed with concise language, it brims with remorse and emotional clarity. "Untitled" comes from a moment of transience, when time & space are distorted and re-formed. Daniel Umemezie's "Nke Nta," on the other hand, finds a child's nostalgia, rooted in a series of fragmented memories, to form a novel story of memory, legacy, and family.

From streams reshaped in Alex Kim's photography, to the mystical drowned girl in Michael Chin's short story, the evolution of Issue 1 through the editorial process has found us speechless at the novel interpretations of the theme from a diverse group of writers. We hope you interpret each word as its own universe, appreciate each piece as an

opportunity for meditation on simple joys, and take the blank space to explore the simultaneity of moments that envelops us all under a common blanket of ocean sky.

We are proud to present *Bubble & Fancy*, the first of many to come.

—EICs

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Peanuts: The Miniature Horse Behind The Old Church

Collage on Bristol Board, 2025

Abby Huston

DANIEL UMEMEZIE

VERIFY YOU ARE HUMAN

I never said I live just for this, eating
the tangerines that sit bright on broken plates
while nephew trails soft mud through carpeted rooms,
picking ticks off the dog's paws, Looney Tunes in
background, summer day cereal staining milk
rainbow ripples, screen door slammed every hot breath
for the admittance of toads which sister keeps
to teach her kids the value of the grotesque—
but God, what else was I made for? I dispense
whipped cream into waiting mouths: niece, nephew, dog.
I count my precancerous moles like tickets
to a strange parade: aging, death, in the frayed
lawn chair that barely contains me as I hear
a scream, a seizure of firework, speechless mesmer—
a singed opossum skulking offstage—and
a firefly trusts my palm long enough to linger—
to think, some years back, how close I was
to that shuffle offstage, almost committing
the finality of overdosing, and now
the muchness of this life seizes me, shakes me,
and I think—what did I do? To deserve such beauty.

MICAH COZZENS

WE ALL THE [NIGHT]

When you die, there are earthworms
pressed to your ass & eating. You out
& about & wearing that open hoodie pocket-
mouth, your phone inside at 2hrs in dead-
men-hours. Your jeans, basement-rat
-piss & pre-pre-Thanksgiving sale detergent;
your mother drove a hard bargain. Your last
meal was Hot Cheetos & your fingers are orange
-dust & fat & wiped on the left thigh
& your stomach is empty because
dead men have little more to digest

when you die. You are pavement-
pressed, dog-tongue & wet forehead-
salt. Your shoes untied & sole-gut.
Your phone 8% now. There is a text
from your mom: are you alive?
& the wind tastes of dog-saliva-orange-
dust because dead men have no thoughts
more little than

when you die & do not think.
Of your father or the belt & the after
-silence of lung-sick pavements, tongue
chalk & the dry teeth grind of
milk in mouth. The McDonald's napkin
are quarters, thigh-slick & paper birds,
hand-pressed to mash & night
stays night, taking you nowhere.
Somewhere, a car alarm. Somewhere,
your mother's text & its pocket-glow & all dead
men, unturned by the pond.



Stratified Salvation

Paper Collage on Wood, Cardboard, & Foam, 2025

Abby Huston



SCHEDULE

We loved each other best in fragments.

A fifteen-second voice memo, recorded in the dark, my pillow warm on one side and cold on the other. A message sent at 3:07 a.m. my time and received at 3:07 p.m. theirs, summer kindness with a customs delay, affection stamped and forwarded until it arrived slightly foreign. Distance made us precise. We carved ourselves into people worth engraving. It turned intimacy into logistics: a tidy operation with calendars, conversions, and a mutual belief that feeling, like money, should never be transferred without a record.

On-screen, he was immaculate. Same lamp, same angle, the same neutral wall that made his face look professionally lit. Compression did what devotion couldn't: it softened edges, blurred blemishes, edited out the small failures of skin and sleep. I loved the version of him that bandwidth allowed. The one that didn't sweat, didn't interrupt, didn't forget his words. Desire stayed sealed, like a tin of compressed pet milk. You add a little water, stir, and suddenly there was flavor.

It's been 2 years since we met in person, we procrastinated on taking a step forward. we were excellent at maintenance, seeming performative. We checked in without smothering. We remembered details the way people do when their persona is scheduled to glow. More

responsibility than initiative. Birthdays were logged weeks in advance; gifts were shipped early, tracked all the way across oceans, proof-of-love delivered and signed for. Apologies were drafted carefully and rarely used. Our affection ran on upkeep. Even exhaustion was announced in advance; Given a time window, softened, made palatable, titled the way you title a meeting request: "Quick Chat," "Touching Base," "Just Ten Minutes."

It was adult.

It was tidy.

It was ideal.

We never surprised each other. Surprise implied inefficiency. Then I decided I wanted inefficiency. In person, there was nothing to cut. New York rained the day I landed.

...

New York rained the day Crystine landed. The city did not announce her arrival. Water ran down scaffolding and pooled at curb edges, darkening the hems of commuter coats without apology. Umbrellas bloomed and collapsed along the sidewalks like temporary structures, assembled to be dismantled. Crystine dragged her suitcase through it, wheels stuttering over grates, already awake to the fact that this visit broke an unspoken

rule they had obeyed for years.

Crystine did not tell him she was coming. That, in itself, was the deviation. At the airport she watched other people rehearse their reunions: someone holding a bouquet in cellophane, someone filming the moment on a phone, someone crying before they even found the right face. Crystine carried no flowers. She packed the way she always did: folded outfits, a spare charger, a silk sleep mask, the kind of planning that made you feel immune to chaos. But she left one thing unplanned: her entrance. On the ride into the city, she watched New York smear itself against the taxi window. Brick dulled by rain. Traffic lights refracted into red halos. A siren passing somewhere behind them, like an argument she didn't have to join. She checked her phone once—three new emails, two calendar reminders, a chaotic group chat and then turned it face down. The urge to announce herself felt juvenile. The whole point was interruption: presence without preparation. May had recently gotten married. May and her husband were never as neat. Their fights spilled out in public restaurants; their apologies were clumsy and fast. May laughed once, stirring her espresso like she could dissolve the future, and said, "Darling, we simply make each other feel too much." Crystine nodded at the time, wondering if stability was just a sign of burning

out. If calm was what happened when a fire ran out of oxygen. She watched the city, wet and unbothered. She thought of her own relationship and how it had always been conducted like a good meeting: mutually agreed agenda, timeboxed feelings, action items carried over to next week. In Shanghai, they had been young enough to believe that such discipline was romance. Seven years ago, in Shanghai, she was a student with borrowed seriousness. He was already working, already fluent in the tone of someone who had learned how to sound busy even when he wasn't. They met at a bar near the offices, one of those places where cigarettes were technically illegal indoors and therefore tasted better. They smoked outside under neon, cheap sparks in the humid air, and talked about nothing as if it were a philosophy. Crystine didn't come from a native English family; in Shanghai, an English name was almost compulsory for a middle-class girl like her. She had started as Crystime, a well-wishing for "crystal time," as her mother called it, a name that sounded like a promise you could store in a jewelry box. He told her it sounded like a camera, and he altered her permanently. "Crystine," he said, reshaping the syllables. "That's better." The new name fit like a dress pinned in the right places: flattering, slightly constricting, too committed to return. Shanghai came back to her in fragments: shared cigarettes outside office buildings; meals eaten late

because they could; plans formed in a bouquet and then unrolled and abandoned. They were never the loyal kind, fashionable, frivolous, frank. They could do well without each other. And yet precisely because of that, there was always the urge to prove they were not trapped by stereotypes, not bound by expected endings, not just another couple growing into tradition like moss. Even then, pauses had been built into how they advanced. In Shanghai, they paused for cigarettes. Later, when the relationship became long-distance, they paused for time zones. The pause was their style. The pause was how they avoided the part where the sentence had to end.

His building in Manhattan looked smaller than it did on video. Narrower. Slight, like a feather brushing up against her. She'd never been here. She stood across the street for a moment, letting the rain decide her posture. The lobby smelled faintly of bleach and wet wool. Someone's dog shook itself dry near the mailboxes, turning the air briefly into spray.

Crystine paused by the intercom, thumb hovering, then decided against it. She took the stairs instead. There's a kind of intimacy to being unannounced. It is rude, yes, but it is also honest. A text message gives the other person time to become good: to clear the counter, hide the laundry, open the curtains, angle the lamp. To convert a real life into something presentable. Crystine had too much of that. She wanted whatever that was underneath. The stairwell narrowed as she climbed, walls

sweating inward from heat and moisture. Paint had chipped where other hands had steadied themselves, then been sealed over with fresh layers meant to disguise time rather than stop it. She climbed carefully, not from fatigue but from habit. She had spent years moving through life as if every step might be audited later. If youth were a sonnet, she was nearing the couplet. The part where you have to mean what you say. Halfway up, she adjusted her grip on the suitcase handle. Not because it was heavy. Because pausing made her feel prepared. Maybe it's time for something emotional, she thought. Something inefficient. A hug. A French kiss right at the doorstep. A heart-to-heart about how far they had come. She imagined him opening the door joyful, surprised the way people were in movies, his eyes bright with the pleasure of being chosen without warning. Then she reached his floor. She stood still, trying to catch her breath from the thick, enclosed air. Suddenly she lost track of her goal. What was she trying to achieve? romance, proof, repair? She set her suitcase upright beside her and raised her hand. From inside the apartment she heard movement. Something dropped. A laugh cut short. Water ran briefly and stopped again. None of it belonged to her.

She knocked.

He opened the door too quickly.

The surprise reached his face late, after his body had already adjusted. His shoulders shifted as if to make room; his hand rose to the frame as if he'd been expecting someone, though not her. His eyes did what his sentences always did: searched for the most correct option.

Behind him, the apartment was unarranged.

A woman sat on the couch with her legs folded under her, barefoot, damp hair darkening the collar of an oversized T-shirt. She held a mug with steam rising off it. There was an old chocolate stain at the rim, like evidence she hadn't bothered to wipe away. On the coffee table was a plate with crumbs gathered at one edge, a fork abandoned diagonally as if someone had dropped it mid-thought. A jacket draped over a chair instead of hung. A hair tie left on the counter. Milk instead of water in the mug. Raw.

It wasn't carelessness; it was habitation.

The woman looked up, curious. Not alarmed. "Oh," she said, glancing at him, and the word hung there incomplete. She wasn't expecting an explanation.

He introduced Crystine. Then he introduced the woman. Crystine nodded because that was what her body did when it didn't know what else to do.

Introductions passed between them like objects set down hastily without deciding where they belonged. Like a Secret Santa where no one wanted to unbox their present.

No one apologized immediately. Apologies died out in adulthood because no one meant it anymore, we all make conscious decisions. Not much explanation was required for Crystine to process the situation.

"I didn't know you were coming," he said, stepping back, tilting his body in invitation, the way you invite a delivery person to leave a package inside the threshold.

Crystine nodded. Of course he hadn't known. That was the point and the problem.

She should have been furious. Distance had taught her how to perform anger politely: a paragraph, a pause, a closing line. In-person fury has nowhere to go. It takes up space. It asks to be shared. Crystine stayed silent in the corridor, suitcase beside her like a loyal animal, staring at him as if he were a translation she could no longer trust.

The other woman stood and then sat again, unsure whether standing counted as courtesy or intrusion. Her movements weren't polished; they were oddly authentic. She did not seem concerned with how she was being read. She took a sip of her drink, watching, as if she had stumbled into a scene and was waiting for the director to call cut.

He began explaining. Sentences arrived with their edges blunted, overlapping. Words like unplanned and confusing surfaced, as if naming the situation

might stabilize it retroactively. He spoke the way he always did, as if precision could still save something. As if the right phrasing could turn betrayal into a misunderstanding.

Crystine listened without interrupting. She realized, with a feeling close to admiration, that their stability had always depended on advance notice. On time to convert emotion into something acceptable. Surprise didn't break the system; it merely removed the scaffolding. The word scaffolding returned to her with a certain spite. The city outside was full of it, metal frames promising improvement while hiding decay. Their relationship had been the same: a structure you kept erect by constantly attending to it, never letting it harden into something that could stand alone.

"What do you like about her?" Crystine asked. The question landed harder than she intended. She heard it herself, too clean, too direct. China's education taught her to learn from her mistakes and be accountable even if it isn't hers. He hesitated. Not long. Just long enough to reveal he hadn't rehearsed this. His eyes moved briefly, searching for a correct answer, for the sentence that would make this reasonable, for the tone that would turn it into a discussion rather than a collapse. Then he inhaled and let the search go.

"It's easy," he said. The word sounded thin in the room. It had the lightness of something disposable. The other woman smiled at that:

small, unguarded. She reached for his hand without looking, a gesture that wasn't strategic, hadn't been scheduled. When he didn't take it immediately, she withdrew it without recalibrating, without embarrassment, without turning it into a problem. No expectation. No spreadsheet of grievances. The softness of the gesture was its own proof.

Crystine noted it the way she noted everything else: without judgment, with interest. With him, she had always arrived prepared; she had spoken as if each sentence might be audited later. With this woman, he was slack. His shoulders sat lower. His voice dropped out of its careful register. He did not glow. He did not need to.

"You never have to manage her," Crystine said, trembling upon her observation and reflection. He looked at her, a pale smile rosed upon his face. "I never felt managed."

The words did not escalate. There was nothing left to contest. The shape of the thing had already declared itself. Stability, she saw, was not a foundation. It was maintenance. Something that held only as long as everyone agreed to keep showing up on time.

Crystine picked up her suitcase.

"You don't have to leave," he said, automatically, as if the script still applied.

"Yes," she said. "I do."

She walked back down the stairs because she couldn't remember how to use the elevator in a life she hadn't been invited into. Each step echoed

louder than it had on the way up. Downstairs, the lobby was brighter, more public, less intimate. Rain hit the glass doors in fast, impatient beads. Outside, the city was doing what it always did when it wasn't being watched: moving on.

Crystine walked with her suitcase to the corner and stopped under an awning. A bodega's neon sign flickered like a tired heartbeat. She watched a man argue into his phone with the seriousness of someone discussing war. She watched a woman in running tights push a stroller through the rain as if weather were merely an opinion. She considered calling May. She imagined May's response, terrible sympathy followed by practical advice. But Crystine couldn't bear to turn this into content, couldn't bear to narrate her humiliation into another person's afternoon. She pulled out her phone anyway. She typed a message and deleted it. Typed again. Deleted it again.

Do you know what a calendar invite is, in the end? It's an agreement to be present later. It's faith formatted as a rectangle. Crystine built a relationship on rectangles. She had never built one on a mess. In her hotel room, Crystine unpacked with the same care she always did. She hung her coat. She lined up her toiletries. She plugged in her phone. She placed her suitcase by the wall, upright, obedient. She did not cry. Crying was inefficient.

Instead she opened her love calendar.

Tomorrow: nothing.

The next day: nothing.

The week after that: nothing.

She realized, with a sudden coldness, that she had never scheduled grief. They had never planned for collapse. When she finally slept, she slept like someone who has been released from a contract, or retrenched, or a mix of both.

Much later, after the city had swallowed the moment whole, they spoke again. Months passed first, cleanly, without dramatic interruption. Time did what it always did when it wasn't resisted: it moved. It blurred the outlines of shame. It took the sharpest moments and made them anecdotal, something you could tell without shaking.

They met in predictable daylight at a café with WiFi, reserved seating, and music so neutral it could be read like an apology. Crystine chose the place because it offered no atmosphere to hide in. If she was going to do this, she wanted fluorescent honesty. He arrived on time. Of course he did. He looked the same: polished, restored, the version she knew how to love. He ordered an Americano and said her name in the careful tone he used when trying to be kind.

The other woman was gone. He mentioned it as if describing something that happened in Vegas. No bitterness. No nostalgia. "It ended," he said, with a

shrug so small it could have been a checkbox.

They talked about work. About rent. About Shanghai, about New York. About people they knew who had married and combined their assets and calendars, who had learned to live under a shared system without fiction. The conversation aligned. They were, still, very good at maintenance. At some point, without preamble, he said, “We could make this work.”

Crystine watched condensation slide down the side of her glass. The ice was already melting, diluting what she'd ordered into something thinner than she remembered liking. She did not look at him.

“I shouldn't marry you,” she said, and then, because she was committed to honesty now, added, “But I feel like I could.” The sentence surprised her. It didn't sound like hope. It sounded like feasibility. A plan you accepted because you were tired of adapting to new software. At least now, cheating was predictable.

“It doesn't make sense,” she continued, stirring her drink. “You cheated.”

He waited. This was familiar territory: a difficult meeting, a conversation where the wrong tone could ruin the quarter. He listened the way he always did—attentive, composed, ready to agree.

“Marriage isn't an act of love,” Crystine said. The statement felt not cynical but clinical, like a diagnosis you could live with. “It's a game. You stay loyal until you get caught, you win. You cheat and don't get caught; you also win.”

He didn't argue. He didn't defend himself. He only

looked at her as if trying to learn what she meant, as if her cynicism were another language he might become fluent in.

Crystine took a bite of tiramisu. The cocoa dusted her tongue; the cream tasted faintly like someone else's celebration. She thought of May, married and messy. She thought of the woman on the couch with her milk. She thought of all the years she had spent turning feeling into calendar entries.

Then she stood.

“Get ready,” she said, pulling on her coat. “Get me a ring. 1-0.”

Outside, the city was clear for once. The sky looked scrubbed, almost blank, as if the weather had been edited overnight. Crystine walked to the subway with her hands in her pockets, feeling not victorious, not loved, but finally unscheduled.

ALLISON BURRIS

IRIDESCENT INTO MADNESS

I know what you're thinking—
cuss words couldn't escape a mouth like this
clean like soap, cute like a cupcake.
Even now your Grandma has me wrapped
sitting in cellophane on the windowsill.

Fuck that.

Every color of rage looks good on me
(except yellow—so fuck yellow) I don't
think you can handle this pink-lemonade-
incandescent-rollerskate energy.
Why are you so angry? they ask,
and I answer how can you love the world
and not be sweetness enraged
like a pissed off tree frog?

I cover reality in stickers. Stick a fox
on it. I decree the only things that matter
are hedgehogs roving through gardens,
fairy rings glowing in the moonlight,
girls finding their familiars and joining covens.

Okay—we can slip in plushies, hugs for
the oxytocin boost. There is enough
love and fleece to go around. There
is enough popcorn and seats to watch
witty dialogue and women getting
what they want.

There is enough and it's for everyone so I'm the
crazy crazy lady with the birdnest in her hair
who's allergic to cats.
What decency will she concoct next?

She is nonsense. She is me, so I should know.
I walk a celtic cross in weaving circles
composed entirely of bubble wrap.
I pop as I go. I hang silk ribbons
stained with wildflowers to catch
the breeze.

I'm hungry for more. I want the whole
world open. Hold out your hand
for this stardust, these marshmallows.
I'm telling you I have enough to share.

HOW WE MET

My friend told me every meet-cute presages a cautionary tale.

*There's a difference, she says, between a red flag and
reflector tape.* I'm squinting and pretend to see
distinction in the glint.

We hedge
among the shrubbery, but you
're winking regardless.

Is a blink romantic? I'm asking because I'm all signs,
so I have a hard time grasping them. My friend told me
this kind of thing reads as desperate or delusional, but
I'm delighted. Delirious. Darling, this might be it—
these shadows on this sidewalk: first flashes of forever.

Who says this can't be our story?
Who says all this caution tape can't be snaky confetti?
Maybe we're at the edge of our own parade and it's
all floats and fireworks from here. It has to be—
all floats and fireworks from here.

ALLISON BURRIS

UNTITLED



ALEX KIM

EVAN TUNGATE

UNTITLED (EVERY YEAR AROUND THIS TIME...)

Every year around this time, in the late afternoons when shadows seem to stretch forever without breaking, I remember the canoe trip we took down the Brule River where it moseys along with Wisconsin on one bank and the Upper Peninsula on the other. Where Al Capone had his secret island hideout. Back then I was still a person that stepped gently out of boats and you were always the kind of person that jumped. We pulled over for lunch at a wide bend where the river flowed fast and deep on the Michigan outside and ran our canoe aground on the warm Wisconsin mud of the inside curve and you hopped out and sank up to your knees, laughing. I tried to follow you but mid-step I realized there was nothing solid to catch me, just silt like the missing tread of a stair, and I tumbled over the side of the canoe and a trout leapt upstream. You were still laughing when I came up spitting mud so I flicked you the riverbed off my fingertips and you scooped a handful to make your reply and we ended the afternoon looking like quail eggs: speckled and delicate and full of life. The sun brushed the tops of the pines on the Michigan side and we passed the bottle back and forth and pretended we were gangsters hiding out in the Northwoods until the heat died down. I waded to where the current picked up to let the river wash me clean and when you followed me out I wiped the flecks

of mud from your face to reveal the freckles underneath, in the exact same spots, because sometimes we really are what we appear to be.

NOT ALL MANNEQUINS ARE MEANT TO COME TO LIFE

some don't even have windows
which is to say eyes which is to say
they are unarticulated limbs
wearing size small on hip juts
it's always like this—things come to life
when you're not looking then freeze
in the periphery so you have reason
for your double take which is to say
someone is always watching.

ALLISON BURRIS

DANIEL UMEMEZIE

NKE NTA

There are faces on the walls
around the house. They are hard
to understand, their eyes go round
and round. Some look happy or sad.
I'm not sure. The ones in the kitchen says four
but the ones in Mama's room says eleven.

I think.

Mama is the nke nta now.
Her hand this morning. I held it
and then I put it back down.

The grown-ups are talking Igbo
in the kitchen. Very fast.
They talk Igbo when they don't want me to know
but I know. I know from how they stand.

It's hot. My shirt sticks.
I went outside because
the house smells wrong.
Not bad. Wrong. Like the closet
where the ákwá ọnwụ is
except everywhere.

There's mud by the back
step from last night.
I'm eating it.
It tastes like a penny.
I ate some yesterday too.
It tasted the same.

Mama told me about snow once.

When she was the nke nta. Not me.
She said when she was the nke nta
there were ọkụ ofufe and she would catch
them and her hands would be.
red and yellow. She did not tell me
what happens if you don't open them.

I tried to catch the lizard on the wall this morning
but it was faster.

Mama's hand was so small.
Mine is bigger now. When did that happen?
The doorknob to her room is sticky.
I washed my hands but they're still sticky.
Everything is sticky.

Uncle Chidi brought plantain yesterday or maybe
two days ago and Aunty Ego said
ka ọ dị the way she says it when
she's not talking about the plantain
She said *kahodee*.

They keep saying tomorrow.
Tomorrow we will. Tomorrow she will.
But now the light is red and yellow
and there's a spider web in the corner
with no spider
and my feet are muddy
and I'm running my hands
on my cheeks. They are cold.

Mama said to cup them gentle.
She said the light stays in place

if you're gentle. But there's nothing
in my hands. It's just my hands,
up, the way Mama is.
And someone is crying in the kitchen
and I can't tell who
and the light is red and yellow.

My hands smell like dirt
and the penny taste.
My feet are muddy



Farmer's Market With Grandpa

Paper Collage and Oil Paint Canvas, 2025

Abby Huston

MICHAEL CHIN

THE DROWNED GIRL

When I was twelve, a girl drowned in my living room. She saw me.

See me like she did, from the far side of the cathode-ray tube television screen. A mess of curly brown hair, freckles dotting my cheeks. Mom's ratty blue cardigan, worn at the elbows. I wore it all the time but only in the house because I feared losing it or getting dirt on it outside. I wore it and wouldn't wash it because it still smelled like her. I knelt on the far side of the thick glass, curious, small for my age.

See the drowning girl. Freckles too. A similar, maybe identical pattern.

Fist pounding the glass. Open-mouthed, silent screaming. Tiny bubbles floating from her.

A small sea monster atop her head—no, just her hair. Copper colored. Not weighing her down.

Trying, itself, to swim free. She came into focus, dimmer than the TV picture ordinarily was, like someone had played with the brightness and color contrast to render the muddiest picture. I pressed a hand to the glass. Her eyes went dull. Her body sagged.

Did she cry or did I imagine that later? These are the imprecise, inconsistent details my father the high school English teacher cited, describing me as an unreliable narrator.

He sat me on his big lap, over olive trousers he wore to school. He was large by every

dimension, a towering man with a reputation for silencing the cafeteria when he pulled lunch monitor duty just as easily as he'd silence his own classroom, his voice booming.

"How could someone be inside the television?" he asked. "And how could someone inside the television see you?" He ignored the part about her drowning.

Of the freckles: "Your reflection. Your eyes playing tricks on you."

A sigh. Then: "You're getting too old for this make-believe, Sarah."

My father's brother looked on. I only noticed him then. No telling how long he'd stood in the entryway where the kitchen gave way to the living room, backlit in flickering yellow light. There was always a bulb about to go. Early Grey steamed from the mug cradled in his hands. He sipped loudly, rudely, my father's back to him. My uncle winked at me.

#

See me in workshop. ENG 300: Advanced Fiction Writing.

"The story just feels—incomplete." Anita was bone thin, always wearing flip-flops, always her toenails painted, even on a winter day like that when she covered the rest of her body in an oversized sweatshirt and acid wash jeans. She majored in Bio,

which sometimes allowed her to raise fun insights from outside our English major wheelhouse, but more often made me feel she had no right to speak up as often as she did in the literature building.

Her friend Chelsea—an English major—seconded Anita's thoughts. "The image of the girl drowning is so provocative." She extended a hand toward me. Had I been at the next desk over in the horseshoe, I imagine she'd have taken my hand. She had really big hands. "But it feels like that's where the story ends. Nobody believes her and it's like you didn't decide if the girl were real or not. So, the reader doesn't know what to think."

I saw the drowned girl again then. The desperation in her eyes. What would she think if she heard these girls questioning her existence? Years ago, I'd decided I should've broken the glass, no matter how angry the busted TV, water, and shards would've made my father. "It's a story about the price of a childhood." See Alex. Devastatingly handsome. Buttons of his shirt carefully misaligned and askew to reveal an optimal amount of his chest. Most of the girls in class loved him at least a little. I'd become acquainted with him through his writing—a beautiful story about a magic carousel—editing the English department literary magazine the spring before. He was the best writer in class,

He was the best writer in class, and those who didn't love him were annoyed with his writerly shtick at looking disheveled and trying to sound profound, not to mention the way we admirers reinforced his worst impulses. He had a girlfriend. A humorless accounting major who didn't understand his writing. He and I made out on the side, though I suspected hope he'd never break up with her.

"There's so much we don't understand when we're kids," Alex went on. "We're left with this amalgamation of what we saw and what people told us we saw—what we think and know and believe."

The professor moved Alex along. She was an accomplished writer—three books and a story selected for Best American from back before anyone else in the room had been born. I got the impression she respected Alex's work and his potential but also recognized in him the most pretentious habits of writers she'd known throughout her life. "What's the point, Alex?" He held the pages. It excited me because soon I'd hold what he'd held, his notes in the margins, a document we had, in a sense, coauthored which felt about as intimate as canoodling.

"Don't get me wrong," he said. "This isn't any good yet."

My pen dropped. I watched his mouth.

"But the heart of the story's there. This impossible childhood nightmare that Sar—that Priscilla"—the protagonist's name was Priscilla—

"knows is true."

Later, Alex came back to my dorm room while my roommate was in Chem lab. He rested the weight of his body on mine, on my bed. His skin felt very smooth I asked if he really thought my story wasn't any good. He told me none of the stories from workshop were.

"Even yours?" I asked.

"Especially mine." He spoke the words right into me, his coffee breath pushing its way into mine—his exhale, my inhale like the way he'd resuscitate a girl rescued from the sea.

#

See me. Eight years old. Before the drowned girl. Before my mother died. My mother and father argued behind their bedroom door. My brother sat on the living room floor, playing with oddly shaped wooden blocks my uncle brought for him. They were arguing about my uncle. Because my father had said he could stay as long as he needed to and my mother didn't appreciate that. She tolerated his visits. She couldn't tolerate an indefinite stay.

"He's strange," she said.

She'd left me alone with him just the same, the assumption only so much damage could be done in so little time, and, at eight, I could mitigate it by going to my own room and closing the door a few minutes, going outside even.

But my uncle insisted I keep him company as he loaded frozen chicken nuggets and crinkle-cut fries

into the oven. I remember thinking he meant well—that he shielded me from eavesdropping on a grown-up fight. He meant well in slivering the grapes, too, a choking hazard for children like my brother at four. My uncle didn't know kids well enough to know it was absurd, insulting for someone my age.

"Tell me about your day." My uncle cut the grapes paper thin. I worried about how close he brought our sharpest knife to his thumb.

"We played Around the World," I said.

"Which one is that?" One grape done another started.

"Everyone stands up at their desks. One kid starts, standing next to someone else, and the teacher gives them a multiplication problem."

The pile of blocks fell. My brother grunted.

"The kid who calls out the right answer first goes on to challenge the next kid. The person who didn't get it sits down."

"You run the gauntlet."

I didn't know what my uncle was talking about. I rarely did. "It keeps going until someone makes it to the end of the room. They're the winner."

A louder toppling of blocks. My brother must've made good progress before this fall. A moaning then. I knew this sound. That he wanted the people around him to notice his frustration, but he didn't want help yet. He'd snap at anyone who offered him a hand.

"How far did you get?" My uncle had assembled a mound of grape slivers. More than I imagined

we'd eat, their purple juice pooling on the cutting board.

I had beaten the boy who came to my desk. Nine times eight. A tricky one, because not everyone had made it that far in their multiplication tables yet. I had the misfortune of coming to Gabby Winterson next, though. The smartest girl in class. One of the few who consistently volunteered to go first in games of Around the World, because that presented some small chance of her fatiguing. She got me on seven times four. Not that I didn't know the answer, but it was like she knew the problem before the teacher'd turned the flash card. Sure enough, she won.

I told my uncle I hadn't gotten far.

My brother cried. The last two spills had happened faster. He grew frustrated.

Slice.

I surveyed if it were time to intervene, and I heard the cut, then the sharp inhale, before I recognized my uncle had hurt himself. Lots of blood. He stanching it with paper towel, then came to me, torn between my brother's upset and the chaos in the kitchen. My uncle took his thumb from the wad of pink Bounty and shoved it into my mouth. It's an instinct, I'd read later, to cover a wound, soaking up blood in saliva, though practically speaking, it compounds risk factors for an infection. Most people in this situation are inclined to put the cut in their own mouth. "Suck," my uncle said softly while his copper taste filled me. "Suck."

My brother—I think it was my brother—wailed.

#

See me at my brother's house—a three-night stay with him, my sister-in-law, Chrissy, my three-month-old niece. I'd imagined a cozy domestic scene. A turkey glistening, golden, perfect in the middle of the table, mashed potatoes smeared on the baby's nose. Laughter. Holding Chrissy in a dark room to look out the window and study stars, pointing at any movement at all in the night sky to speculate whether it were Santa Claus.

The baby cried when I tried to hold her. When I sat next to her on the floor. When I stood closer to her than either of her parents while she rested in the harness of her motorized swing.

I gave her space.

Christmas Eve dinner consisted of two Domino's pizzas—one pepperoni, one pineapple and black olives. I hesitated to grab a slice until my brother and especially my sister-in-law had some. The baby only drank breast milk. Chrissy had dark rings under her eyes, staggered each time she stood. She was thinner than I remembered her. My brother was always on the go, fetching something from another room, warming a bottle of pre-pumped milk from the fridge.

The pizza grew cold, and I grew shaky from hunger, so I grabbed a slice of pepperoni, leaving a grease stain behind on the cardboard. I didn't know where they kept their plates, but it seemed like a

burden to ask the two of them for anything at all, so I held the pizza in my hands, fingers flecked with garlic and parmesan for the crust. Chrissy asked if my brother had remembered to gas up the car on his way home from the grocery store that morning.

He hadn't.

Out he went. I said I'd go with him.

We'd grown up in Pennsylvania, just outside Harrisburg, and settled in opposite directions in adult life—me in a one bedroom apartment two hours south in Baltimore, him four hours north in Schenectady. Funny how these drives, measurable in hours, could lead to such differences in climate, but while Maryland offered just perceptibly warmer temperatures, and fewer, less severe snowstorms, Upstate New York felt like the frozen tundra, not just colder, but darker.

My brother drove a Corolla like our father had. Used, all the knobs and gauges looked strangely dated. Emptied out twenty-ounce Mountain Dew bottles and Styrofoam cups from gas station coffee littered the floorboard. The defroster blew hot air in our faces, so I found myself in the uncomfortable spot of my head feeling too warm, my feet freezing.

"Have you heard from Dad?" he asked.

The world outside my window alternated between total blackness and blurs of Christmas lights as we passed more houses, as we broached a commercial area of town. It seemed funny

driving out this far just to get gas, but I could understand Chrissy's desire, a new mother, to have plenty of fuel in case they needed it to drive to the hospital in the middle of the night, first thing in the morning. She was nothing if not worried.

"No."

My brother ran the wipers over the dripping mess of melted snow and turned down the defroster by degrees, so for the first time I could hear the radio. Don Henley sang "Please Come Home for Christmas."

I think he was waiting for me to ask if he'd heard from our father, because it was the kind of open-ended question, because maybe they hadn't been in touch or maybe he was asking expectantly, because our father had shared something noteworthy with him that he wasn't sure made its way to me yet.

"I like this song," he said.

We got to the gas station—an off-brand one with a big red sign the lettering had weathered away from, so it was impossible to know the name of the place. There was something appealing, if anachronistic, about a business one couldn't search for on a GPS.

I thought I'd stay in the car while he filled the empty two-thirds of the tank. I briefly entertained offering to pay in exchange for the hospitality, but when he turned off the engine, he asked if I wanted anything, and I realized he meant to get a snack first.

The pavement was slick with snow, despite the

rock salt sprinkled to stave off ice. My brother held the door for me, the convenience store, lit in harsh, fluorescent overhead lights.

He grabbed two twin-packs of Twinkies. I picked up a twenty-ounce Canada Dry. When he started counting out change against the front counter, I interjected my Visa.

My brother stuffed the first Twinkie whole into his mouth while he was pumping gas. I shivered next to him out of some sense of solidarity, and a memory came back of the two of us waiting for the bus together winter mornings. We only did that in elementary school, when he'd huddle close and I'd put an arm over him until the bus was in sight, so we separated before anyone could see us. It was a sweet memory.

When my brother offered me a Twinkie, I took it. I'd forgotten how sweet they were, a burst of cream exploding onto my tongue on the first bite. My teeth hurt. I didn't want the rest, but it felt as though throwing it away would be an affront to him.

Back home, we found Chrissy sitting up asleep on the couch, the baby asleep, head on Chrissy's shoulder, drooling. The whole thing looked precarious, because the child could slip from her sleeping grasp and tumble all the way to the floor, or face down into the space between cushions. It wasn't my business, though, and I couldn't imagine my brother interrupting anything about this moment of peace.

So, we said our goodnights with head nods to one

another. He left the second, unopened Twinkie pack on the end table beside her and disappeared into the master bedroom. I brushed my teeth, laid down on the futon in the guest room and dozed off quickly. I woke up an hour later, throat raw, thirsting, and got up for a glass of water. I'd forgotten about Chrissy and the baby on the couch until I saw them there, not asleep anymore, Chrissy with her t-shirt pulled all the way up, left arm out of it altogether, left hand supporting the kid's head as she suckled from her mother's left breast.

Her breasts were bigger than I realized, in contrast to the rest of her, bone thin enough to counter her ribs after the back of the baby's head stopped and Chrissy started again. The Twinkie wrapper remained on the end table, empty now, lightly crumpled, a dab of white frosting clinging to the cellophane. I imagined the flow of milk. I'd heard the taste of it varied based on what the mother had eaten, then imagined a more liquid, fluid Twinkie cream trickling out so sweet, a flavor that might register as familiar to the child years later. I only noticed a beat later Chrissy watching me, a hollow gap beneath her eyes, darker than the rest of her skin. Watching like a warning not to interrupt. I came to recognize everything in their lives as a delicate balance, up to and including my place in it.

#

MICHAEL CHIN

There came a point in meaningful relationships when I told people about The Drowned Girl. I told Alex after the third time we slept together. It helped that he'd already read the story version. He studied my face afterward, rubbing his big hand back and forth over the goosebumps on my upper arm, chilled where the covers wouldn't reach it. Then he fell asleep and we never talked about The Drowned Girl again. I told a therapist about her, who got invested in a series of questions that made it clear she was trying to get to the bottom of what the girl represented. It felt less like therapy than bad literary analysis. If there was one thing I'd learned in college classrooms, it was bad literary analysis. I meant to talk with my brother. To see if he'd remember, and to see how he'd react from a grownup perspective. I didn't get to do so on that Christmas trip, or a year and a half later, shortly after their second child, when the house was even more chaotic, a year before the divorce. There was never the right time. Then: Lilah. I fell in a deep, easy love of whiling away whole weekends in a cocoon of blankets on Lilah's couch where we'd alternate between watching old movies she described as *important to the canon and conversation*. The conversations transitioned from giggling to deep meditations on family, past lovers, the meaning of life. All of this over glasses of Cocobon, grocery store sushi, dark

chocolate squares. All of this punctuated by cunnilingus. Lilah gave more than she received. She was self-conscious about how she smelled. I reassured her that was ridiculous, but our patterns didn't change.

In a post-orgasmic haze one afternoon, Rear Window on her flat screen, I told her the story of seeing a desperate girl beating on the far side of the glass, staring, pleading with me for help. I told Lilah about the girl's freckles and how no one else had ever seen her or believed me.

"I believe you," Lilah said. I almost said, then and there, that I loved her. "It must've been impossible growing up in that house the only woman. And your uncle—" She trailed off into a click of her tongue as I felt the couch give way beneath me. Not just the couch. The floor. The earth sinking. "It's a miracle you survived with no one to listen to you." She stroked my hair. Everything warm. Everything sinking.

It rained outside. Sheets of water streamed down the glass of a porthole window.

"You felt like you were drowning," Lilah said. "You had to." She said it again: "It's a miracle you survived."

Things I wanted to say but didn't:

The problem with the professor was she thought everything was a metaphor and taught every metaphor like a puzzle to be solved.

That arguing someone didn't see what they say they saw is an act of violence.

That I thought I'd found purchase on dry land.

That, with Lilah, I could breathe.

That here I was, like so much rain pounding on glass. *Please*, I wanted to say. *See me*.



Untitled 2

Alex Kim

CONTRIBUTORS

ABBY HUSTON

Abby Huston is a collage artist who works with paper materials, primarily images from discarded magazines, books, and calendars. She deconstructs (what she calls ‘process’) these materials through cutting and sorting the paper fragments by color. She uses paper the way a painter uses paint, building compositions that ask viewers to experience the whole rather than search for recognizable sources.

Through accumulation, repetition, and variation, Abby constructs compositions that prioritize movement, method, and metaphor over the legibility of source material.

Based on her own life experiences as an ex-Mormon, eldest daughter, and wife, Abby's work is rooted in an attempt to understand the collage of life and people—how contrasting moments, emotions, and experiences coexist.

Through collage, she explores the tension between opposites: the expected and unexpected, the good and the bad. What results is a reflection of the complexities and collage of the human experience—fragmentations, layers, and being held together through accumulation.

ALLISON BURRIS

Allison Burris writes whimsical and subversive poems from Oakland, CA. Her most recent publications are in *The Lit Nerds* and *Redheaded Stepchild*. You can find her at the library looking for a magic portal or getting up to some kitchen witchery. She writes about creativity on *Substack* at *Ink in the Archives*. <https://linktr.ee/allisonburris>

EVAN TUNGATE

Evan Tungate is a member of the Duluth Failed Poets Society and an editor of their first anthology, *Murder Your Darlings*. When he is not working as an engineer, he writes love poems about people, places, and things. His work has appeared in *The Periwinkle Pelican*, *The Nemadji Review*, and elsewhere.

MICHAEL CHIN

Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and currently lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. He's the author of seven full-length books, including his novel, *My Grandfather's an Immigrant*, and *So is Yours* (Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2021) and his latest short story collection *This Year's Ghost* (JackLeg Press, 2025). His short work has previously appeared in journals including *Bat City Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Pinch*, *Passages North*, and *The Normal School*. Find him online at miketchin.com

MICAH COZZENS

Micah Cozzens graduated with a PhD in Creative Writing from Ohio University in 2024. Her work has appeared in *Irreantum*, *Segullah*, *LIT Magazine*, *Jersey Devil Review*, and *Time of Singing* magazines. She was also a finalist for the *Fugue* annual poetry prize. Her first full length poetry collection, titled *Emily and Other Poems*, is expected in October of 2026 from *By Common Consent* press. She is cohost of the *Over/Poetry* podcast. When not writing, she enjoys teaching, spending time with her eight nephews and nieces, and watching bad reality television.

DANIEL UMEMEZIE

Daniel Umemezie is a Nigerian-American poet based in Iowa. He is currently the Iowa Youth Poet Laureate, Iowa Student Poet Ambassador, and Midwest Youth Poet Laureate. He works attentively on diaspora, boyhood, faith, language, and how grief remakes the everyday. His writing has appeared in the *North American Review*, *JUST Poetry*, *Scholastic Anthology* as well as *Magpie Magazine* and *Voices from the Prairie*. A Multi-National Gold Medal recipient in the *Scholastic Art & Writing Awards*, he also performs as a jazz pianist and spends his free time watching movies.

AMPERSAND QUARTERLY

CONTRIBUTORS

ALEX KIM

Alex Kim (he/him) is a Chinese-Korean student studying in New Hampshire. He is an aspiring photographer and mainly photographs his school's swim team and the small, suburban town surrounding his high school.

PENG DONGYU DANIEL

Peng Dongyu Daniel goes by the artist statement, "A different pathway into modernity and structural expectations."

STAFF

Minghan Zou **1** Editor in Chief

Alicia Medina **2** Editor in Chief

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