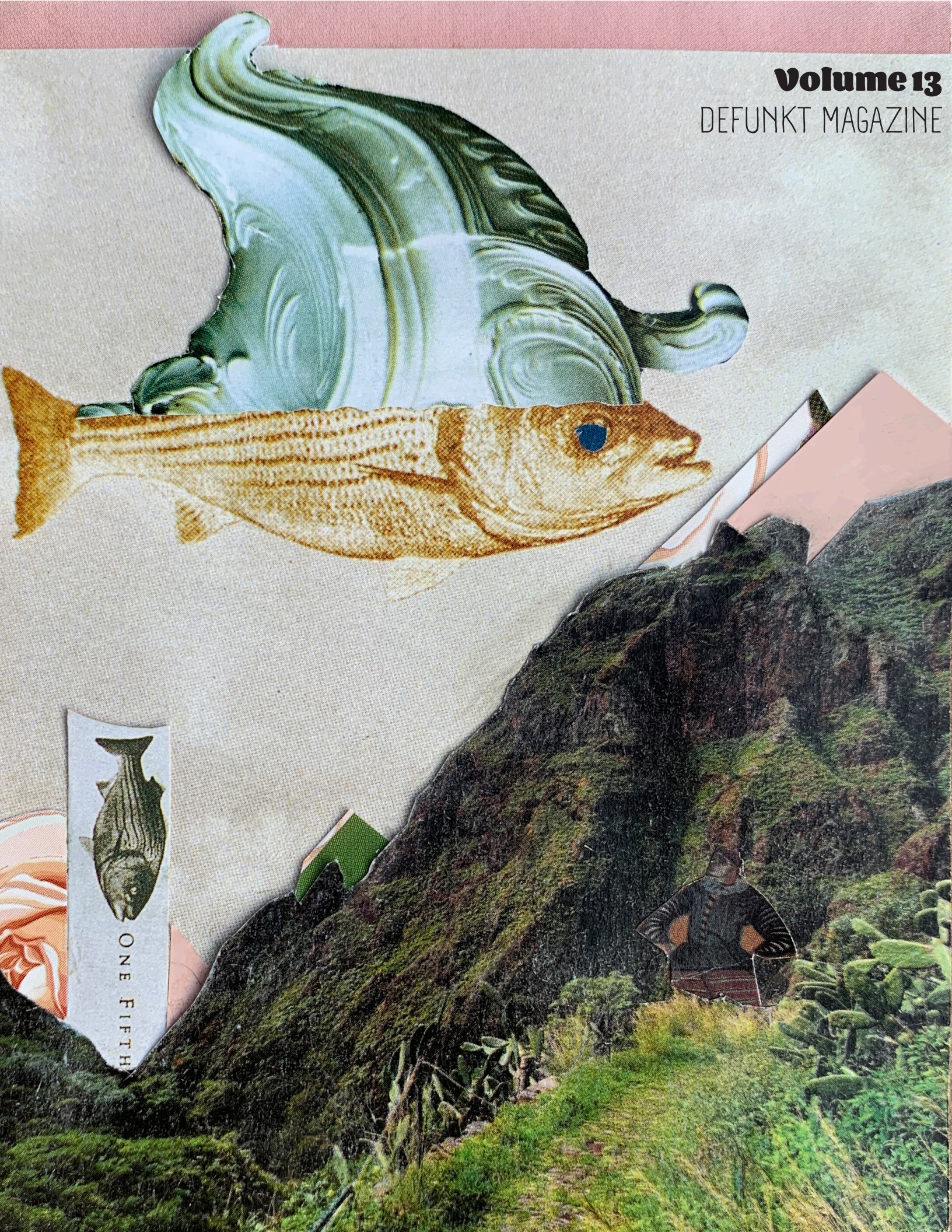
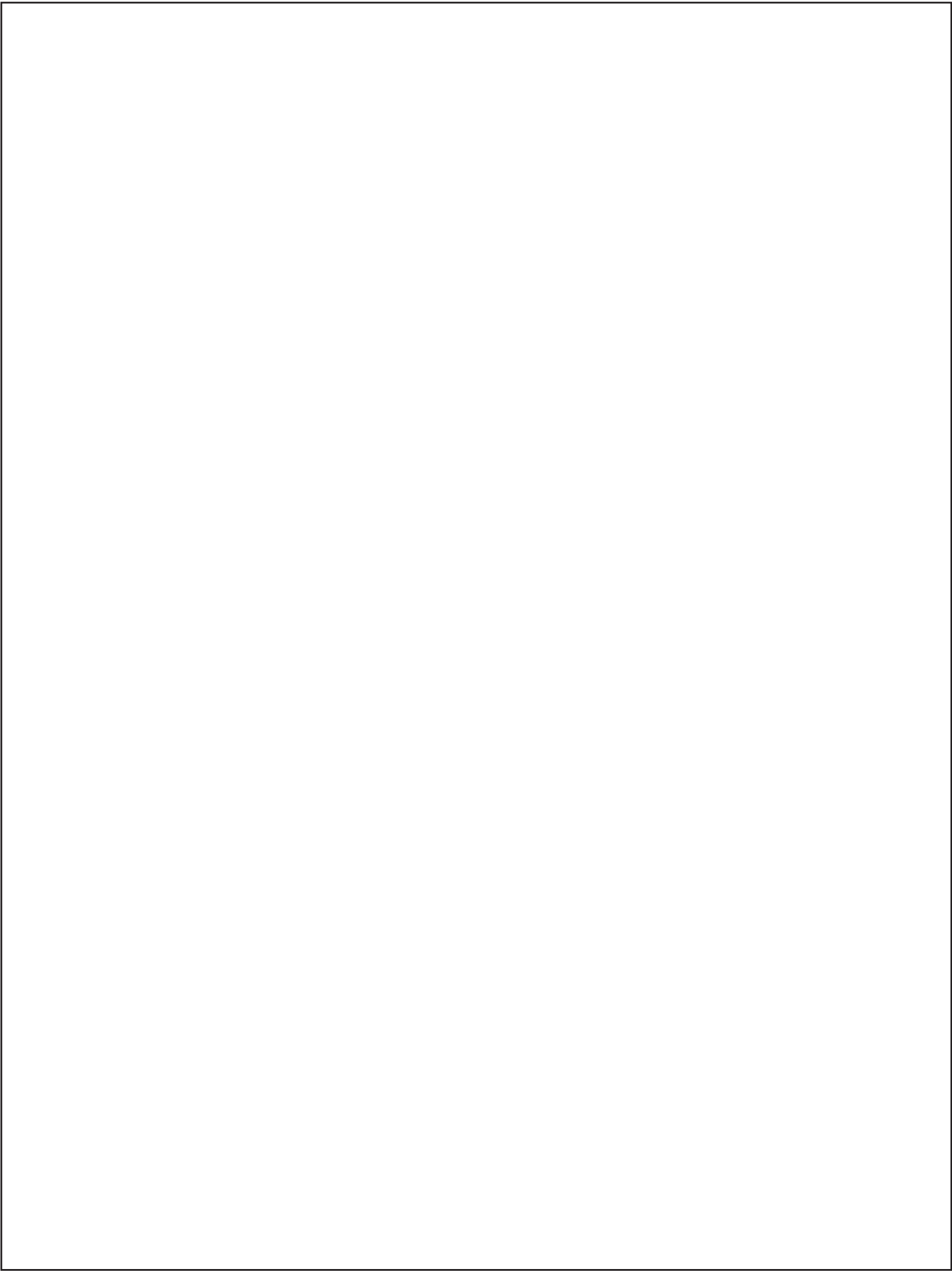
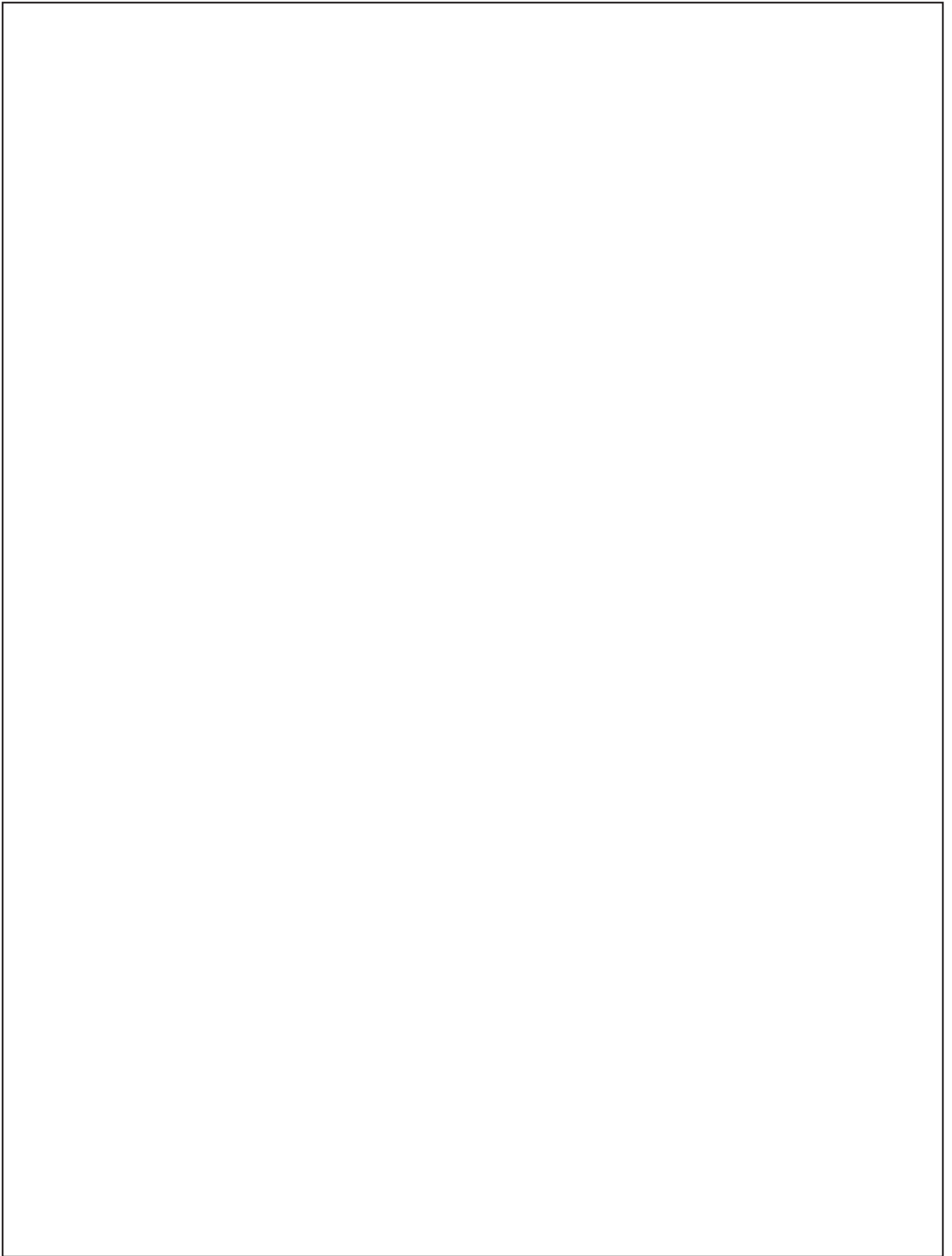
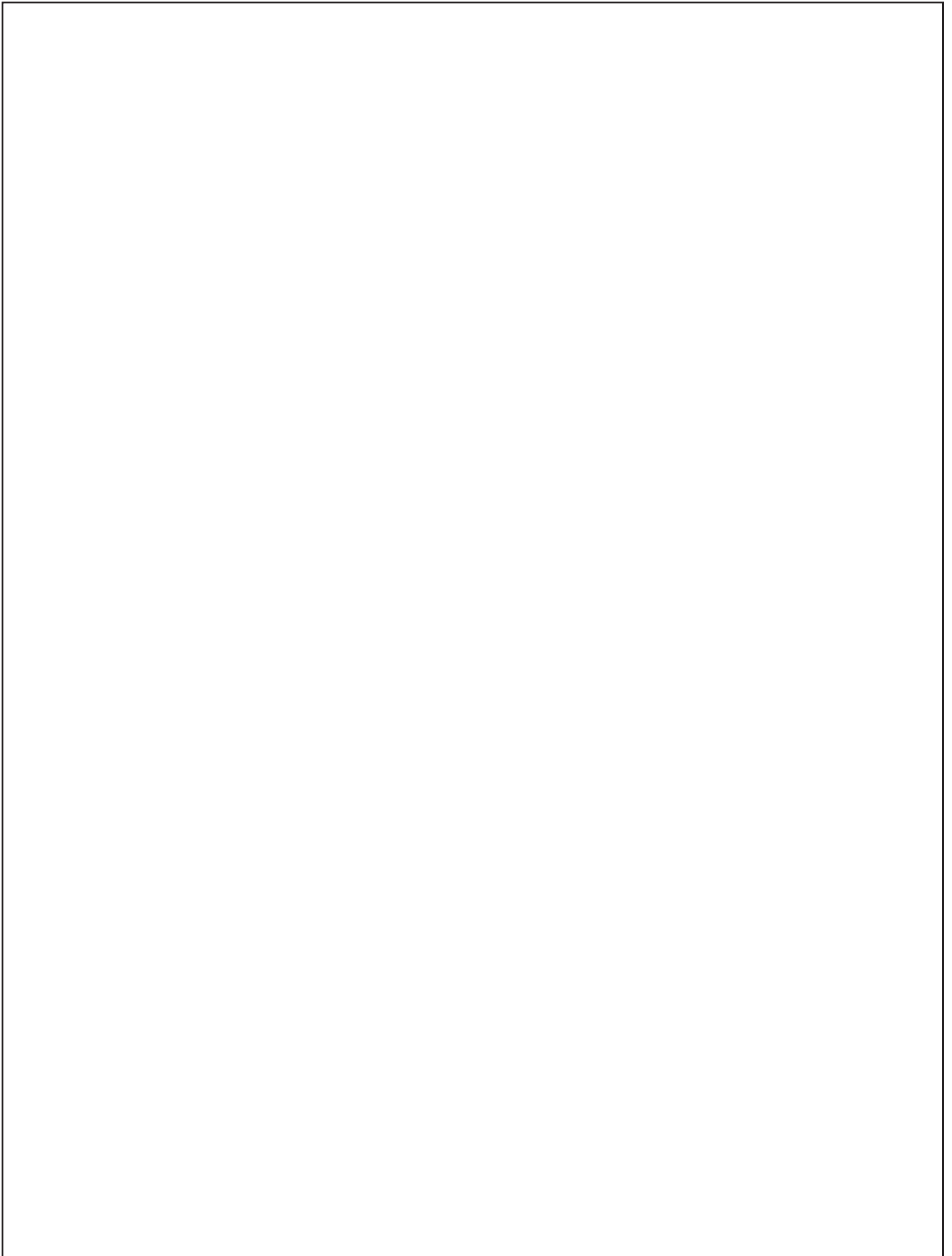


Volume 13
DEFUNKT MAGAZINE









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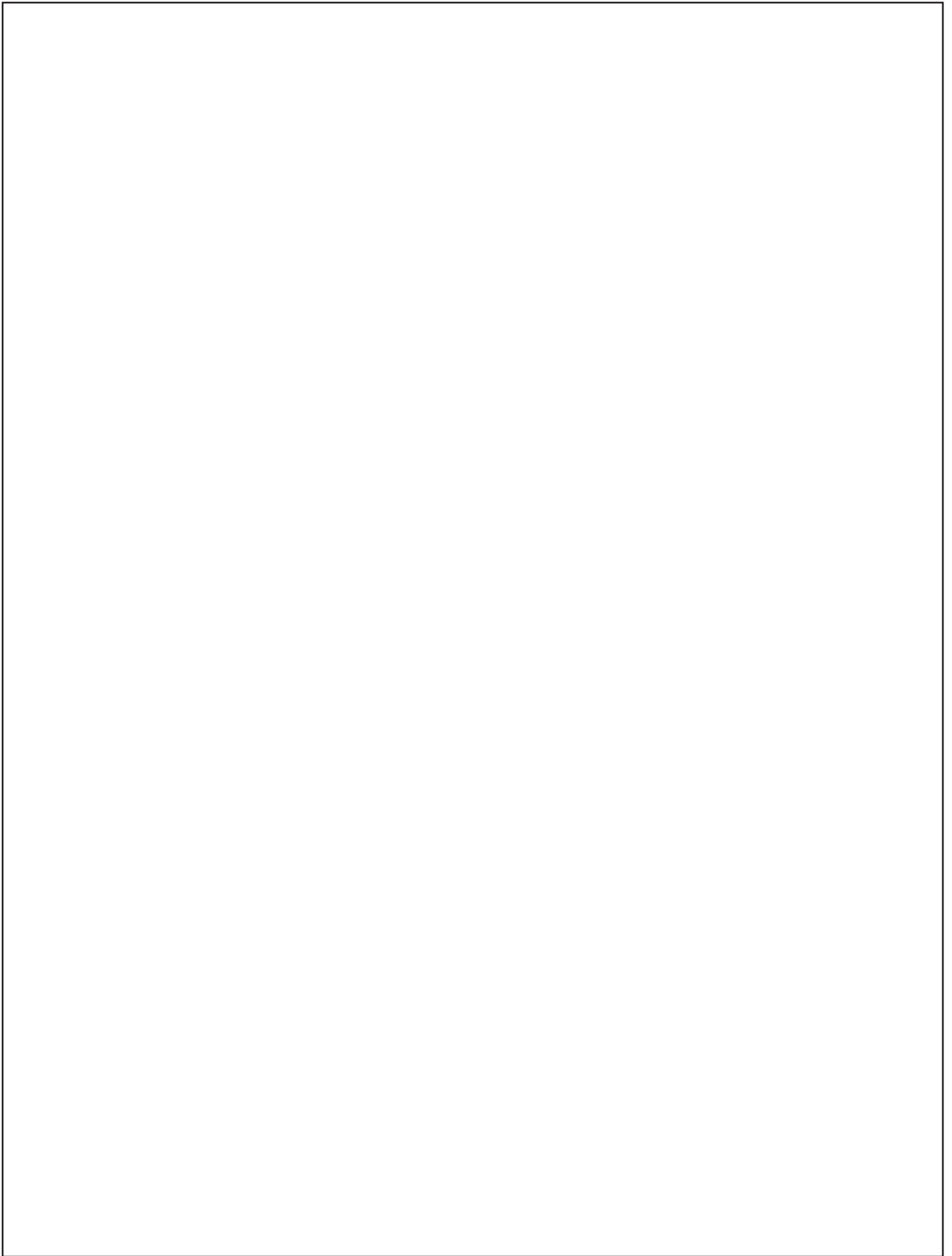
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Letter From the Editor

Dear readers and fellow members of this beautiful community,

I am equal parts thrilled and humbled to be serving as the Editor in Chief for Defunkt Magazine. While I was a late addition to the staff, and have not seen volume 13 from its inception, it has been a privilege and honor to work with these words chosen by the magazine staff preceding my arrival.

I've had the opportunity to work closely with Defunkt on and off over the years and have long-admired this magazine's commitment to empowering voices around the country and the world, cataloging and championing a wide range of lived experiences. I'm also so proud of the way that Defunkt has embedded itself into the literary community as a pillar of support to emerging and established writers through respect and equity.

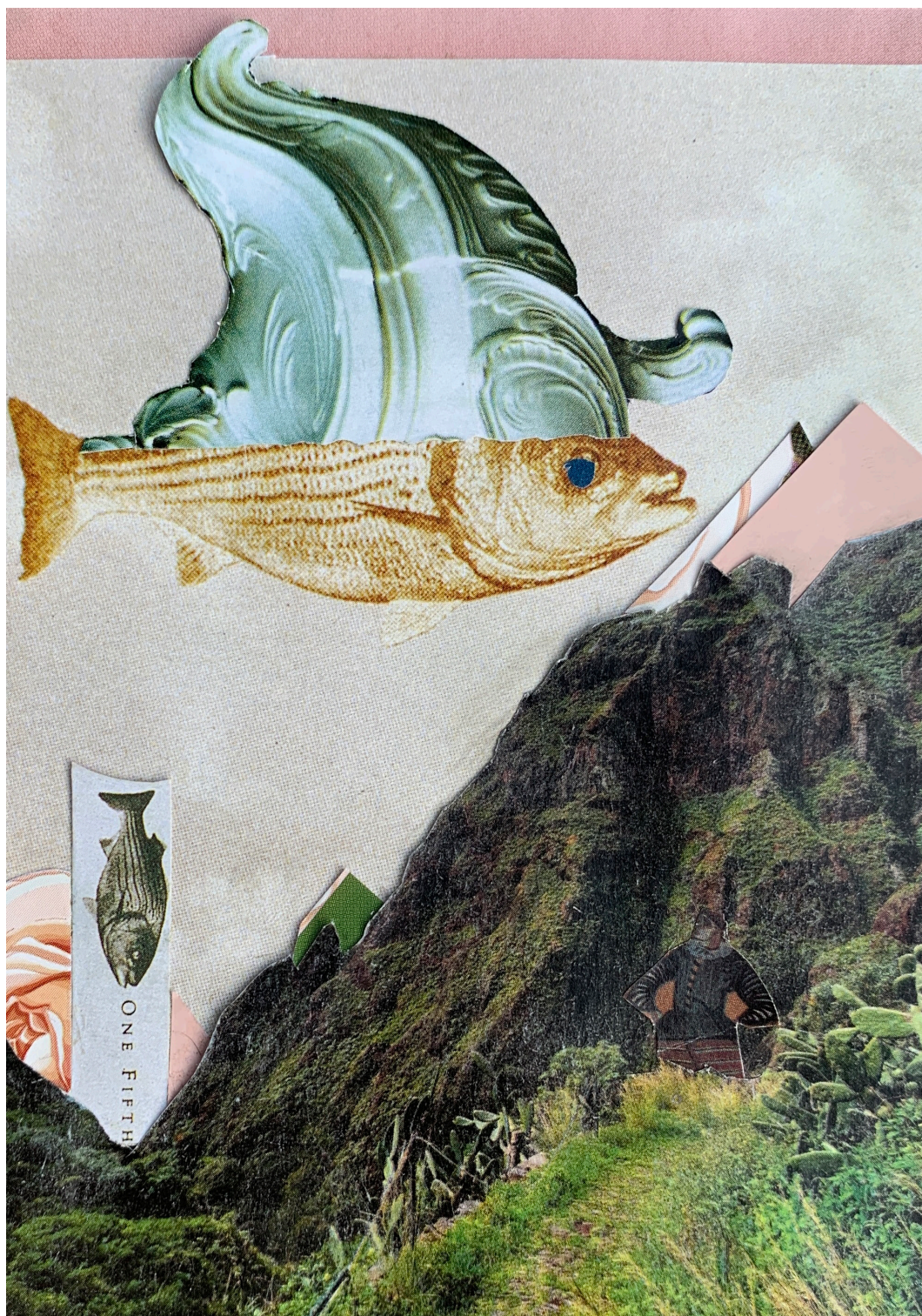
As a reflection of these goals, volume 13 is no different than the volumes that came before it, and I personally believe it continues to push the boundaries and heighten the stakes with beautiful and challenging narratives that ultimately connect us with what it is to be human, what it is to love, grieve, and experience ecstasy against turmoil and oppression. Ultimately, this issue reflects the unique experience of each author's journey and outlook. I am so proud to have played a role in helping them reach this volume's finish line.

I cannot wait to continue my journey with Defunkt Magazine as we move forward into a new year, a new administration, and other changes that will no doubt impact and challenge us. I am completing this volume with the confidence that we are a community of love, empathy, strength, and a deep understanding of how important we are as individuals who create a resilient and remarkable ecosystem. I am excited to continue with each of you and for all of the work to come. I delight in the privilege of it all and hope to wield it well.

With so much grace, peace, and persistence,
Bleah Patterson
Editor in Chief

One Fifth

Lena Farruggia



A Game for Girls

by Stephen S. Mills

I.

“Sometimes offensive” warns the dictionary before providing the definition of “housewife.” Often defined as a married woman whose primary occupation is managing her own household. A hold on the house. A house to hold.

But it’s not just her. A woman alone is not a housewife. She is just a woman in a house. A housewife must care for others. Some definitions mention a family which implies children. Though children are not required of marriage or of a housewife. One may have a house. But not a housewife. One may have a wife. But not a house. One may be a wife. But not a housewife. The point is a house is required.

But what is a house? A trailer? An apartment? A shack? Are these houses? Like that game I played as a kid that predicts your future. *A game for girls* (or so they said). MASH. Not the TV show. Mansion. Apartment. Shack. House.

A mansion was the most desirable. The lifestyles of the rich and famous. Robin Leach’s voice. A parody of fancy. Like Goldie Hawn in *Overboard*, which I loved as a kid. Desired being the fabulous version of her from the beginning of the movie. Thong and all. I desired the yacht, the clothes, the shoes, the caviar (though I had no idea what caviar was at the time). I was just a kid in a small city in Indiana. We didn’t have caviar.

But I could also see the appeal of Kurt Russell when he pulls that muscle-tee together in front of his chest revealing both nipples and smirks at her. At her ridiculousness. We are supposed to see her as absurd. See him as working-class sex appeal. *Overboard* is a movie of extremes. Another way of Hollywood telling us we should love our shitty lives because they are more authentic. They sell us this idea so they can go buy yachts and mansions and caviar and maybe even thongs.

An apartment was the next option in the game. An apartment was not desirable in my childhood mind. I had never been inside an apartment. Poor people lived in apartments as far as I was concerned. Not that my family was rich. But we had a house, which meant we weren’t as bad off as others. This was a time in America where a family could afford to live off one income and still own a house. My father, who didn’t have a college degree, worked at a school bus factory and supported a family of five for my early childhood years.

Apartments were a foreign idea. I remember the school bus dropping off a girl (just one) to an apartment complex. Very few in my hometown. They reminded me of the motels we stayed in on our way to Florida: Knights Inn with those faux paintings of Italian gardens and purple bedspreads. Like Olive Garden for sleeping. No, an apartment was not what we dreamed of. Though as an adult, I have only ever lived in apartments. Never a house.

A shack. What was a shack? Like a love shack? I didn’t have a real context for a shack other than you didn’t want one in the game or probably in real life. A shack was a poor I didn’t know.

House was the final option. An okay option. *Fine, I’ll take a house*. Better than an apartment. Much better than a shack. But it wasn’t a mansion. A house was something I knew. What I lived in. A space for a family. For a wife. For a husband. For three kids. Me and my two sisters. My dad. My mom. Was she a housewife?

My mother didn’t officially work until I was around the age of ten. But she did work, of course. She raised us. She babysat other people’s kids for extra cash. She went to college. Nursing school. Night classes. She ran the house. Had a hold on the house. Yet it feels odd to call her a housewife. A term I never remember her saying.

What do you do? Oh, I’m a housewife. No, never.

Maybe no one ever asked. It was the 1980s to early 90s. It was the Midwest. There were assumptions made. Mothers were mothers. Mothers were in charge of the house. Work or not work. School or not school. Mothers were mothering.

The game MASH also included predictions for your future jobs, spouses, and cars. *What would you drive?* A burning question for any child. At the time all I drove was my bike. And the main job I imagined was being a writer or a teacher (I've become both).

I played with my sisters. We were young. I was the middle child. The only boy, which gave me special access to games and toys that *boys weren't supposed to play with*. But because I was a boy my choices differed from theirs. Had to differ from theirs. Childhood is so often defined by gender. Especially in the 1980s. *All the boys line up here. All the girls here. Boys don't do that. Boys don't let their wrists move like that. Boys don't cry like that. Boys don't sound like that. Boys don't like other boys.*

We were young, so our potential spouses were hardly ever real people. I mean they were real people but not people from our lives. Not people we knew. They were celebrities. I always picked Alyssa Milano from *Who's the Boss?* My first celebrity beard. This would be an on-going trend for me. I would select a female celebrity as my answer to any crush question to prove my heterosexuality to my peers for years. The celebrity would shift with time and pop culture trends. This was my era of Alyssa Milano.

Of course, it was really Tony Danza (her daddy on the show) who I wanted to live in a mansion with. Who I wanted to drive around in a convertible top down. Tony Danza made me question my desires. He was a man. A manly man. Fit. Athletic. Italian. Oh and that hair. But in this show, he was basically a housewife. He took care of the family. He was the caregiver. The nurturer. Though he was being paid to do so. Basically, an employee. He did not have this role by default. It was a choice.

The 1980s loved to play with gender roles in film and television. Just not in real life. It was very cutting edge. Very *let's explore what it means to have women work*. Think *9 to 5*. Think *Mr. Mom*. Think *Baby Boom*. Think *Who's the Boss?* A show that posed a question in its very title. There can only be one boss, right? And boss was still a very male-dominated term in the 1980s.

But the show posed other questions for me. Like episode five, season one when Tony replaces the actor for Angela's commercial for "Machismo" shaving cream. This requires him to be in the shower nearly naked or as naked as you could be on network TV in the 1980s. We get abs. And arms. And pits. And tits. And they are all wet. Nearly every queer boy's fantasy. Yes, even as a young child, I was convinced I'd buy anything this man was selling. Even shaving cream with a stupid name. But he was more than sex appeal. He was a man who cooked. A man who cared. A man who looked very much like "a real man" of the era but did things others said were not for men. I wanted to cook. I wanted to care for others. For other men. For the Tonys of the world. I wanted to be a housewife.

II.

Historically, the British have also used the word "housewife" to mean a sewing kit given to soldiers to mend their uniforms. The needles could also be used to remove splinters. The name suggests this is something your wife should be doing. Your housewife. But she can't. It's war. So you have to be your own housewife.

It is also noted that many wounded soldiers after World War I took up needlework to pass the time. Not something commonly shown in war movies. Like where is the needlework WWI epic?

War is not something commonly connected to housewives (the people not the kits). Unless you count waiting. Housewives are known for their devotion to waiting. Like the image embedded in my head of a perfectly dressed woman taking a drag from a cigarette while anxiously looking out the kitchen window. A longing. A desire for more. A void so deep nothing will satisfy it.

There's a sadness to the stories we tell about housewives, which over the years has become my weakness. Give me a story about a sad, complex, and bitter housewife, and I'll give you all my money. These

stories are typically rooted in the lore of midcentury America. One of my favorite eras. Not because life was better. It wasn't. Especially for anyone seen as an outsider. Like queer people. People of color. Immigrants. And women. Horrible things happened. But I love the design. The fashion. And yes, even the hypocrisy of it all. It's a façade. It's layered. It's complicated. It's very American.

These stories about housewives are also deeply rooted in whiteness with a good dose of financial privilege. Poor women cannot be sad, lonely housewives staring out of windows, dragging on cigarettes, imagining the life unlived. No, poor women have always had to work. To find a way. To survive. Their stories are different. And because white supremacy dominates our culture and institutions, more women of color have found themselves in those positions than white women.

The housewives I'm drawn to are best captured by Betty Draper (played by January Jones) in *Mad Men*. One of my all-time favorite TV shows. Here is a very white and very wealthy housewife. She is beautiful. Movie star beautiful. Grace Kelly beautiful. She is impeccably dressed at all times. She cares for the children. Mostly. Sort of. She is a cold mother. But still a mother. A mother who is a little uncomfortable with mothering. She cooks. Even though she does have help, it isn't live-in help. She plans events. Perfect nights of cards with the couple down the street. Dinners for her husband's work partners. Birthday parties for the children complete with heavily-poured cocktails for the adults. She has it all. A beautiful house. Money. And a husband who is more gorgeous than everyone else's.

I highly respect how attractive Jon Hamm (who plays Don Draper) is and how it is used in the storylines of the show. He is one of my all-time celebrity crushes. *Mad Men* mentions Don's good looks more than any other character on the show. Men mention it. Women mention it. It is vital to his character in a way we don't often see in male characters. There is a recognition that an unattractive man would never get away with everything Don Draper gets away with in this show.

This is demonstrated time and time again by the men around him. Pete. Harry. Duck. Lane. Looks matter. As they do with Betty.

Together, they create the perfect image to crack open the disfunction of the midcentury nuclear family. In many ways, Betty and Don are a lot alike, which isn't completely obvious at first. They handle things very differently and are separated by the demands of their given genders, but both are attempting to follow the expectations of the era and finding themselves miserable. Both also have an obsession with being desired. Their daughter, Sally, points this out late in the series.

Betty stopped modeling and married Don and immediately had children so by the age of 28 (when the series begins), Betty already feels very alone and isolated by her choices. She's done what she was told to do. What she thought she wanted. But now what?

For Don, he clings to the idea of the nuclear family that he longed to have as a kid and hopes it will make him feel like a real person. It doesn't. In an early episode of the series, he leaves his daughter's birthday party to go pick up her cake and doesn't come back for hours. When he does, the party has ended. He's overwhelmed by the life he's created. He attempts to make up for this by bringing back a dog as a gift.

These are the housewife stories I'm drawn to. I long for the privileged sadness of Betty Draper. In a now famous sequence from season two, Betty begins to unravel after hosting a dinner party for Don's work where she feels she's been made the brunt of a joke, so she stays in her polka dot party dress for days. The image of her sitting on her bed with her tear-stained face in the puff of her dress has made for many a good meme. It serves as the perfect image of the troubled housewife of the era. There is an elegance and beauty even to her unraveling.

But there is almost always a safety net in her situation and in the situation of other wealthy white housewives of the era. Betty isn't going to end up homeless on the street no matter what. And in many ways, she could do a lot more with her life, if she just made the choice. She's partly upholding her own cage, which many white women have done throughout history and even to this day (see all the white women who voted for Trump not once but twice).

Betty finally does make an important choice in the final season by going to get her Master's degree in psychology. This is upended by her lung cancer diagnosis, which AMC originally aired on Mother's Day as if for an extra punch, yet it still serves as a strong progression for her character.

But it is the sadness and longing of the early seasons that appeal to me most. This idea of being devoted to keeping things nice and presentable. A home. Your own appearance. The ability to plan perfect events. Get all the details right. Then stand there in your gorgeous outfit with a wine glass in hand and find something to make you angry or upset. It's not enough. It's never enough.

I've done this. I've been that person. Though it lands different in this era. Lands different as a queer person in a same-sex couple. Feels less acceptable.

In many ways, I've channeled the anger I feel at the world and its expectations of gender and heteronormative behaviors through my own idea of this imagined housewife. There's drama in it. There's rage. A rage that often has unleashed within me without warning. Perhaps it is my own identities and expectations duking it out inside that makes me see a part of myself in these characters when in fact I am not like them at all.

I want to be allowed to be as bitter and angry as these housewives and as beautifully dressed (just with my own queer twist). I want to be as absurd as Betty slapping her neighbor right in the middle of the grocery store and just walking out. Leaving her cart. Or Betty, cigarette hanging between her lips, raising that gun to shoot at the neighbors pigeons in one of my favorite episodes from season one aptly titled "Shoot."

But it doesn't work that way for queers. Our anger has to come in other packages. Again, those damn expectations. I want the sadness of a housewife like Betty that makes others pay attention. Makes them give all their money just to hear your story. Oh, to be a wealthy white housewife of 1960's America.

III.

In 2008, five years into my relationship with my now husband, the queer singer-songwriter Jay Brannan released a song called "Housewife," which includes the lyrics "I want to be a housewife / what's so wrong with that." I was immediately in love.

The song goes on to reclaim tasks often associated with housewives like cleaning and cooking and having babies, but it begins in a clearly queer way by talking of two boys together in bed: "The smell of sweat and leather / a kinky greeting card." This isn't just placing a queer couple into a hetero normative narrative. There's a queering of it that very much mirrored my own existence.

Here was a queer man writing about housewives in a way I had never seen before, which connected to my own desires. Underneath my love of the sad, troubled housewife of midcentury America, I also truly wanted to fill that role more happily. As in without the window gazing and cigarette drag.

The various feminist movements of the 20th and now 21st centuries have done powerful things for the advancement of women, but while there has been a push for women to do "what men do," the opposite still often remains taboo. In this way, much of feminism still works within the patriarchy because it embraces those symbols and statuses. Like the suit. Women now commonly wear suits: a long-time symbol of masculine power. Think of how common they are for female politicians. In fact, women can now pretty much wear whatever they want and they should, but as a man, if I want to don a dress or skirt, it's going to be an event. Trust me, I do it sometimes.

I love genderfluid clothing. I love skirts and kaftans. But I love them on my body. My male body. My queer body. I love that image. That combination that brings together the different parts of me. Of who I am. How I see myself. How I see my own gender. It's a performance. It always has been. And the older I've gotten, the more I've embraced this side of me, which is helping tame that inner anger I've held onto for so long.

A few months ago, I stepped away from a work environment that had grown very toxic. It was an unwelcoming space that was affecting my own mental health. Up to this point, I had never quit a job when I

didn't have another one lined up. But things were not good, and with the support of my husband, we found a way to make it work for a while. I would take some time off and focus on my creative work. My writing. I would rely on my husband's job and money to keep us afloat. Which meant, suddenly at the age of 40, I was basically a housewife.

Or was I? I am not a wife. I am a husband. But I do love to play with gendered terms within my relationship, though I also will not tolerate the *who's the man and who's the woman?* question I've been asked so many times by heterosexuals. Like seriously, stop doing this. It's one of those things that only works when I'm talking with other queer people. For example, my husband and I often call each other *lady*. Of course, we also call our 17-year-old male dog *lady* as well. He really is a lady.

I also don't have a house. Which feels vital to the role. I live in New York City, so I live in an apartment in a midcentury building which I've decorated in a midcentury modern style, of course. But still I found myself living my own version of a housewife. Or maybe I should say an Apartment Husband? But that doesn't have the same ring to it, now does it?

Part of me felt a little uncomfortable with the shift. It was strange at first to not be making any money. To be tied so completely to another person. Though we've been together almost 20 years at this point, so that tie is very strong. But strange gendered feelings did pop up, because we've all been conditioned to think them even if you've spent most of your life resisting them. A man not working, even in 2023, feels different culturally than a woman not working. Even though it shouldn't. It's absurd. If a husband can financially support their wife without question, why can't my husband do the same for me?

To be honest, not much changed in our day to day other than having less money. I've always done most of the cleaning (though he does the laundry) and I do all the cooking. This is because I truly enjoy cooking. But now I could do it all with more flair. More drama. A few times I made elaborate midcentury dinners as if I was right out of the 1960s (but heavily modified as we are vegetarians). These dinners included a signature cocktail of the night. Like a Tom Collins, which young Sally Draper learns to make quite well. There was even a night with Flaming Alaska.

Over time, I let those cultural norms and pressures slip away and I enjoyed being home. Having more time to take care of the space I so carefully decorated and designed. Taking more care of myself mentally and physically. But also devoting much of my time to my writing. I was working, but as any creative person knows, our culture does not support the creative lifestyle. It takes a lot of courage and discipline to set aside time to just be creative in modern day America.

My time as a "housewife" is waning as I will be returning to teaching in the fall. But over the last six months, there's been days I've found myself looking out of my 24-story midcentury window in the kitchen like my imagined housewife. I stare down at all the rooftops while wearing one of my colorful kaftans or a beautifully printed pant. I look good. Put together. No cigarette, as I don't smoke. Maybe just a wine glass or a gin and tonic or a gimlet, which I started drinking mostly because of Betty Draper. But there is a difference. I'm not longing for another life. I'm not empty or lonely. I'm not imagining the life unlived. Because I've lived. Truly lived. I've lived the life the game of MASH could never have predicted.

A Very Special Episode: Morality and the Modern Sitcom

CNF

by Henry Luzzatto

Yeah, sure, television is art, and it's science, and it's philosophy. But more than anything, it's just *on*.

And when you're lonely, there's no better company than a late-night block of sitcoms. While each episode is different enough to grab your attention, the characters, cuts, and even laughs on the laugh track stay the same. There's a reason you can absorb a dozen episodes of *Friends* in a sitting without noticing it — they're designed to be consumed ad infinitum, forever. No matter the conflict, it's always just a speech, a hug, and a half hour away from resolution. It's like seeing old buddies. Like hanging out. Like no time has passed at all.

But the thing that makes the sitcom so comfortable and familiar also locks it into a weird state of moral paralysis. When conflict is confined to half an hour, so is character growth. There's no sense of a real, personal arc, because if the characters grow and change in a coherent way, they will move past the dynamics that made the show

work in the first place. The survival of a series — and its characters — is dependent entirely on their ability to return back to zero. Urkel will never address the hurt in his heart that forces him to be Urkel. He must remain eternally, unchangingly Urkel.

Is it any surprise that modern comedies have reacted against this so strongly? While traditional comedy TV allowed viewers to stumble into random episodes, the interface of streaming demands active decisions on the part of the audience. Starting from episode one is a commitment, and creators have responded with takes on traditional comedy setups that, instead of focusing on reiteration, actually give their characters and stories clear, cohesive arcs like the dramas that defined the golden age of TV. Shows from *Fleabag* to *The Marvelous Ms. Maisel* to even *Ted Lasso*, *The Bear*, and *Barry* offer moral and ethical journeys for their characters in a way not seen in previous generations of comedy. This new generation represents something conscious, something intelligent, something *serious*.

But sometimes, that's just too much crap to deal with. So you just turn on *The Office*.

Despite the billions spent on original content, there is no show more synonymous with the early era of Netflix streaming than *The Office*. It's maybe the perfect sitcom — so universally likable that it became the de facto sense of humor for dating apps and the standard background noise for a whole generation.

The Office began its life as a much harsher English show with a much shorter shelf life. The original, written by Ricky Gervais and Steven Merchant, is a crushing satire on the painful drudgery of work. The mockumentary style and pseudo-realism of the dialogue emphasize how the patterns of life solidify their own dynamics over and over again. Eventually, the patterns lock you into hellish paralysis while you desperately attempt to make eye contact with the camera, hoping somebody, somewhere, will recognize your pain.

But in the American adaptation, the series was transformed from a portrait of a workingman's hell into a show about an unlikely chosen family, a central group who were so close and likable that they sustained major cast changes and overhauls until an ultimately graceful departure.

After a janky half-season that featured a slightly more cruel, capricious, and balding version of Michael Scott, the American *Office* quickly switched gears with its tone and conception of the main character and the series as a whole. The creators of the show wisely realized that the soul-crushing realism and irony at the heart of the original program were fundamentally incompatible with the goals of the American sitcom. In order to exist beyond the fourteen episodes of its British predecessor and turn into the massive juggernaut of millennial entertainment, each episode had to resolve to some sort of moral baseline. While conflicts arise through the same selfish or thoughtless actions and reactions that create the cringe comedy in the first series, the characters in the American *Office* are generally handled with the benefit of the doubt. Even while Michael Scott makes bad choices, he's not a bad person — just an incompetent one, and a sensitive one, and in the end, one who cares about the people around him just a little *too* much.

While the British *Office* illustrates how the repetitive nature of working life puts you in constant contact with the most frustrating and obnoxious people in the world, the American *Office* is about how this repetition can make even those people into your dear friends. Ultimately, despite the individual problems of each episode, the characters

resolve them and return back to square one because, well, they all have to go back to work in the next morning.

It is, depressingly, aspirational television for a broken era — it shows even when your working life is fundamentally meaningless, the bonds you make with others create meaning.

Post-pandemic, *The Office* has an odd taste of eeriness again. The Gen-Z kids who grew up watching the show as calming, comforting background noise might never experience traditional office culture in real life. As time goes on, the setting of *The Office* could feel as quaint and strange and out of place as the worlds of *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show*.

It's 2021 and I have moved back to New York with an internet job, and I am crushingly alone. The infinite freedom of working from home means, unfortunately, that *you* are the source of your own socialization. There's no chance to stumble into your Pam, or your Jim, or your Michael Scott. And besides, *The Office* was on Peacock now, and it's too much damn energy to select a different streaming service. I have run out of *Succession* episodes. I briefly, painfully, consider watching *Friends*.

I never really got *Friends*. The show or the real-life concept. I never watched it, but I distinctly remember getting pegged as a "Chandler" in my eighth grade French class, and then furtively googling his "best lines" at home so I could understand what that meant and maybe begin to sort out my own place in the sitcom ensemble of my life. That was my general experience with friendship from youth basically all through college. Somehow, everywhere it went, it seemed like everybody else was already friends with each other, based on bonds and references I didn't get. It was like I had missed out on some secret bonding activity where they all swapped blood and signed some document that made them bros for life.

It's 2021 and I have signed up for a writers' group and I desperately want them to be friends with me. They hang out at the coolest bar I've ever seen and work cool jobs and say interesting things. They all drink more than they write. And, to me, even though I clicked "attending" on the same meetup app tab they all did, their clique seems impenetrable to me. Two years later, and no time at all, and they're practically the only people I talk to. I am become Frasier Crane.

"To me it's the best sitcom ever made," Mike Schur, the writer behind *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *The Good Place*, and late seasons of *The Office* said in a 2011 interview in *Vulture*. "I will always answer *Cheers*."

Cheers is a miracle — it's 300 episodes that all, at their heart, boil down to the same thing — friends talking at a bar. "The thing that made it so great," Schur said, "is it has a giant cast of incredibly great characters and they would get immense mileage out of just having them talk to each other. It wasn't fancy or tricky, they didn't have crazy plot moves."

There's nothing fancy or tricky to making friends. No secret codes, no underground rituals. That's the trick. It's not about crazy plot moves. *Cheers* made one point brilliantly, one that I would never realize without experiencing it myself: The secret to making a place where everyone knows your name isn't screaming your name at everyone — it's simply showing up, time and time again, and becoming part of the fabric, too.

Like Frasier Crane or Woody in *Cheers*, or Andy Bernard in *The Office*, or, hell, Steve Urkel in *Family Matters*, I could only do my best to slide into an existing routine while adding what I can to make it unique. But finding a place doesn't guarantee a happy ending. In the very first episode of *Frasier*, the titular character claims that he has left Boston and returned to Seattle because his life has "grown stagnant." "I was clinging to a life that wasn't working anymore," Frasier says. "I knew I had to do something." There is, of course, something essentially depressing about downing depressants as a social activity. If you do it too long, you develop some sort of failure, liver or otherwise. But at least Frasier could recognize his need for change. And if he could do it, maybe there was hope for all of us.

But even though he resolved his story and freed himself from the boundaries of the *Cheers* bar, he immediately finds himself in the world of *Frasier* — another situation that is guaranteed to sustain constant conflict.

A sitcom needs problems in order to exist, in order to self-perpetuate, in order to make money. No matter how much you change, no matter where you go, you're right back into a situation guaranteed to perpetually raise your blood pressure. As long as *Frasier* is in a sitcom, *Frasier* is in Hell.

And nothing wrestles with the hellish morality of sitcom stasis more than Schur's own *The Good Place*. The first season begins with an almost classical premise — four main characters find themselves in Heaven, even though they shouldn't be, and have to work together (despite their differences) to avoid detection. While the concept is heightened, it still retains all the elements needed for a classic sitcom — constant character-driven conflict, a reluctant chosen family, and a consistent location. By the end of the first season, the show makes its big reveal and its grand statement about the

nature of sitcoms: The saccharine universe that creates infinite, constant conflict between its members, forbidding actual growth is, in fact, Hell itself. By throwing off the boundaries of its initial premise, *The Good Place* was now able to explore deeper themes — and, crucially, to let its characters resolve their issues, both with themselves and with one another.

Ted Lasso doesn't have the existential scope of *The Good Place*, but it has a similar blue sky tone and approach to morality. The first season of *Ted Lasso* remixes a classic fish out of water scenario by upping both the conflict and the sensitivity of the story. So much of the humor of that first season comes from how utterly disrespected the main character is, and how much he springs back up in the face of these reactions.

Eventually, after enough time with his sensitive, folksy charm, the characters, and the audience, have no choice but to embrace him. There's a reason this show was such a huge, deserved hit during the pandemic. It forces both its characters and its audience to finally, after spending enough time with the main character, move past the annoying parts and find the things that are worth loving. It's almost like if Michael Scott were transported into the British version of the Office.

But while a traditional sitcom would perpetuate these character dynamics, keeping them essentially the same in order to squeeze 100 episodes out of this bunch of misfits who love each other in spite of their constant conflict, *Ted Lasso* sees these conflicts as issues — the things that get in the way of the characters forming better, closer relationships with each other and the audience.

In *The Good Place*, and *Ted Lasso* the characters are allowed to realize their own infinite stasis, and then use this as fuel to make a change. To these shows, there is nothing admirable about moral stasis. Instead, they're here to fight demons, whether personal, literal, or the ones at West Ham United.

Characters in *The Good Place* and *Ted Lasso* “put in the work” to improve themselves and the world around them. They reflect a post-millennial attitude towards problems — now that we're more emotionally intelligent, more sensitive, and more aware of the flaws with our systems, we can finally make permanent forward progress. But while they aspire toward feel-good tone and positive moralities, *The Good Place* and *Ted Lasso* are too didactic to feel like friends. They feel like therapists, or bosses, or particularly unfunny pastors. They feel like work, but not like *The Office*.

In real life, constant, permanent progress is an unfair, unattainable goal. Unlike on TV, a series doesn't end with all your issues resolved. It can't. Unfortunately, time keeps marching on, and with each new victory comes a new opportunity to screw up.

The Other Two focuses on the constant screw-ups of Cary and Brooke Dubek, who are thrust into spotlight-adjacent positions when their younger brother becomes a viral singing sensation. The show is a Max original, but head writers Chris Kelly and Sarah Schneider, as well as the super producer Lorne Michaels, all hail from the network TV background of Saturday Night Live. As a result, it can feel like a cocktail of different approaches. It fuses an episodic structure and incredibly fast-paced string of jokes with a sense of constant, feverish escalation in its overall narrative as the Dubeks grow in fame and notoriety. But even as the story gets bigger and the episodes get more ambitious, the show almost spitefully rejects the idea of linear

moral progress for its characters.

The series builds up some big, effective emotional moments, but the comedic structure renders their impact somewhat flat by necessity. Every time Brooke or Cary come to a realization that should ultimately stick with them, they are brought right back into their most essential modes of conflict by their own needs for self-fulfillment. At the end of the first season, and the second season, and even the penultimate episode, the show practically screams its “lessons” at the characters, only for them to continue to reject progress.

But in the final episode, this constant acceleration finally reaches a breaking point. The characters are brought back down to Earth. Both Cary and Brooke, faced with the real-life emotional consequences of their actions on the people they love, finally make the intelligent, unselfish moral decisions they had been avoiding since the beginning.

This reversal can feel sudden — almost as jarring as the announcement that the series itself would not be renewed. But despite the soft-focus lighting and sentimental music, the resolution can’t help but resonate with the series’ signature irony. Even when things are resolved, conflicts don’t just stop. The Dubeks, like any real-life celebrity family, can’t just stop being famous. And as long as there are eyes on Brooke and Cary (and post-credits scenes that tease new temptations) the characters threaten to do the same thing they’ve done for the entire series — to make bad choices despite their better nature.

I don’t know if the series could have continued to escalate under different circumstances, especially considering the tense workplace environment alleged in reports by *The Hollywood Reporter*. But while *Ted Lasso* staggers to its finish, exhausted after giving every character and story a complete ending, the final episode of *The Other Two* bounds to the finish line with energy in reserve. I can’t help but feel that there’s still juice left in the characters and their conflicts. Maybe not enough to become a juggernaut like *The Office*, but maybe enough to stick in the minds of audiences when they’re lonely, it’s late, and they need a comfort show.

Because as long as life is repetitive, and as long as it’s difficult, you need those shows. *The Office*, or *New Girl*, or *Friends*, or *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* or *Community* or even *Family Matters* — I don’t know, pick yours. Whatever it is, these series all become fundamental parts of our background noise because they self-perpetuate, and regardless of their individual approach, they follow that same rhythm of conflict and resolution each time.

In the sitcom, like in life, everybody has already learned their lesson many times before, yet they transgress because of spite, or fear, or self interest. The moral journey of being a person isn’t one of definite, tangible progress into something with no issues — That’s an unfair, impossible goal to put on yourself and others. But if you acknowledge your flaws, the constant transgression in spite of your better nature, then you can ask the people around you for the grace to try again in the morning, and hopefully, one day — after syndication — earn a change for good.

How to Have the Perfect Pussy

by Harper Walton

CNF

As far back as I can remember, I've always wanted to have the perfect pussy.

Not *a* perfect pussy, that would be too easy. *The* perfect pussy. The cat's pyjamas, the apex predator, the lioness supreme.

Asses that won't quit have had their time in the sun. A new era has begun, one of cunt that will never stop serving.

I want a pussy so wet it will make your mouth water.

A pussy with a life of its own.

A three-dimensional pussy, a complex character.

A pussy of substance, with subjectivity.

A pussy to write home about.

A politically charged pussy for MPs to fight against.

A pussy to start a revolution.

A pussy to go to war over.

A pussy men will have to earn the right to enter, either through kind behaviour or gladiatorial combat.

I will look down on their bruised and bloodied bodies and point my thumb to the heavens, and they will crawl on their hands and knees towards me just to taste it.

And long after my perfect pussy dries up, and I breathe my last breath, my gravestone will read: HERE LIES _____, A BAD BITCH!¹

*

Recently, TikTok introduced me to something called pompoir. It's also known as The Singapore Grip, although I'm not sure how problematic that term is. Some content creators advertised the activity as a way to improve pelvic floor health, similar to Kegel exercises. If you don't know what these are, Kegels can prevent urinary incontinence and enhance bowel control. You start by locating your pelvic floor muscles in your anus, vagina and urethra by localised tensing, or stopping your urine mid-stream. You can squeeze and tighten any of these three areas, individually or all together. You can do these exercises standing, sitting or lying down.²

Anyone can do Kegels, regardless of gender. Everyone has a rectum and a urethra. Apparently, for people with penises, it can help reduce premature ejaculation.

Pompoir takes the concept of Kegels a step farther. Promising better orgasms for everyone involved, pompoir aficionados teach you specific muscular contractions that will increase the grip strength of your vagina. One commenter said they were using this technique to obtain a "Gorilla Glue pussy." Another said they couldn't wait to "milk [their] man's dick with this." Apparently, the practice is ancient, but somehow I find it hard to visualise historical women busting out the move. Perhaps Mary Magdalene, Cleopatra and Boudicca were all pompoir masters.

In the videos, I learnt how a vagina can essentially function like an organic fleshlight, with different settings: milk, squeeze, pulse, lock, whip, wring, tilt, suck, rub, rock and twist. So far, so Bop-it. Netizens were amazed at the possibilities, calling these academic-style videos on vaginal biomechanics "gripology 101," the laws of "grippodynamics" and saying that the teacher has a "PhD in griponomics."

1 A quick question for those of you who don't know me in real life: how does the meaning of this text change if I tell you I was assigned female at birth, or assigned male? How does your perception of *me* change?

2 In one of the videos I watched, the scientist described pelvic floor muscles as a hammock. I don't need to mention that, but I just thought it was funny. I might write a devotional poem that begins: *hold my sleeping body / in the hammock of your pelvis*.

So, if you're determined to obtain the perfect pussy, you better start practicing your Kegels and pom-poir.

*

I discovered sex and relationships coach Kim Anami's Instagram post captioned #thingsiliftwithmyvagina. The photo shows her posing in a yoga lunge on the edge of a swimming pool, in front of a stunning Bali sunrise. A pineapple appears to be floating between her legs. But zoom in closer and you'll see an almost imperceptible string. The string is attached to a weight inside her, usually a tampon-sized cone. A quick look through Anami's Instagram shows other things she's lifted with her vagina muscles: a Venetian mask, a ceramic vase, a surfboard, a chandelier.

"What does a fully optimised vagina look like?" she asks.

A "honeypot of pleasure" that gives you "daily bliss," she answers.

It's safe to say that Kim Anami has some interesting opinions:

- childbirth is "meant to be orgasmic" and should be "one of the most pleasurable moments" of a woman's life
- shooting a ping pong ball out of your vagina is an "essential life skill"
- you can heal past trauma that is stored in the vagina
- breasts are "sentient, alchemical pleasure portals"
- semen is the "most potent antidepressant on the market" and should be consumed daily

Her podcasts and YouTube videos have titles such as:

- Marathon Man, Marathon Cock
- Make Her Squirt, Make More Cash
- 5 Ways Men Cockblock Themselves
- How to Fuck Your Woman into Oblivion
- Clitoral Orgasms are for Amateurs³

Her five techniques "create a super pussy" are:

- Use a jade yoni egg⁴
- Yoni massage
- Self-pleasuring
- Toss the lubes
- Listen to your vagina⁵

On the one hand, her work to sexually empower people is commendable. She breaks taboos and is a far cry from the western, conservative, repressed sexuality of the 20th Century. But she does see humans in a very binary way – with only two genders / sexes, who are as different as yin and yang. She views men and women as "equal," but falls back onto essentialist stereotypes when positing how they should relate to each other. Addressing men, she writes "that solidity in your life, in your erection, is what sustains [women]. That is her nourishment. Without it, women will look elsewhere for food. Often in actual food, when what she really wants is your cock."⁶ She wants to be overwhelmed with your masculinity. This is the primal energy that

³ She can teach you how to upgrade to G-spot and cervical orgasms.

⁴ Available for only \$299 on her website.

⁵ "If vaginas could talk, what would they tell us?" This would make a good creative writing workshop prompt.

⁶ A question to all women: does lack of sexual satisfaction make you hungry? (I'm always hungry, so I wouldn't be able to tell)

every woman wants. And when she feels it, she is yours. Your hands and cock ought to be as relentless and penetrating as your drive in life.”

In none of her 2093 posts does she acknowledge the existence of queer relationships. She believes monogamy is the only truly fulfilling relationship dynamic. She passionately denies asexuality, stating that every relationship “need[s] sex” and that “everyone naturally has a high libido.” She thinks men can “cure” their low libido by increasing their testosterone levels. She’s strongly against re-naming “sacred female anatomy” to avoid offending trans and non-binary healthcare users. Anyone who disagrees with her is a “woke under-fucked SJW” that she’s happy to purge from her followers list.⁷

So, if you want to have the perfect pussy, you must be a cisgender heterosexual woman, lift weights with your vagina, and squirt so high your ejaculate stains your bedroom ceiling.⁸ The only way you can gain the perfect pussy is by signing up for Kim Anami’s eight-week online “Vaginal Kung Fu Salon” - for only \$1197.

*

In my quest for the perfect pussy, I’ve been listening to Erykah Badu a lot for inspiration. There’s a rumour that her pussy has magic powers. Any artist who is lucky enough to sleep with her is forever changed, their music reaching another level.

She met André 3000 in 1995, three years before I was born. Outkast had only released one album. With her in his life, his sartorial style evolved, his rapping skills honed, his production became more infectious. His lyrics became “funkadelic, futuristic” and he developed a “seemingly unfamiliar, weird, or eccentric persona” that “transcend[ed] the more pronounced characterizations of gangstas and pimps so regularly assumed by black men rap artists.”⁹ He took up guitar and painting. He’s now regarded as one of the greatest, most innovative rappers of all time.

After sleeping with Erykah Badu, Common won a Grammy. According to him, she was his first love, and first heartbreak. She ended things over the phone. She seems to exclusively date rappers. The D.O.C., Jay Electronica. Maybe Kendrick Lamar, but they both denied it.

An urban legend says men can’t look Badu in the eye without falling in love.

“Not just men,” she clarified. “Women too – and children and animals... any living, breathing thing.”¹⁰

Now you too can surround yourself with her powerful aura. She released an incense called Badu’s Pussy that smells of, you guessed it, her vagina.¹¹

“I took lots of pairs of my panties, cut them up into little pieces and burned them,” she revealed. “Even the ash is part of it... The people deserve it!”¹²

The whole stock sold out in 19 minutes.

She doesn’t want to be reduced to her genitals, however: “My magic doesn’t lie between my thighs, it lies between my ears.”¹³

When asked about her relationships with men, she said: “I learned just as much from them as they learned from me. I’m a cold motherfucka though. But the people I’m with are cold too, they’re a reflection of

7 SJW = Social Justice Warrior. As of August 2023, Anami has 172,000 followers.

8 I’m not just saying this; it’s another of Anami’s indicators of a “super pussy.”

9 Howard Rabsy II, ‘Beyond Keeping It Real: Outkast, the Funk Connection, and Afrofuturism’ in *American Studies*, Volume 52, Number 4, 2013, pp. 205–216.

10 *The Tamron Hall Show*, February 15, 2023.

11 This came out the same year as actor Gwyneth Paltrow’s “This Smells Like My Vagina” candle. Whose pussy would you rather your living room smell like?

12 *10 Magazine*, February 5, 2020.

13 *The Tamron Hall Show*, February 15, 2023.

that. Become a cold motherfucka and the motherfuckas will just come like magnets.”

Maybe I don't need a perfect pussy. Maybe I just need to believe in myself. Maybe there's no such thing as a perfect pussy. Maybe every pussy is perfect. Maybe the perfect pussy was the friends we made along the way.¹⁴

¹⁴ This essay would not exist without the excellent YouTube videos of Kadija Mbowe and Tee Noir, especially *Hypersexuality and the Perfect Pussy Complex* (Noir, 31 August 2022).

Invisible Woman Has Reasons to Take Time Out

FICTION

by Mandira Pattnaik

When I woke up as Invisible Woman, exposed to some spectacular fabulist cosmic storm, having the power to bend light rays, it was nine. The baby was wailing, the husband waiting for his lunch-box, dressed for office, the milk choosing to turn sour the night before, the maid at the door, and the older son fidgeting with his shoe laces.

Irrespective of the overwhelming confusion, I stood in front of the mirror for two seconds thrilled I finally had a slim body I'd always desired, and a glorious head of golden wavy hair. I'd have plenty of time to experiment with my newly acquired power later — to project fields of invisible psionic, hyperspace-based energy rays. Perhaps something that could be used for a variety of offensive and defensive effects — shields, blasts, explosions, and levitation. For now though, I went straight to the kitchen. I still had a strange feeling no one noticed that their wife and mother hadn't been seen around, she was invisible, missing.

At breakfast, son spilled tomato sauce over his school uniform which I speedily rubbed off; supplied the husband with sautéed vegetables (light oil, no salt); waited at the table hoping to hear a thank you; hoping to be told it was great; words of appreciation about my efficiency; but the baby suckled a feeding bottle, the boy rushed out to his school bus honking outside and the husband continued to fork a plate of cut fruits with his eyes on the newspaper.

Later I put the dirty clothes in the washing machine, dusted and cleaned the rooms, rearranged the cushions and curtains, trimmed the bougainvillea, and opened the door for the boy and the husband when they returned. They changed into a fresh set of clothing from the cabinet, noticed the new set of bed covers, noticed the floral room freshener, but didn't notice *me* missing, instead they ordered Thai food, and spent the remainder of their waking hours watching soccer on TV.

Tired, I woke up the next day as Malice, the Mistress of Hate, alias of Invisible Woman. Stayed in bed without doing the chores. They found the unwashed plates in the sink, the dirty linen in a heap, the lights left on through the night, the grocery running out, the carpet soggy from cat urine, but did not bother either. They went about their school and job, promising each other to have lunch at the cafeteria and opened the door with their key when they came back. I overheard the husband say: *She's perhaps upstairs with a book / She might be visiting her mother's place, son / Mum might be gone for a walk, silly!* and that was the end of the conversation, but they never really looked for me.

I hoped to be missed. Missed like crazy. Malice, the Mistress of Hate, alias of Invisible Woman, became Evil Woman, avatar #2 of Invisible Woman. Lazed on the couch, watched TV. Began to do crazy things: unfastened windows just for the fun of seeing them get up and close them, turned on the faucet, littered the floor with chips and chocolate packets, and left mysterious notes in drawers. This didn't work either. I overheard them talking about the season being weird, and *Are we getting less sleep?* and *Let Mum rest, she works so much*, and *Mum would be very angry when she finds out you've been naughty*, but still were not really worried about me.

That's when, rested enough, I decided to become this woman again — superheroine, selfless, demand-less, super-efficient, *visible-only-in-the-background* mom-and-wife. Started with uprooting the weeds in the garden, bought fresh fish from the neighborhood fishmonger, cooked an elaborate meal, put on my best dress, went shopping, back in I turned on Bollywood music and waited for them. When the bell rang, I hugged the husband and kissed the son, and shouted *Love you, mmmm...* and showed them what I'd shopped for them.

They seemed terribly lost; the boy looking around as if unsure what had come over his always-simple-perpetually-on-mute-forever-subdued mother: *What's all this, Mum? Hmmm — are we missing something, Dad?*

Our Disposition to Beauty

Adeyemi Adebayo



MARA JENKINS IS NOT EN FUEGO:
A PROFILE OF THE COUNTRY-FOLK SONGSTRESS
STEALING HEARTS ALL OVER YOUTUBE
PROFILE BY RICHARD STEVENSON

FICTION

by Malavika Praseed

Mara Jenkins is not En Fuego. This much is made clear from my seat in her Winnebago. Unlike other touring acts, including her husband, Mara opts for minimalism as she travels from the family home in Valdosta, out to the western reaches of the Bible Belt. Then she will travel back southeast, ending with a flourish at the near-submerged Florida Keys. Just an RV, just a few passengers. Her driver, myself, herself, and Elaina, her five-year-old daughter. Staff and crew travel separately.

No, Mara Jenkins conveys none of the frenetic energy and rapid lyricism of her most well-known track. She is long, languid, in old jeans and a worn J Crew blazer. She could be your coolest English teacher, or an aging barista, just with dark silver circle tattoos in the center of each palm. They are just iridescent enough to catch the light coming through the van windows, as we drive across the interstate on a Friday afternoon.

Last September, Youtubers Darren Christo, Mike Neil, and Roderick Shepherd faced both criticism and intrigue for speculating as to the nature of her famous tattoos. “I bet they’re match producers,” Christo claimed, and went on to cite their use in cheap, commercial magic acts. The men are co-hosts of the popular channel VFX Bros, which boasts 6.7 million subscribers. Most well-known for their analyses of movie and music video special effects, they were tasked with the challenge of watching one of Jenkins’s live performances. Unfortunately, their claim met with widespread backlash from longtime fans, who were quick to comment that the circles are indeed tattoos.

“She’s had them since at least 2012,” wrote YouTube user Kristy202. “It’s clear that these men did zero research into Mara’s artistry and should stick to Star Wars.”

The tattoos are clearly evident now, as I sit across from Mara en route to Tuscaloosa. Perfect black circles in each palm and black fingertips. Simultaneously, Mara refers to this as influenced by Bollywood makeup trends of the 1960s, and also a youthful mistake—dating back much further than 2012. It is a similar cultural conflict that led to the title of her signature song.

“In my early performing days, I was often mistaken for Latina,” says Mara, whose father is of Irish descent and mother an immigrant from India. “So I tried to weave in some Spanish. It was supposed to be funny. It ended up making people more confused.”

Indeed, “Mara Jenkins Hispanic” and “Mara Jenkins Mexican” are her third and fourth most common Google searches, next to “Mara Jenkins husband” and “Mara Jenkins fire.”

Much of the van ride is unbearably quiet, except for little Elaina’s occasional questions. Any of her words are swept up by her mother, who sits between us, her body a barrier between myself and the child. One attempt to approach Elaina with a microphone ended with an icy *absolutely not* from Mama Bear.

We stop for cheeseburgers at a diner Mara knows well, because this is a route she’s traveled many times. “They love me here,” she says. “If anyone’s been made an honorary Southerner, it’s me. And I’m grateful for it.” She tells a banal story of running out of gas in a remote Alabama town, and half the churchgoing folk pouring out of their pews to help. “They get free tickets now,” she laughs.

As she reminisces, Mara moves her fingers in the same casual one-at-a-time manner that she does in her live shows. Fireless now, more muscle memory than active thought.

VFX Bros responded to the backlash via a pinned Youtube comment: *All our assessments are speculation, we make this clear in every video description. We are unfamiliar with mara but we agree her effects are amazing!!*

Much of the country is unfamiliar with Mara. Her last few albums hardly scraped Gold combined, and apart from occasional streaming bubbles when she is seen next to her husband, Jayson Hamblin, at award shows. Yet she tours, and will continue to tour, for a slim contingent of Target moms and ex-Evangelical millennials.

Christo, Neil, and Shepherd could not be reached for further comment. Mara laughs off their match producer theory as “an idea.”

In her latest record, *Clear Blue*, Mara explores a notable tonal shift, embracing calmer soundscapes and stripped-down production, while her lyrics do the heavy lifting in exploring the anxieties of motherhood.

“I was at the beach with Jay and Lainey. There was a warm salty wind, and I had a cold drink in my hand and there were glowing tiki torches in the distance and my daughter gathered seashells, and I still couldn’t find peace. That’s the kind of feeling I wanted in this album, a lack of peace when peace surrounds.”

She admits a distancing from her influences on this LP—Brandi Carlisle, Natalie Hemby, early career Miranda Lambert. She also admits a growing distance from En Fuego (“You really wanna hear about that song, don’t you?”). Her laugh is strained and rehearsed.

There’s a similar practiced annoyance when asked about Hamblin, who provides only backing vocals on *Clear Blue*.

“Do you think you and Jayson will ever collaborate on a full-length project?” I ask.

“We already have,” she says, motioning to Elaina, five years old, playing games on an iPad. There are smaller dark circles inside her own hands, likely drawn on with magic marker. Like mother, like daughter.

At the venue in Tuscaloosa, which seats four thousand and fills to full occupancy on this Thursday night, Mara edits her setlist last minute with pen and paper.

“A perfectionist if I’ve ever seen one,” says her backing guitarist.

Some things never change, however. En Fuego is always last.

And the audience knows. As the guitar chords fade away in her penultimate ballad, one of many on the recent album, people leap from their seats and press their bodies against the plastic chairs in front of them. They’d rush the stage if they could. You can hardly hear those opening whispered words. This venue, only fit for dying stars, rattles floor to ceiling.

“He told me I was En Fuego...”

Mara has never revealed the ‘he’ of En Fuego. Some have speculated Hamblin, despite the song’s release years before their relationship went public. This, of course, would place the song in the middle of Hamblin’s acrimonious first marriage. Mara laughs off this rumor too (“you realize I was a whole woman before I met him, right?”). There is no choice but agreement. There’s a tight vein in her jaw.

Performing En Fuego, she is all looseness. Fluid hips, her hair let out of its haphazard claw clip. Her disaffected posturing and coffee shop aesthetic all abandoned for this one song. En Fuego is up-tempo, exudes the raw appeal and energy its artist often holds back. Indeed, witnessing it live, one wonders if Mara Jenkins, had her discography followed suit, had she followed her famous husband into the dark, pursued the rougher edges of her voice and production—would she sell out stadiums today?

And then the flames. They begin in the center of Mara’s hands and pass from her fingertips to the length of her shoulders. Her body gyrates with the fire, as if one controls the other, then she holds her hands out and the oil lamps placed around the room glow bright. It is sexy, thrilling, enchanting, the crowd goes wild. It breaks every fire code. Mara wipes her brow, sings on, and as the song reaches its zenith, the lamps dim to candlelight and extinguish entirely. The sound is deafening, feet clomp in time with the drums. It is a crowd mostly inert through most of Mara’s set, coming to life at its culmination. If there is any proof that Mara Jenkins is a one-hit wonder, it is this.

But Mara has never acknowledged the transformative element of this song, nor does she now. She collapses into a folding chair backstage and fans herself with a brochure and hardly talks the rest of the night. Vocal rest begins. In the RV she sips ginger green tea and stares out the window and breaks her silence only

to tell me she's considering taking En Fuego out of the set entirely.

"It takes a toll," she says. She knows the crowd loves it, but it does not fit the current era of her song-writing. What this current era actually *is*, she is unable to articulate.

Any criticism of her idea she meets with frustration. Her thin lips disappearing into her skin, her dark fingers knit together, it is easy to envision her as an artist, a mother, a wife, this barely restrained defiance. And while she will not discuss the split rumors between her and Hamblin, one wonders if this reluctance is an admission of guilt.

In watching En Fuego and examining the theater thereafter I find none of the tells VFX Bros had discussed. No ashes from a match producer, no timed lights. But that does not mean they don't exist. In any case, Mara folds her body beneath a wool blanket and refuses further questions. Pressing the issue risks finding myself on the side of the highway, with no kindly Alabama townsfolk to come to my aid.

I talk to her driver, who can tell me nothing. "That's Mara," he says. If she has scared him into silence, or he simply doesn't know more than this, who can say.

I talk to her crew, before they board their own transportation and we set off in the Winnebago. "I joined on because I wanted to know," says a young, witchy woman who handles sound.

"Did you find out?"

"I found out something greater. That some things aren't meant to be known," she says. Her voice is fried and her eyes are the kind of red you see at college fraternity parties or by the oceanside, and so I leave her testimony as just this, a fragment. But the rest of the staff is equally cagey. I even follow down the keepers of the oil lamps and find out that Mara uses new ones at almost every venue, all different models and sizes, whatever the venue can accommodate. Sometimes ones provided by the venue itself.

"They're just props," says one of them, sharply, as if to parry all further questions.

No, from the sources themselves there will be no answers. Mara turns her back. I think to remind her that this is her first profile, after fifteen years in the business. Jayson Hamblin, by contrast, has been profiled in over a dozen different outlets, including this one, before and after their marriage. And profiles are not written by fans, or they'd reveal nothing.

Hamblin was not available for comment.

I ride the Winnebago back southeast, where the crew will venture down towards the Keys and I will board a flight in Orlando. And it is halfway to the airport, perhaps, after Mara has drifted to sleep and the driver stops to take a leak, when it is just me and Elaina in the back of the RV, when she stares at me with solemn gray eyes.

She doesn't speak much. Her voice is hardly louder than the wheels of the van on the highway. But she glows. From the center of her painted hands, I watch her pass a flame from palm to palm.

We were on our way to another world. We were on the boat, we'd said goodbye to our mothers and fathers and our past, there was no going back. We were in the hold, kept hidden from view, safe in the swaying damp darkness, rusty threads of light coming from the cracks beneath the men's feet. We sat on straw, the sea rising and falling beneath us, rising and falling. A pail was kept in the corner. Some of us were from villages in the mountains, some of us were the daughters of fishermen, but most of us had come from the desert and had never seen the sea. We were on the blue boat with the men above us. There was no need to worry. They told us to be still; they told us to be good. We had already learned how to make ourselves invisible. We had already learned how to keep quiet, how to completely cover our heads, how to duck before we were hit. We had already been told that the men would save us. Some of us had a baby sucking, some of us had a baby growing inside, and those who didn't have either spoke with certainty of the place we were going as though they'd already been there before. *Fresh water from a faucet! Light when you flip on a switch! Fruits growing everywhere!* Our first few hours floating between worlds, the sea rising and falling beneath us, rising and falling, the engine constantly throbbing, all of us became seasick and the pail was repeatedly passed. Some of us were so dizzy we could not even remember the dream. We tried to comfort each other, we lied and said: *We're almost there!* At night, the sea rising and falling, we stayed up and discussed what we wanted most in the unknown land ahead of us: endless bolts of lace, a painted house with a twisting staircase, a whole library (though none of us could read). Some of us knew that the moment we got there, we'd run away together and start again without the men. Even on the second day, breathing the same stale air, the food and water already out, the rising and falling, the rising and falling, the unbearable stench in our nostrils of urine and vomit, we still held tight to our dream. And even after the engine juddered, even after the boat began to break apart, even as we screamed, all of us astonished and disbelieving as black water rushed in, even then we said to ourselves: *They'll come for us! They'll save us!*

And we would be wrong.

1. Bruja
Xiomarra Gonzalez

POETRY

“We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn’t
burn” reads the graphic tee of the white woman

sitting next to me, looking like she just walked off
the set of American Horror Story, season 3

and I want to tell her

my great-grandfather spoke to the spirits
of the friends he left on the battlefield

like the water he placed on his porch every night to quench the hellfire
that seared through their bodies until they could transcend to

the beyond, something even he knew was always there,
sins we still needed to pay for.

Sometimes I catch my mother speaking to herself
in whispers, manifesting

a peace no one else will give her.

My grandmother in ceremony:
Dios te bendiga, leave candles burning
at the altar of our Lord,

our Savior, summoned through her
prayers are just prayers,

by any other name, a language
my blood cannot remember.

I want to ask her if she remembers
dancing naked under moonlight
before the camera flashes went off

When our bodies were just
bodies, not frontline pawns

cracked knuckles, withered fingertips

Fruit from the womb, be sweet
not sterile

Their holiness dressed in white, the reason
our magic is made dark.

At 3 am, my son sees visions of men
swinging from his door frame

I tell him, the scariest thing you'll find
in this house
is me.

Watch me slither in candlelight, taking
everything that was never meant to be
ours.

This world makes monsters of men, but
it also makes witches
out of people like me

and I just want to know if she knows what it's like
to still be burning.

Stroke My Face and Call Me Flower

Karen Lozinski

POETRY

I am the Sasquatch that bloomed on the rose bush
heavy-footed and miraculously still perfumed
unburdened by the succulence of petals
coarse with hair and sticky from a fistful of berries.
They still stroke my face and call me flower
though I'm a hulking, bipedal mythology
unfit for this type of admiration
too burly and square-shouldered for your bouquet
too damp and musky for your potpourri
unsuited for quaint boutonniere or tidy corsage
and still this vexing insistence I'm a flower.
When I grunt and roar does that not convince you
that I am some vast other, perhaps birthed more than bloomed
spun from a legacy of blood, towers of meat
plumped generationally from formidable helices
muscle and sinew that incite strength and speed
and though unknown to you, my stout legs
catapult me into a forest glen pirouette
or a sonnet I crow in my thundering voice
using a language forever inscrutable to your ilk. To you.
Allow me my softness as I find it.
I amble dimensions you cannot fathom
my vigor is still mostly unmapped
I gargle calculus before breakfast
which is eaten typically raw.
My softness does not ask for or want your approval
it is incapable of capitulation
I will not scrape essence from my limbs or body
to ferment comfort in you.
My call stays ragged and my gait spans continents
I don't expect you to reach out or keep up.
I gather my own flowers with no expectation
that I am nestled quietly among them.

Saturday Night in the Empty Lot Behind the Waffle House in Apropos, Texas, 1982

Sean Gallagher



A Todas Las Palabras, I Belong

POETRY

Farrah Fang

Dancing into Marlboro smoke y Catholic sin

Not pride

Ella es pasiva so as sloth her tongue extends

Her crucifix is “t” for Trans, “x” for crossed

Out sliced

They slur their fear at her

that she does not belong

to the tierra

Gente machistas revoking her plate of carnitas y

Mexican rice

But she runs off with

sábanas suave y

paint y blades to weave

New Skin

Her nerves are tortured chronic,

invisible

inflammation

Named “Fibro Mami”

her pronouns are

SHE / HURTS

Weeping fantasma

uninvited

from her own

quinceñera

Gray corpse with

“no manches”

eyes to bury

her vessel

Maize made

To queer the land

as a sultry cactus,

her maceta

a lavender mattress

To her chasers

she is La Virgencita

“eres divina niña”

they worship

Sacrilegious
Y chimaeric

Saunters in her Mamá's gowns
on pot-holed roads

Con miedo y she keeps
it under her scarlet eyelids
Undisclosed

She speaks with the feminine palabras
as if they include everyone

Prays violent
The way men rope the patas
of your hermanas with their machete

She is the Espolòn
they pour on their wounds,
sabes lo que dicen

Mourning is the soft sweat
that travels over her
like her ancestors

Bodies y voces
risen from the Tejano soil

Above any mal del ojo or caged up smiles

You ask them in English porque you like the way it bleeds

But what is our breath
if not a loving farewell that repeats

Hanging Balloons

for a friend

Daniel Barry

POETRY

Grandma, you were an old black lady
who traumatized everyone in the family
in your own way.

People carry things—it doesn't always come in a tote bag
or buckets of mauve paint. But you see it in shoulders.

I don't need you playing peekaboo with my muscle
and bone and posture and voice, God knows,
this is my final stance. You can't get me.
I've sent the boy to sea, cut the leash.

Now I can comprehend my own potentiality
and move resolutely forward.

I can watch caterpillars slinking into their chrysalises;
drink one cup of wine, or none, and be satisfied.

Hurray for the power to tear my skin that was her skin
that I thought was mine. I'm in the chrysalis
hanging balloons for my own birthday party.

I can swing dance now, with pivoting legs,
and lush, lanky limbs.
My mouth can water before a cantaloupe.
I can say something that only I
understand to someone as I exit the subway.
I can be the moose in the clearing.

I can be in the heart of a dark, evacuated library, leaning
back among the unlit, insulating shelves reading:
"Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself."
I picture the wind slamming autumnal
leaves against stained glass.

Here's to one less innocent child given a
story that was never their own;
I can walk down the street like the protagonist of my story;
I can lie awake for hours, sick to my stomach with dreams.

I can feel so untethered that when someone
says *you've changed, you look good*,
it sounds familiar and fair.

I can be hatred, let my steam rise, snatch it, and blow it back into the furnace.

I allow it.

A man at the pub turns his eyes
towards me, smirks, and lingers his gaze for an excessive second.

I walk towards him leaning on the door.

I walk like a blackbelt in jeans.

I look inside his two round greens
and smile as if greeting an old friend.

Grandma, you would have smacked him silly.

But you're resting—and finally—the land bears good fruit.

Yeti in the Springtime

Courtney Bambrick

POETRY

You sneak up on me, your arms a hairy embrace. Eyes shadowed by trees. *This is me*, you say, in case I cannot recognize. It's June – always June, even when it isn't anymore. The greens their greenest; the means their meanest. I am unemployed, more or less. I am annoyed.

Bootleggers and pirates and the runners of rum, the sweetest sugar and the sourest mash. The ache of teeth becomes the break of bones, a squirrel skeleton floats, a bird's feathers are lost. We only find each other when we look. You wear snow like a suit on top of your everyday clothes.

Lights and music glare – the glamour of new love, the love of a new lover. They see you when the bulb flashes: knuckles on the ice. We soon become the history we study. Books to shelve, books to lose our postcards in. A prairie of pages.

Names link us, chains to change. We are tethered to a future we hate as much as love. As much as I eat the enemy, I still slip on my slippers, bend my knees, and point my toes. You stand still, collect the cold. I will move around you.

Aphrodite Boom

Lena Farruggia



Recipe for the Cliche Diasporic Iranian Prose Poem

POETRY

Celina Naheed

Where Girl finds a way to eat at night. In the dark, Girl washes her hands inside her [MELT 1/2 cups ETHNIC] home. Girl knows that culture can be eaten. She opens her mouth to starve. Her body tries to be the [INSERT KETTLE] kitchen where the Mother [CURE TONGUE] went. Mother-with-a-tongue tries to fill Daughter with everything she knows. [FOLD IN HOW MOTHER CUTS FRUIT] Years from now, an American professor will tell the class that: *This was a custom meant to replace I love you.* [DRIZZLE RUMI QUOTE] *This is a* [REDUCE FARSI] *translation of the words the Mother didn't know.* The Mother pounds the back of [STIR 2 tbsp. PEACOCK] Girl when her stomach swells. The culture leaves her lips and becomes the culture on the [WHISK THE CARPET] floor. Girl has lost her appetite.

POETRY

Apology to my psychiatrist, who forgot to send in my refill

C.M. Green

I'm sorry—
Which may be all I've ever said with my body.

The end of Bupropion means a constellation of bodily responses.
(in)stability & crying more than ever & not manic (yet).

Crying more than ever in the coffee shop in Brooklyn
I paid for this cold brew with my blood, which is to say my money.

Blood stains my nails because my cuticles, well, they demand it.
A small violence, enacted upon myself, by the day/hour/second.

I like couplets because they defy violence.
A thing, complete, in two parts, united.

I am united with my mother against this illness,
And when I call her she sounds so human.

Is it human to cry at the coffee shop in Brooklyn?
I came to this city to have fun. I'm not much fun.

It is so fun to be sick. I'm sorry—I'm sorry.

its awful gnawing
on the map in my mother's mind,
tears climb into her voice.

Her four-toed cane clomps
emphatically on the bathroom tile
as she turns toward night's

certainty. I cannot or will not
mollify. The Church presses
its sharp point at her origin,

a compass subtending
an arc that excludes
not only me but all those

like me. I am
willfully disobedient—
I am.

Sometimes, she gazes
in my direction, saying softly
if only I could have prevented the influences—

for I am her manly daughter,
in whom she is not well-pleased.
One night she confesses

she's afraid that when she dies
she'll never see me again,
an eternal separation

not unlike the Gospel
definition of hell.
Belief's steady hand

inscribe its circles
in indelible ink; love is nothing

next to such power.

In my father's house
are many mansions

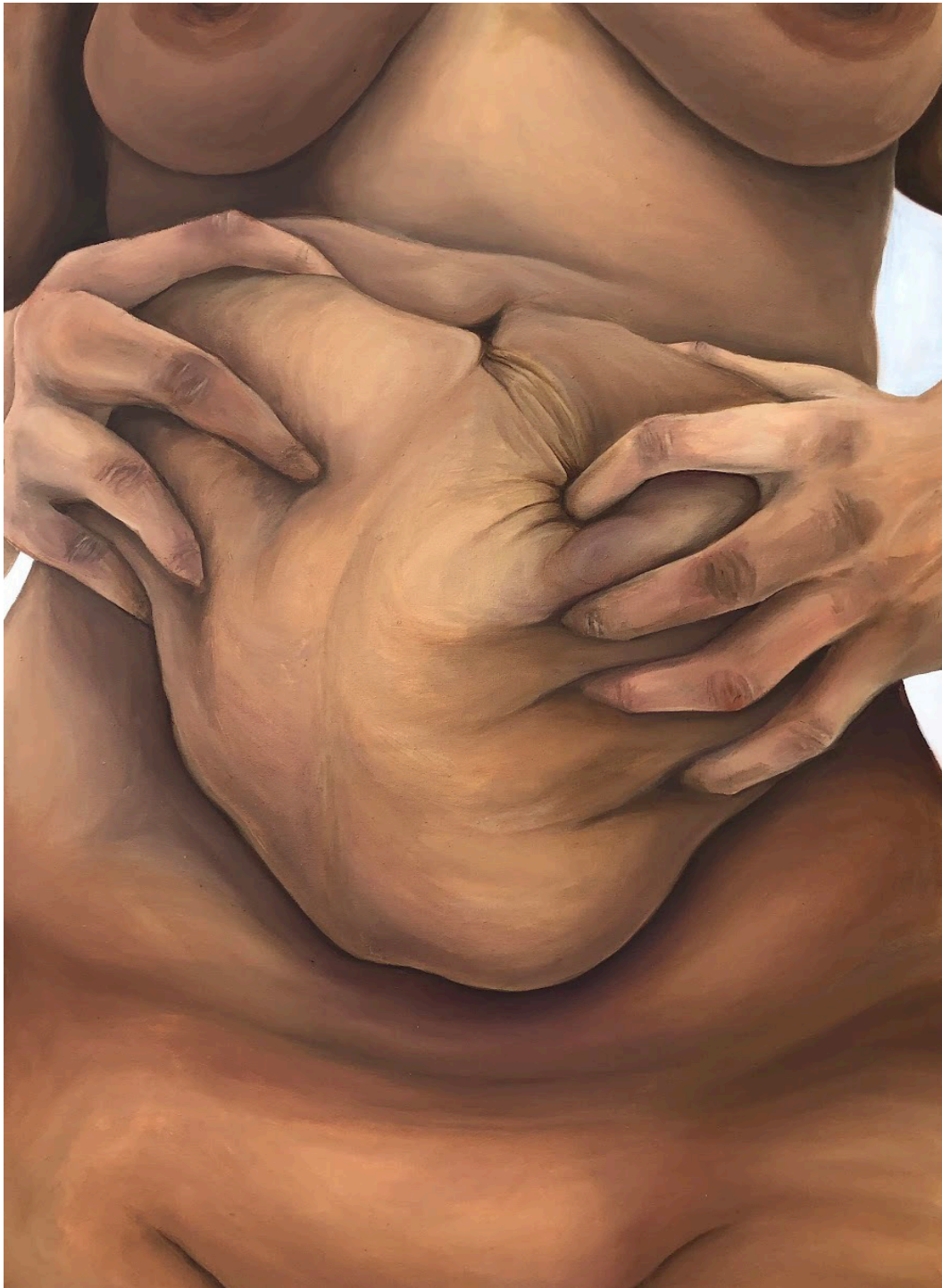
says one version of the Book of John,

though my mother expects
maybe a tiny house. If only
I could be with her. Her god

in his Heaven cruel
and withholding as her earthly father.

No Longer Accessible

Aleena Sharif



FIELD NOTES

Hardening the Target

Cindy Huyser

Today, I wrench free
and tighten a bolt,
adjusting the alley gate

so it will close. Shutting
my mouth is also a strategy
of containment. I consider angles

of approach. A stop sign
is only as good as the willingness
to obey it. I divide myself

between past and present
as I hammer with a small sledge
to declare I have embraced

surveillance. In a phalanx,
soldiers' shields make a wall,
like a many-legged armored

insect. My identity, though multiplex,
lacks this ability. Today, I'm training
sensors from the perspective

of a target. In college, I grew
fond of olive drab that draped me
like a chitin. A few blocks from campus,

a woman stopped me
in the street—*are you a boy*
or a girl? Laughter floated

from the doorway of the bar
where she'd settle her bet
in the darkness and cigarette haze.

Even then, I was never tempted
to adjust my gait.

The Gorgoneion: (Re)Mapping Women's Intuition

Gabriela Denise Frank

We have not yet heard enough, if anything, about the female gaze. — Maggie Nelson, Bluets

In April 2002 my left eye went blind. I was twenty-seven, battling my Saturn return¹, unhappily married to a gentle Midwesterner. Restless, unfed creatively, living paycheck to paycheck in a lackluster Seattle apartment, I kept wondering, *Is this my life?*

Two years earlier when we were students at the University of Arizona, my husband survived a car crash in the Tucson foothills while he was delivering pizzas. Days before, he read my diary² and confronted me about a confessed attraction therein to a mutual friend. Though I was furious about his breach of my privacy, I took his accident as cosmic comeuppance: the gods made him suffer for my lust. While he was in surgery I vowed to bury the deep stuff deeper. For five years, I quit writing.

Naturally, it didn't work³.

Truth? I married him for his parents though I couldn't have articulated this at the time. My mother died when I was sixteen; at eighteen I fled my father's unsafe home. I met my future husband at twenty-one and glimpsed in him, eight years older yet boyish, a chance for a stable future with a loving family.

I took it.

1 If you've had yours, you know it was a motherfucker.

2 His first wife cheated on him. He suspected the same thing was happening with me.

3 What we bury in the basement has a way of coming up on the front lawn, my friend Eleanor says.

A Technicolor imagination was my refuge from a tenuous childhood.

At my inscape's core pulsed artistic proclivities, paranormal receptivity, and a knack for

FIELD NOTES

second sight. In layman's terms, I was hyper-sensitive—an open channel. A person's eyes divulged kindness or cruelty to me apart from their words and actions. I saw through the pretenders as clearly as I could predict who'd invoke success or sorrow by their own hands. To me, the invisible tethers weaving the universe together were apparent and solid as flesh. My family and friends didn't seem to perceive them.

At eight, I entered my school's gifted program. That year, I puzzled over the adults at church who spoke of Bible stories as real life rather than metaphors. Were they stupid...or pretending? This question upset my mother, a devout Catholic who sought to ensure my place in heaven.

She didn't understand that, for me, faith in a greater power rather than religion's objects held resonance. Her distress taught me to camouflage my insights. Given form and breath, my observations caused trouble. Which is to say, I knew better than to write them in a journal my husband could discover, except where else were they to go?

"You can't see my hand?" the ophthalmologist asked.

Air stirred near my left eye where he presumably wagged it. A black pirate's patch covered

my right. "No. I see snow. Like in the '70s when there was no late-night TV."

His humid fear huffed on my cheek as he peered into what poets call the portal to the soul. "Oh...my," he said.

A tear in my retina leaked vitreous⁴ beneath the glassine tissue, its goopy bulge widening the

rupture with every flick of my eye. My macula⁵ was half-on, half-off. Quick action could save my

4 Vitreous is what the human eyeball forms around in the fetal stage. Afterwards, it serves no functional purpose. 5 The part of the eye responsible for fine vision.

The Gorgoneion - 2

vision. Delay meant permanent scarring and, potentially, lifelong impairment. He referred me to a vitreoretinal surgeon and gave my husband directions to Northgate Hospital.

“Don’t pay me,” he said, “just go.”

The hospital’s dry, frigid ozone swept me back to my mother’s bedside in Phoenix the winter of 1990. Dark hairs pushed through the duff of her dead flesh; purple splotches of coagulated blood mottled her thighs. Twelve years on, I couldn’t unsee this.

The white-smocked nurse touched my shoulder lightly. “You nervous hon?”

I nodded and swallowed tears as she pushed Valium into my drip. The monitor’s emerald peaks dulled—*my* heartbeat, not my mother’s. I shuddered and shut my eyes against an inevitable future that I courted yet dreaded: I knew in my gut that my marriage wouldn’t last, and that I’d have to be the one to break it.

My gurney wheeled into surgery.

Look at things differently, the gods seemed to insist by stripping my vision. How?

“Count back from ten,” the masked anesthesiologist said.

I didn’t make it to nine.

The fix was pneumatic retinopexy⁶ and a scleral buckle⁷.

My vision was restored, albeit slightly wavy. Seven years later, a tear in my right retina was

positioned such that it didn’t impair my sight⁸—no snowy curtain of warning this time. Translation: I was going blind (again) while being able to see.

⁶ The injection of a temporary gas bubble to close a retinal tear and the surrounding detachment. After the procedure, the patient must maintain a specific head position for a week to ensure the tear is sealed.

⁷ The surgery consists of suturing a soft piece of silicone to the eye wall (sclera) so as to indent the sclera and close the retinal tear.

⁸ My eye surgeon caught it during a routine exam.

The Gorgoneion - 3

My doctor, the surgeon who had saved my vision, lasered around the rip⁹, his mouse clicks scorching my eye with lime green light. Each painful singe was followed by a flashing fuchsia afterimage. Halfway through Dr. Barloon reached across the table and touched my arm with the same dextrous-yet-detached tap the nurse gave. “Are you okay? Would you like to take a break?”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

Tears slipped down my cheeks and dripped from my chin. Not from pain, although the zaps hurt, but overwhelm. Blindness was a betrayal. My extrasensory abilities couldn’t avert or anticipate this failure, nor was there forewarning this time. In myths, those who wield power often can’t leverage it for personal gain. When tragedy strikes, they’re defenseless in the particular spot the arrow or sword happens to hit. Fate draws them, magnetically, to their end.

The Gorgon Medusa, for instance. She couldn’t prevent her own murder though I suppose she should’ve foreseen it. Power attracts violence¹⁰. Thus, the so-called “terrible monster” is slain¹¹ by the “hero” Perseus¹² in her sleep despite the fact that she wasn’t troubling anyone.

She lived alone in a cave.

Medusa’s severed head, wide-eyed with surprise¹³, is the Gorgoneion, an apotropaic symbol of protection¹⁴, the Evil Eye. Her physical transformation—as punishment for “defiling” Athena’s

⁹ Laser photocoagulation is an outpatient surgery. I was divorced by then and had no one to drive me home, so I recovered in the waiting room alone. The hot pink afterimage (pink being the complementary color to the green laser) dissipated after an hour and a half.

¹⁰ Is she shouldn’t have been surprised in the same

vein as she was asking for it, meaning Medusa is, in part, to blame for not averting her own killing?

11 Murdered in her sleep in the cave where she was living peacefully. Perseus used Athena's polished shield to view the reflection of Medusa's "awful" face and avoid her petrifying gaze. He cheated in every way. He used Hades' helmet of invisibility in order to behead her with an adamant sword, then he used Hermes' winged boots to escape, holding Medusa's head in a magical sack called a kybisis.

12 Sent by Athena to kill her.

13 In archaic iconography, Medusa has a round face, wide eyes, a beard, and a gaping mouth with an extended tongue and gnashing, sharp teeth—a form that certain sources note resembles a hairy "man-eating" vagina.

14 The island of Sicily embraces Medusa as its patron guardian, taking the tricorn Gorgoneion as its protective emblem.

The Gorgoneion - 4

temple¹⁵ the goddess turned Medusa into a monster¹⁶—is itself transformed into a monument of female rage¹⁷: a screaming head crowned in writhing snakes, a brutal gaze that turns men¹⁸ to stone. The deed done, Athena takes Medusa's head from Perseus's blood-caked hands and straps the dripping trophy to her aegis.

No one asks what Medusa's head has witnessed in its adventures since or what Medusa's life was like before. We don't map the feminine malefic the way we chart Odysseus's travels or Heracles' feats. Western culture exalts Christ's transubstantiation and glosses over Medusa's, yet when one considers the power of her ancient symbolism—fertility, rebirth, protection against evil—how are Medusa's mutagenic powers less fascinating or the metaphors of her existence, origin, and end less real or potent?

Charting the veracity of myths and otherworldly phenomena in modern scientific terms is tricky. I've

tried to track and measure my own powers of perception with limited success. Anecdotally, my prefigurations are correct more often than they're not, but how and why do these powers work? Are they powers at all, or simply the residue of childhood trauma? The more threads I follow, the more complex the network grows¹⁹. Results can't be duplicated exactly. Each insight reveals new quantum entanglements²⁰ that deepen the mystery. My belief in these abilities keeps coming down to faith.

15 After she spurned his advances, Poseidon raped Medusa in Athena's temple. The rape is blamed on Medusa for attracting the god's lust by walking around being attractive and asserting sovereignty over her body. A powerful man, Poseidon goes unpunished. In some versions of the myth, Medusa was always a horrible monster.

16 Some say Athena's curse was Medusa's savior in that men avoided her after this—except, of course, Perseus who murdered and beheaded her.

17 During the 2016 American presidential election images were created of Hillary Clinton's open-mouthed face superimposed on Medusa's decapitated head held aloft by Perseus, his face superimposed with a photo of Donald Trump "slaying" her.

18 Always men, never women.

19 A paradox known as the Richardson effect.

20 Quantum entanglement is a phenomenon in which entangled systems exhibit correlations that cannot be explained by classical physics.

The Gorgoneion - 5

For all their knowledge, none of my doctors can explain why my retinas tear ("genetics"). Electromagnetic waves strike the retina, producing different images, and from the retina, the waves travel to the brain, and, owing to the fact that their passage from the retina to the brain remains unexplained, there is an enduring mystery about the way images are produced.²¹ Likewise, the etiology of my inner gaze remains hazy. Everything is connected to everything,

ancestral DNA to socialization to trauma, my body a porous holobiont leaking multitudes.

If a study yields more questions than answers, has it failed? Is the nature of my insight not worth examining, then? What can we hope to gain from any experiment, if not new questions and an altered perception of the world? At what point do theories unproven by trial become false? How many times must we probe the wound before we receive an answer that satisfies either way?

I've worn glasses since age eight; at forty-eight I need readers, too. Objects are too near and far to see without correction. Where diagnostic instruments assess eyesight and prescribe corrective lenses, what measures and methods might we use to gauge insight?

Intuition's inner workings are counterintuitive: a soft gaze, not squinting, yields clarity. Acuity is uncovered rather than accrued over time, like cataracts in reverse. The key is to relax. Porosity makes space for the imagination to connect the seemingly unrelated: insight, inspiration, ideas. A pattern appears in one's peripheral vision and hovers at the corner—gossamer, out of reach. It's maddening: one approaches discernment by being certain of nothing. By embracing mystery, rather than grasping at facts, the truth coheres, just barely. Like any skill, honing is a practice of letting go.

Intuition's ecosystem—feelings, creativity, noticing—blurs the borders between eye and I, between text and subtext, between the physical world and the world inside. It's a tenuous ecotone to traverse, particularly if one's intuitions are proven right: women who “see” and “feel” beyond

21 Anselm Kiefer, Collège de France lecture

The Gorgoneion - 6

observed phenomena risk dismissal and detainment²². They may be medicated, electrocuted, or branded hysterical. Their genuine afflictions may be ignored²³.

Where discerning²⁴ men are shrewd, discerning women are bitchy²⁵—or witchy, the latter of which can be truly dangerous. Whether one can be “out” with such gifts depends on who holds power. Women's intuition²⁶ is a wives' tale, but a man's spider sense is battle-tested. Men lead with vision²⁷ while female visions are hallucinations. Male insight²⁸ is mathematic and his second sight²⁹ (hunches, instinct) is fueled by experience whereas a women's insight is fouled by emotion. Yet, all human bodies contain vagus nerves³⁰, a key component of the parasympathetic nervous system. Every human, gender notwithstanding, contains them.

The tenth pair of cranial nerves, the vagus connects the brain with the heart, lungs, and digestive tract. Vagus is Latin for wandering, which describes the nerves' course, a sensory superweb threading the corpus with sensation. Note: not all who wander are lost³¹. Despite the productivity prized by capitalist colonial culture, this meandering isn't errancy—it's how the vagus functions. The vagus is the body's mechanism for internalizing the outer environment; turn by turn, it demonstrates that we are not separate individuals, that we are connected to everything.

Ever scanned a friend's face and known instantly that something was wrong?

22 Lock her up.

23 See Woolf, Kaysen, Plath, Lorde, Sexton, and every female artist and scientist you have—and haven't—heard of.

24 Discernment: the ability to comprehend the obscure.

25 In one translation of the *Odyssey*, Helen is called a bitch. An ancient slur against women.

26 Intuition: the power of attaining direct knowledge without material evidence.

27 Vision: the act or power of seeing; a manifestation to the senses of something immaterial, a thought or concept formed by the imagination; unusual discernment or foresight.

28 Insight: the act or result of apprehending the inner nature of things. 29 Second sight: the capacity to see remote or future objects or events.

30 Vagus nerves control “rest and digest” functions—the opposite of the sympathetic nervous system’s “fight or flight” response.

31 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Riddle of Strider* from *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

The Gorgoneion - 7

That’s the vagus at work, porting sensory data from her body to yours, the cells of two porous beings meshing. Studies conducted by the National Center for Biotechnology have found that women demonstrate greater vagal activity compared to male counterparts. Is this intuition?

Rather than a defensive response to systemic patriarchal violence—a survival mechanism—could we envision intuition as generative, too? Three thousand years after Medusa’s appearance in Hesoid’s *Theogony*, can we move beyond the dualism of *men are afraid women will laugh at them, women are afraid men will kill them*³² and measure the vagus’s creative manifestations? Why not count what the vagus creates rather than dissect its parts?

Serpents dripping from Medusa’s skull resemble the vagus’s ganglion drape: a brain-heart-gut shawl of inside-out, outside-in. Sensory perception is processed through cerebral-pulmonary-digestive tributaries, which overspill the banks of I and eye. Zeroes and ones can’t contain the vagus’s numinous swells, which is why reductive data analysis of intuition fails. It isn’t the way to measure.

The scientific and spiritual communities are converging on the vagus as a nexus of intra- and interbody relationships. The Gorgoneion symbolizes what the ancients knew yet couldn’t prove about the human form: our atoms interact with each other beyond physical touch and sight—or, better said—it is not only sight or only touch that feeds our perceptions

and what we make of them. Like Medusa, we are crowned with invisible snakes that sniff at the world with darting tongues. Their reach extends far beyond the boundary of skin. It’s not that we shouldn’t trust our eyes, it’s that they function in community with other organs without us knowing. It’s that our eyes, mind, hearts, lungs, and guts reveal more as a system than any one organ could alone.

32 Margaret Atwood.

The Gorgoneion - 8

For most of human history we couldn’t see atoms. Though we haven’t (yet) developed technology to perceive the spectral ganglion shrouding us, I believe the vagus’s medusa-like apparatus is what enables humans to reach out with their feelings. Such powers may seem mystical or magical. If tied to subconscious functions including moods, they will wax and wane and may remain elusive to detection or “proof”. Left understood, they may also appear frightening, particularly if labeled as *women’s power*—sorcery—rather than something all humans can exercise if they tune into their extrasensory selves. Within each body, lives untapped potential.

For now, it might be wise to keep these beliefs quiet lest I be branded a kook. I learned at eight what faith requires, didn’t I? Start seeing everything as God, but keep it a secret³³. Divinity surges in subdermal causeways—but what if it flew in plain sight? When the flesh perishes, the spirit forges alternate channels of survival: Pegasus and Chrysaor birthed from Medusa’s spurting neck.

They say blood from one side of Medusa’s body held poison, the other immortality. The body contains both undoing and cure: joy on the left, and pain on the right³⁴. What if survival wasn’t about averting death but transmuting life? What if survival meant drinking from both channels?

There is a difference between seeing, perceiving, and witnessing, between probing wounds and understanding depth and resonance, between logging

data and comprehending interconnected ripples of life-force that ebb through the universe. Wisdom and data are not the same thing.

What's viewed through a microscope relies on the scientist's perceptions; this eye/I isn't detached or impartial as Western science pretends. Its umbilical is fed by nature, nurture, and culture, by unseen prejudices and predilections. We forget: results produced by science's scope-enhanced eyes aren't always the final answer. Findings are modified, theories amended, and dictums overturned by what's learned through new technology in the next generation.

33 Khwāje Shams-od-Dīn Moḥammad Ḥāfeḥ-e Shīrāzī, a Persian poet known by the pen name Hafez. 34 Björk, "Who Is It (Carry My Joy on the Left, Carry My Pain on the Right)".

The Gorgoneion - 9

Could the science of poetry, not physics or physiology, map the landscape of intuition? Odes, sestinas, elegies—are these not manifestations of the inner eye/I flying free? Language cannot do everything³⁵, but it can thin partitions between our world and the next³⁶. Its revelatory powers are magnified by meandering stanzas churning inside-out and outside-in, which is to say a poem's magic resides in its ability to free truth from fact and meaning from evidence. Poems are open-ended equations.

Like the vagus, meandering is the right-functioning of language, the inexactitude of words is precisely the point. A poem reveals nuanced truths—infininitely sharp—yield insights of what it means to live beyond cold, hard facts, which is why it takes not one poem but trillions. To evolve, to transform, we need both the precision of poets and the imagination of scientists³⁷.

To survive as a species we must cross the streams.

A luminous carpet of whisper-pink magnolia petals cushions the grave of Medusa's underhill home, a loamy palace of supernatural longing. She leaves the earthen door ajar for snakes to slither in.

On the wall, a dusty mirror reflects a man's shadow slipping inside.

His heart thrums with murderous intent.

Medusa goes about her day, burying the needful meat of obsession in poem after poem, her

fecund heart beating with mortal freight her divine sisters, Stheno and Euryale, don't possess. She scribes what her tendrils sense—past, present, future—and tucks the tiny scrolls into slots on the wall. Her ganglion veil symbolizes our empathic potential, our limitless humanity: should we choose to use it, this porous membrane is our ultimate defense against evil. It connects us to everything.

The man stalks behind her.

35 Adrienne Rich.

36 Kaveh Akbar.

37 Vladimir Nabokov: "A writer should have the precision of a poet and the imagination of a scientist."

The Gorgoneion - 10

Raises his blade.

The sweep of air on Medusa's cheek inspires a vision: Athena's shield will be hers! Her glistening tongue wags over her open-lipped grin.

Meaning haunts and ever eludes. In its pursuit we approach the ultimate mystery of Life itself³⁸: not death—transformation. Athena will become a generic abstraction, a statue bleached of its features, but no one will forget Medusa's face. She will co-opt Athena's aegis into her symbol, an emblem of protection and seeing that forever precedes the goddess's glory.

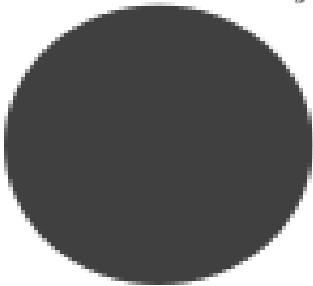
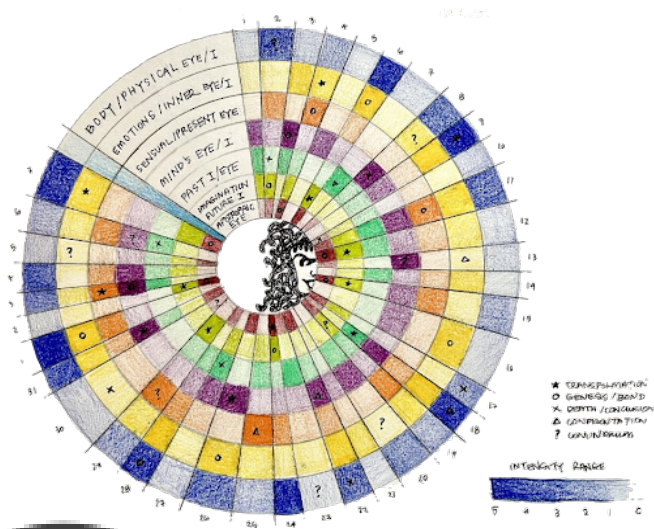
In her final breath, the Gorgon sees her future secured. The fool sees only her end.

He strikes.

Medusa's body falls—

the winged horse and the giant fly free. Glass shatters: a headless shriek of liberty.

38 Rachel Carson, "The Edge of the Sea".
The Gorgoneion - 11



N.B. This graphic illustrates how feminine intuition might appear we valued literary art as an expression of the interconnected eye/I. By observing and recording my lived experience with intuition related to production of poems over five weeks, I found conjunctions between mind-body-senses, emotions, imagination, time, and a safe space for risk-taking and experimentation. The graphic itself becomes an apotropaic eye: a symbol of protection and a metaphor for art's rejuvenating force that works both inside-out and outside-in.

The Gorgoneion - 12

Contributors

Fiction

Donna Obeid is an award-winning writer and educator who has been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize. She earned a BA in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and an MA and MFA from American University. She currently lives in Stanford, California. Read more of her writing at: www.donnaobeid.com and [@donnaowrites](https://twitter.com/donnaowrites).

Mandira Pattnaik is an Indian writer with work published/forthcoming in *IHLR*, *The Rumpus*, *The McNeese Review*, *Penn Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Passages North*, *Contrary*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Best Microfiction Anthology* (2024) and *BSF* (2021 & 2024), among others. Mandira is the author of collections “Anatomy of a Storm-Weathered Quaint Townspeople” (2022), “Girls Who Don’t Cry” (2023) and “Where We Set Our Easel” (2023). Her fifth chapbook “Glass/Fire” is forthcoming. Mandira’s debut novel is under consideration. Visit mandirapattnaik.com

Malavika Praseed is a Pushcart-nominated writer, genetic counselor, and MFA candidate at Randolph College. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Khoreo*, *The Ear*, *The Twin Bill*, and the *Chicago Review of Books*.

Creative Nonfiction

Henry Luzzatto is a freelance vagabond based in Brooklyn, New York. Originally from the swamps of Suffolk, Virginia, his reportage and fiction appear in the *SuffolkNews-Herald*, *body fluids*, *Points in Case*, and more.

Stephen S. Mills (he/they) is the author of the Lambda Award-winning book *He Do the Gay Man in Different Voices* (2012) as well as *A History of the Unmarried* (2014) and *Not Everything Thrown Starts a Revolution* (2018) all from Sibling Rivalry Press. His work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and others. Two of his books were placed on the Over the Rainbow List compiled yearly by the American Library Association. He is also the author of the plays *Waiting for Manilow* and *Is That All There Is?* He lives in New York City.

Harper Walton is a PhD English student from Bath. Their poetry, fiction and essays are published by *Oestrogenation*, *t’ART*, *1883 Magazine* and more. In 2023, they were highly commended for the Manchester Cathedral poetry competition, achieved third place in the Brick Lane Bookshop short story prize, and won the Young Poets Network’s Self Portrait Challenge.

Poetry

Courtney Bambrick serves as poetry editor at Philadelphia Stories. Her poetry is forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Pinhole Poetry*, and *SWWIM Everyday*. Poems have appeared in *New York Quarterly*, *Beyond Words*, *Invisible City*, *The Fanzine*, *Philadelphia Poets*, *Apiary*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Mad Poets Review*, and *Certain Circuits*. Her chapbooks have been semi finalists and finalists in contests for *Iron Horse* and *Pavement Saw*. She teaches writing at Thomas Jefferson University's East Falls campus in Philadelphia.

Daniel Barry currently works as a teacher on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. He's had poetry accepted by Corpus Callosum Press, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, *Ignatian Literary Journal*, Teach. Write., and Calla Press. A poem of his has been accepted by B Cubed Press' "Alternate Leadership Anthology" and a poem of his appears in The Lark Publication's "Passionate Poetry Anthology" to raise money for cancer research.

Farrah Fang (she/her) is a Mexican-American Trans woman, born and raised in Houston, TX. She is a performance artist, digital artist, writer and poet. Her work explores the intersections of Trans identity, spirituality and decolonizing Latinidad.

C.M. Green (they/them) is a Boston-based writer with a focus on history, memory, gender, and religion. They are the Flash Fiction Editor at JAKE and a Hybrid Reader at Abode Press. Their work has been published in *fifth wheel press*, *Full House Literary*, and elsewhere, and they are a 2023 Best of the Net Nominee. You can find their work at cmgreenwrites.com.

Karen Lozinski is a NYC native who lives in New Orleans. She's a writer, poet, artist, photographer, and musician who earned her MFA at the California Institute of the Arts. Her photographs and artwork have been in multiple shows and are widely published, and a selection of her music photos is included in *Can't Be Faded: Twenty Years in the New Orleans Brass Band Game* from University of Mississippi Press. At work on a novel and poetry collection, her writing appears in *Talon Review*, *Scapegoat Review*, *Red Ogre Review*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, and *Red Noise Collective*.

Xiomarra Milann is a Chicana writer based in Laredo, TX who is trying her hardest to make the person who said "those who can't do, teach" turn in their graves. You can find her work in *DVINO Magazine*, *Samfiftyfour Literary*, *Infrarrealista Review*, *The Acentos Review*, *Ink & Marrow Lit*, *Querencia Press*, *Latin@ Literatures*, *The Sybil Journal*, and her 6th grade writing teachers bulletin board.

Celina Naheed is an Iranian American poet from Atlanta. Her work appears in, or is forthcoming, in magazines like *The Lumiere Review*, *Words Without Borders*, and others.

Field Notes

Gabriela Denise Frank is a transdisciplinary artist, editor, and educator. Her writing and visual art have appeared in *True Story*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Orion*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *The Normal School*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. The author of “Pity She Didn’t Stay ‘Til the End” (Bottlecap Press), she serves as creative nonfiction editor and managing editor of Crab Creek Review. www.gabrieladenisefrank.com

Cindy Huyser is the author of *Burning Number Five: Power Plant Poems*, co-winner of the 2014 Blue Horse Press Poetry Chapbook contest, and co-editor of *Bearing the Mask: Southwestern Persona Poems* (Dos Gatos Press, 2016) as well as several editions of the Texas Poetry Calendar. Cindy, whose favorite pronoun is the queer gender-inspecific “qi,” publishes in a variety of journals and is the long-time host of the Second Thursday reading series for BookWoman in Austin, Texas. <https://cindyhuyser.wordpress.com>

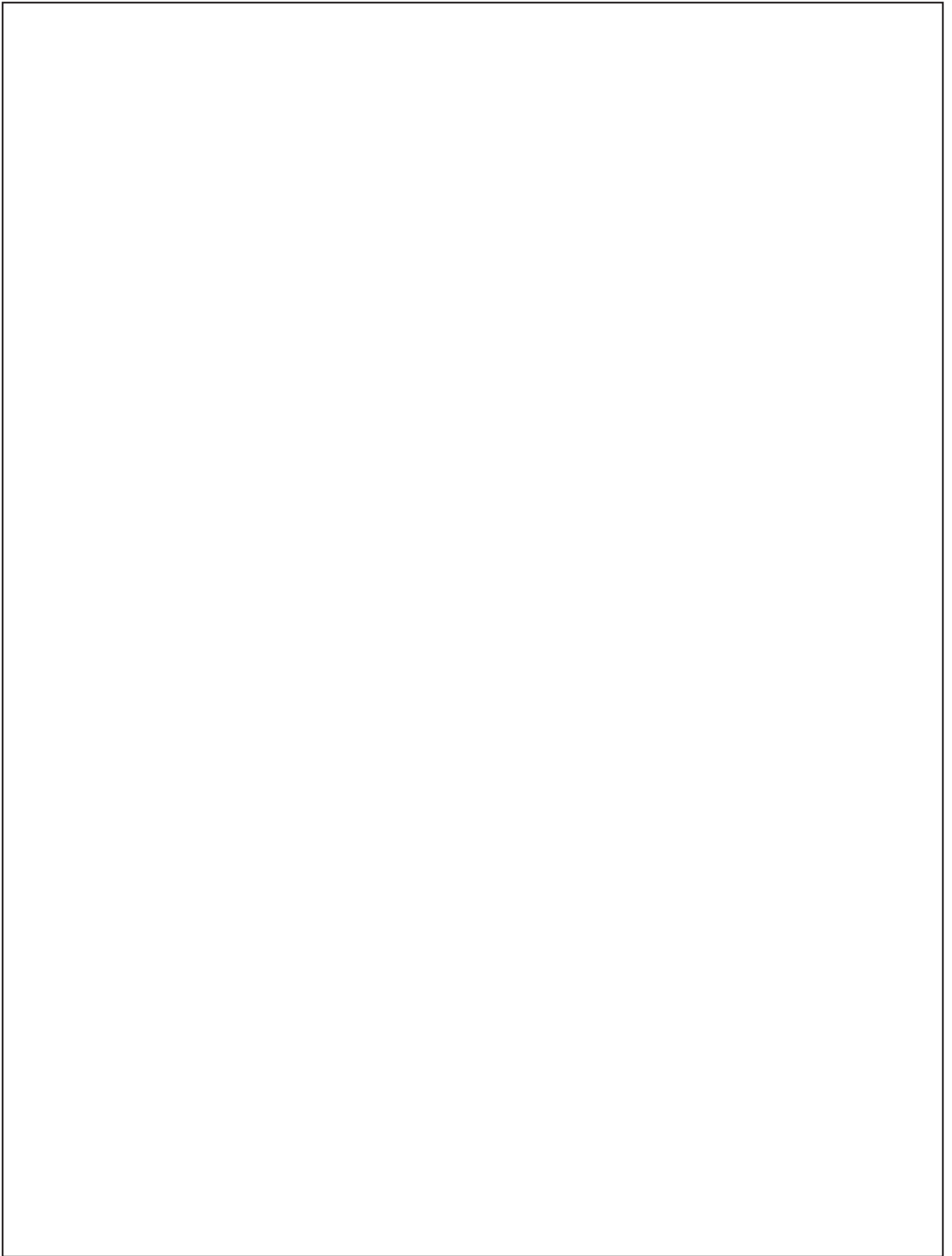
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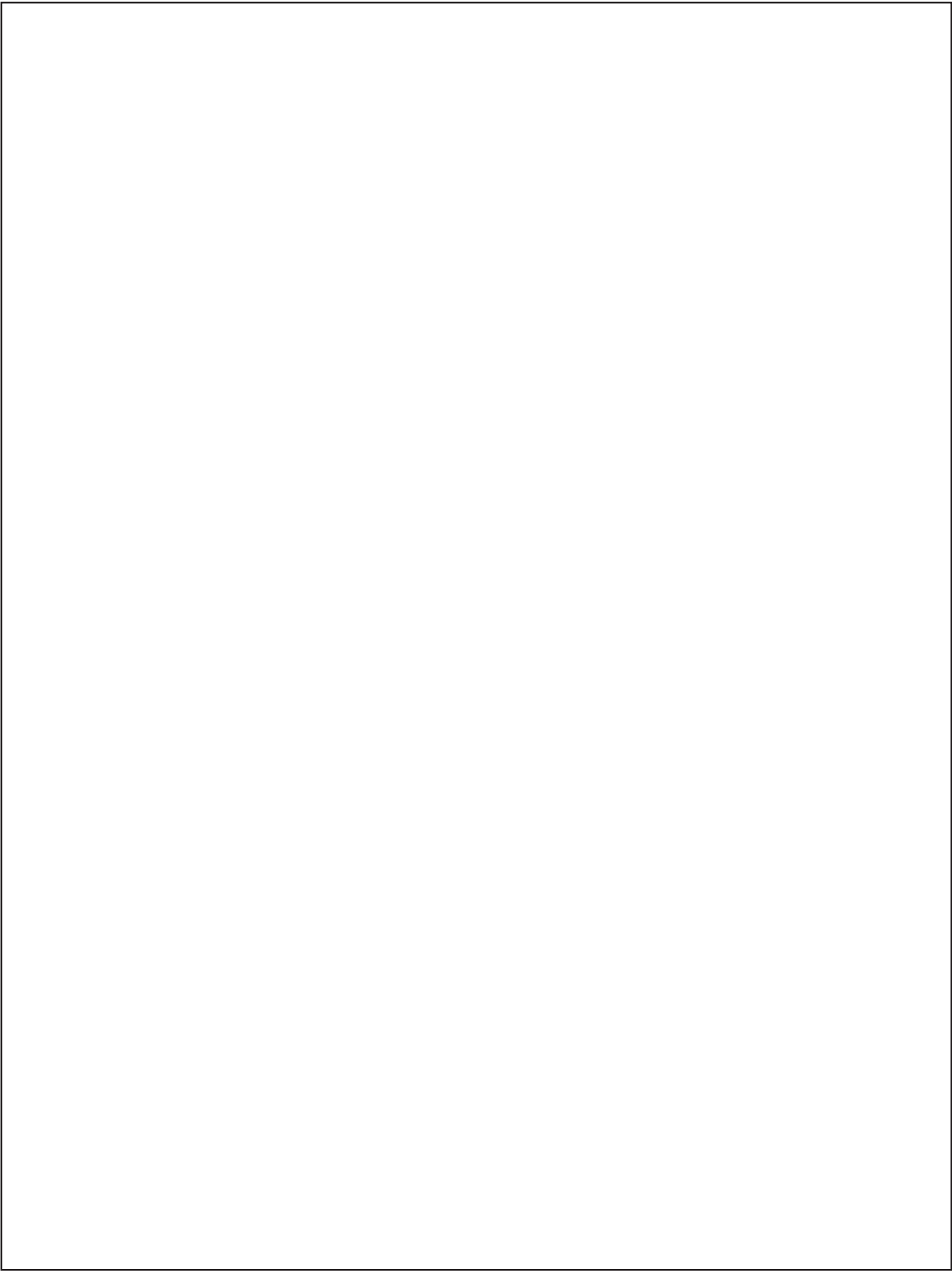
Adeyemi Adebayo is an MFA student at UMASS currently focusing on photography. They are considering landscapes, migration, and home in their work.

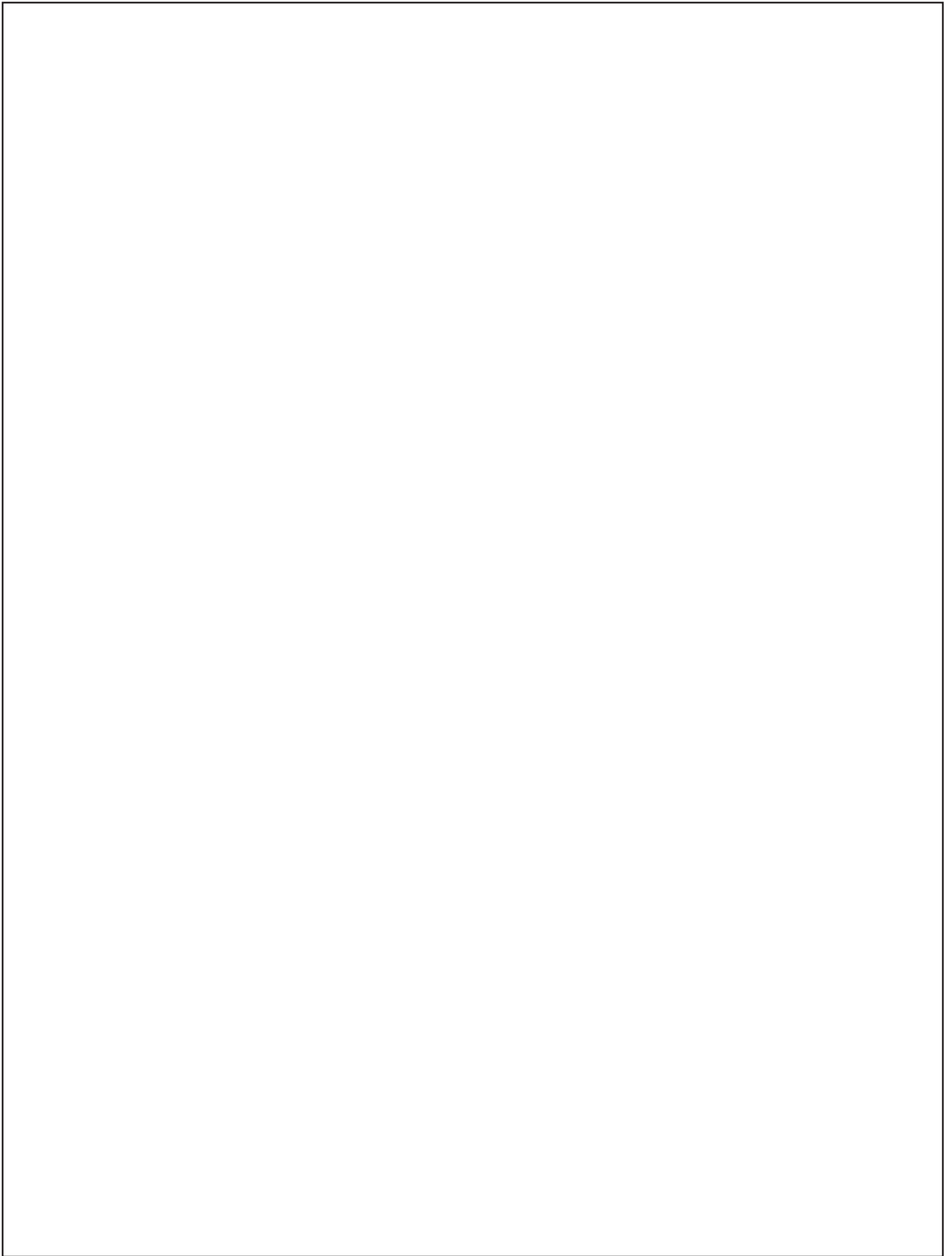
Lena Farruggia is a writer and analog collagist who divides her time between Montreal and Ottawa, Canada. In between meditations, she chases Zen alongside Maya, a sweet dachshund who moonlights as one of her muses. You can find her work in *Ottawa Design Club Zine*, *flo.* literature magazine and *Contemporary Collage Magazine*.

Sean Gallagher has always been drawn to making in-between moments picturesque. Recently, he was selected for the Under the Radar series, which celebrates the top 10 undiscovered artist in the low-country by *Charleston Magazine*. His art has also been featured or is slated to appear in several publications: *Allegory Ridge*, *The Closed Eye Open*, *Passengers Journal*, *Vineyard Literary*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Liminal Spaces*, *Beaver Magazine*, *Fauxmoir Literary Magazine*, Quarter Press, and High Shelf Press.

Aleena Sharif was born in Pakistan and went to school at Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. She graduated with a BFA and a miWnor in Art History. After graduating she has exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, London, Italy, Pakistan as well as many virtual galleries. She currently continues her practice between California and Pakistan where she holds open studies in hope to create a safe space for nude paintings to be shown.







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