

the Local Voice™

WINTER READING ISSUE 2025



A STUTTERING SPARK

BY JORDAN ISBELL

ETERNAL DAMNATION

(ACCORDING TO THE HIGH SCHOOL DEITIES)

BY JORDAN ISBELL

My flame was once a raging beacon,
licking through fields of alkyd fumes
to set ablaze. Dad urged I carry the torch
like a pyromaniac and incinerate hazard signs,
remembering to smile when incarcerated for arson.

Taking his advice, I embraced the fire of Surtr
and kindled camaraderie through the eyes of Hephaestus.
My lenses, scorched by the forges,
ignored soot of cigarette mouths leaning in
to force its acrid miasma through my teeth.

How will his inferno respond to my ember
now flickering like a frightened light switch,
puffing up smoke and mirrors
at the deafening call of "got a lighter?"

My self-immolation now remains as ashen smudges
falling in cracked hands of phantoms hungry for a smoke.
h e a d s p l i t, skin singed, bone exposed,
no more than a discarded matchstick
to spark the butt ends of a roach
passed by dry lips and bronchitis.



Early this morning,
the high school deities were looking
for a new prey to consume,
one that hadn't showered
in the prayers of The Lord.
My stench revealed my secret.

Accursed;
my unwavering silence
when asked what church I attended on Sunday
was enough to tell them
I spoke with a forked tongue.

Their words were sudden:
No bastard of the devil
should be in vicinity
of children of the Lord.
The phrase became their personal 11th commandment,
replacing the torn-out pages of Leviticus 19:18.

Cleansing a follower of Christ requires their head
dipped in a bowl to wash away their sins.
A lost cause, on the other hand
needs their entire body submerged,
leaving them underwater for a few minutes
to ensure their souls are sanctified.

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GENIE

BY ELIZABETH JOHNSTON

"I don't know what's in that blue bottle on the top shelf, but make me a drink."

He served me and set the bottle down. As I dusted off and read the label, I noticed a tall svelte blond draping over the bar next to me. I paid no attention to her actually. The stigma of women sitting at a bar is gone, thank goodness. There was no need for chatting it up with her on my part. Alas, she spoke.

"If you had a chance to have one wish fulfilled, what would it be?" "Oh crap" I thought. With empty stools up and down the near-empty bar, an inebriated woman rambling on about a wish had chosen the seat next to me.

"I want to be a back-up singer in Elton John's band during the timeframe when he was outrageously dressed, outrageously talented with hit after hit song and outrageously in demand all over the world," I said not looking at her. Maybe she would go away. Apparently she did, because when I turned to her she was gone. When I glanced back to the odd blue bottle, it was gone too. The bartender down at the register must have put it up.

The register had a new design. It was more of a grouping of flat, black boxes with numerous dials and levers. From my distance to the register, it almost resembled the sound mixer equipment that sits at the back of huge entertainment venues. It was certainly overkill for sliding my Visa through.

As I was easing off my stool, I caught a glimpse of myself in the long mirror of the back bar. Whoa—way too much alcohol. I'm looking sassy with a fro. My lips are a passion red and false eyelashes

tickle my cheeks. I have on a short, sequined dress that shimmers. The V-cut both in the front and the back is very deep and whooooo-hooooo, I have cleavage. I jiggle. I'm realizing I can't ease off that stool because I have a bodacious butt and this dress is making me look mighty fine. Oh lordy, my shoes are to die for and I must be at least six feet tall.

I'm preening in this vision. I mean I AM HOT. I hear "Betsy, get your bad self down here for a sound check at the mike stage right." I strut away from the bar towards a huge stage with a grand piano and a collection of instruments, wire, and microphones. Two other women decked out like me appear at their mikes and we wail out some tunes. All three of us have super 'pipes.' A holler from someone at the back alerts us to stop, go backstage and wait. An enormous crowd streams into the venue and the excitement mounts. He is here and his outfit way, way, way outshines us. He has paused to put on his glasses and fix his dangling earring right before leaping through the curtains onto the stage. Elton John is at his piano...pounding on those keys and singing,

*Take me to the pilot
Lead me through the chamber*

*Take me to the pilot
I am but a stranger*

We stop swaying in the shadows, step in to our halos of stage lights, lean into our microphones and belt out:

*Na na na ...
Na na na
Na Na Naaaaaaaaaaaa
Na Na Na Na Na*

TV

EVERY GOOD THING MATTERS
by Kyle Kite

*sometimes bad guys win
sometimes plans, they fail
you'll catch another wind
just don't burn your sails*

*this too shall pass
the morning's coming soon
it's coming soon*

*you've faced your share of demons
don't waste your time on ghosts
look around at what your seeing
and tend the fire of hope*

*this too shall pass
the morning's coming soon
it's coming soon*

*i'll stack these stones
they can knock 'em down
and i'll start stacking 'em up again*

*'cause every good thing matters
whatever happens in the end*

*learn to rest
lean on your friends
love and be loved too
the way ahead is not a sprint
it's a table with some food*

*this too shall pass
the morning's coming soon
it's coming soon*

*i'll stack these stones
they can knock 'em down
and i'll start stacking 'em up again*

*'cause every good thing matters
whatever happens in the end*

*at the heat death of the universe
or whatever heaven is
every defiant act of love
remains something that we did*

*and this too shall pass
the morning's coming soon
it's coming soon*

*so let's stack these stones
they can knock em down
and we'll start stacking em up again*

*'cause every good thing matters
whatever happens in the end*

*every good thing matters
every good thing matters
every good thing matters*



PINK ELEPHANT

BY JASON BOYD

Jose's Pink Elephant party started at 5:30 pm. Lynn's sauce bubbled on the stove, slow-simmering to perfection for ten hours. Her calendar held no meetings. This day would be the first one in a long string of bad because she had it planned out. She'd muddle through emails, hit the Square to pick up her gift, dust off her clarinet and run through Ave Maria, make the pasta, get dressed, and get over to Jose's.

It sounded like a lot, but she had enough time.

* * *

Two dings sounded simultaneously from her phone and computer. The every-thirty-minute phone alarm reminded her to stir the sauce and add broth. With a getting-shit-done expression, Lynn headed that way when she saw the email:

SUBJECT: MANDATORY Client Call to Discuss Rollout
TIME: 9:30 am

She *hated* these damn calls. They dragged, and puffed-up managers asked stupid questions. And she didn't have time. Not today. And...

Lynn breathed jagged, too-short breaths. No panic attacks. Please, God.

Lynn signed into the Zoom meeting.

The sauce could simmer. Thirty minutes was probably too frequent.

* * *

The lumpy mixture of scorched ground beef and tomatoes bulging on Lynn's spoon was sludge.

She turned off the heat.

Lynn would run get her Pink Elephant gift and worry about reviving the sauce later. Her phone dinged.

Gabriel, her boss:

Five minutes to chat?

It was never five minutes. He would drone on for half an hour, and she didn't have time to spare. But, what the hell could she do besides respond:

Sure thing [smile emoji]

Gabriel called immediately: "Lynn!" His ebullience melted into something mimicking sympathy but missing the mark. "How are you?"

"Me? I'm great."

Silence. Gabriel cleared his throat.

Small talk ensued that Lynn could only "uh-huh" and "mm-hmm" at.

Finally, he got to the point:

"I expected you to make more of a contribution on that call."

Lynn's stomach dropped. Her cheeks flamed. "Sorry. Uh, did see a few points where we could make their rollout quicker. I—"

"I let you work from home, but we agreed you'd have consistent contributions in calls. I'd hate to have to go back to HR and explain that this wasn't working. I stuck my neck..."

Lynn stopped listening. Her body shook. She mumbled out an intent to "do better", whatever that meant. The call mercifully ended.

* * *

"Out? I called yesterday and asked ya'll to hold one."

The bottle-blond behind the counter squinted at her screen. "We have another 'Keep Oxford Square' mug in blue. I can wrap—"

Lynn waved her to silence. "I can't do *blue*. It's for my *Pink Elephant* party."

"Your what?"

"Pink Elephant. My stupid friend's stupid spin on Dirty Santa." This confused the sorority girl. "Nevermind."

"If it's got to be pink, we've got like these cute beaded clutches. *Totally* would be a hit."

Lynn manufactured exuberance: "Yes. *Totally*. And don't wrap it. I'm in a hurry."

Bag in hand, Lynn pattered to her car.

By night, downtown Oxford, Mississippi, became a magical snow globe filled with color. Twinkling lights would paint shoppers and full-to-bursting restaurant-goers in fae halos. Early afternoon, however, was drab and overcast, a stifling gray prison. Not cold enough for snow, not warm enough for comfort.

* * *

That afternoon brought another client call.

Lynn stared at the clarinet case in the corner. She'd wiped the dust off, but she hadn't opened it.

The call's half-hour grew to fifty minutes. Color drained from Lynn's face. She'd forgotten the sauce. Her mother's sauce recipe. Lynn had cleared out her house and sold her shit. The recipe was a vestige that proved her mother had lived. And she'd ruined it.

* * *

Lynn held the throwaway aluminum pan. Her hastily wrapped gift bag and the clarinet hung from her fingers. She took a deep breath and hit the doorbell.

"You made it!" Jose embraced Lynn with pencil-thin arms. Jose's perfect cocktail-attire from Village Tailor clashed with Lynn's frumpy Marshall's blouse.

"I'm sorry for the takeout. Work emergency, mishap with the sauce."

"Doesn't matter one bit, girl. Get in here."



CANNON BEACH

BY SAM KEALHOFER

I park my shit-tin Civic on the sand-speckled street
and walk through a seaside town
that seems to have shipwrecked here long ago.
The wind whipping, storefronts yawn with me
as I lap up sea salt—
the taste of last night's tequila.
My mind a mess as I descend a splintered stair,
turned splintered pier
turned cold white sand.
But I notice dunes preserved by beach strawberries,
songbirds safe in the cream bush,
and mangled driftwood dozing in the bay.
Dark, fat-stacked clouds push in from the Pacific
As tufted puffins perch atop the cliffs
and their hatchlings chirp for sea eel and herring.
Gulls and terns fly in concentric circles searching for
a porcelain crab who scuttles along the sand ripples to the jetties
but waits for the crash of sneaker waves to pull him back
to the sea stacks:
Haystack and its needles, lucky to be here at all—
these swirling pools of the intertide, a making in the great unmaking.
Sea stars and mollusks cling to the volcanic stone,
mussels clump on the wave-washed rocks,
gaper clams burrow with their straining sinews,
while sea urchins snack on bull kelp
and sea slugs put their prismatic colors on display.
At hightide, cabezons dart at mollusks.
The undulating oral arms of sea nettles mesmerize.

TESTIMONY

BY SAM KEALHOFER

What keeps the lub dub echoing
in the chambers of my heart
and the diffusion of this iron blood through
thousands of capillary miles?

Or informs the unconscious swelling
of my respiratory branches,
and the bloom of their alveolar sacs
while I lie fast asleep?

Or directs the snapping synapses
governing neurotransmitters
and the sum total of my
chemical reactions?

The force inherent in my organ tissue—
the logic of my cell division
and the spindle fibers that untwine,
gently, the figure eight of my being.

The house blossomed like a spring flower. A rose, the petals handpicked by interior decorators. An expensive-looking Christmas village sat atop a mahogany upright piano, lights twinkling.

Women greeted her with stretched-out smiles and sad eyes. One hauled the aluminum pan of pasta to the kitchen, and they fussed over her. Old friends, morphed into strangers by time and busy schedules.

"Meemaw! You remember Lynn?" Jose held a hunched, wrinkled woman's arm. Meemaw wore a Pepto-Bismol pink designer suit, so loud Lynn needed earplugs.

Meemaw's hand shook on Jose's arm. Why Meemaw? What cosmic blackjack game had Meemaw won that Lynn's mom took the cancerous consolation prize?

"Josephine says you'll play something?"

The clarinet felt heavy.

"Of course." Lynn's voice a furry rabbit curled against winter's chill.

She assembled the clarinet while Jose handed out drinks. Lynn had fiddled with imaginary keys on the drive over, the tune coalescing from memory. When those fingers marched the clarinet's tube, Ave

Maria emerged. One note at a time, she pulled the tune by the spine from the Happier Days graveyard.

But she did it. Lynn sighed, relieved.

"Isn't she wonderful, Meemaw?" Jose asked.

Silence.

"It's possible," Meemaw said, "to play the right notes, and not really play the song."

Lynn's cheeks burned, and she studied her sensible flats. This was a mistake. She wasn't ready to emerge from her den. Her shadow greeted her, eight more winter months.

A shaky hand on Lynn's shoulder. "Can we try again?"

Before Lynn could object, Meemaw approached the piano. "Slow tempo for the old lady, make each note count."

What could Lynn do? She put the reed to her lips and played the same, stiff intro, notes clunking like she stomped a mosquito.

When she hit the melody's first note, a chilly C, Meemaw played. Her hands became as solid as iron, flying across the keys.

They wove an audial tapestry. The friends disappeared. The house evaporated. Oxford, with its customer calls, shitty bosses, and sorority girls

flattened until Lynn and Meemaw were the only 3D objects.

The music enveloped them, and flesh filled the wrinkles on Meemaw's hands. Lynn's mother's bob of soft curls fluttered as she reached for high notes. Never mind that Lynn's tone-deaf mom never once played a piano.

Ave Maria ended too soon. Gently as a descending dove, the world returned. Lynn held the clarinet in her lap. Meemaw transformed back into the old woman.

"Terrific!" Jose broke the spell. "I'll get us new drinks and we can play Pink Elephant."

All the women had an elegant gift bag or expertly wrapped package nearby except for Meemaw.

She'd given her Pink Elephant gift. She and Lynn had unwrapped it together. But Lynn no longer cared about the game. She had a gift no one could steal, and she'd hold it within her heart. She'd hear the tune when Gabriel started on his rants. She'd see Meemaw's transformation when the girl misplaced her order. She'd feel the clarinet reed's subtle tingle on her lips when a tear began its journey from her eyes.

Who had the audacity to ask, "Why Meemaw?" Not Lynn anymore. 📺



IN MY MEMORY POEM FOR FRONT BEACH

BY GARA GILLENLINE

in my memory,
the deep aqua sky was severed
from the intense green
of The Emerald Coast that was laid to bear
the color of death,
the silence covered the skeletons
of oaks and
six gulls flew over nothingness, the sand
emptied of life,
and only a person with some bread to throw.



THE SPIRIT OF THE WILD BOAR

BY AUGUST Z. MARTIN

Please walk along this path my friend.
A Summer comes, a summer ends.
The daylight cycle will quickly pass to welcome in the quiet night.
A sunset is a lonesome thing.
Its eye is but a fiery ring,
The only thing it cannot see besides just you and me.
You cannot run from me for long
Because you are my only pawn
To do what I need you to do before I'm gone,
or you'll be forever free.
Now I am ordered to be hunted down
To be lying dead there on the ground
To be shot and killed just because you humans think I did something wrong.
You walk inside a burning star
And suffer from seasonless years
Before you quietly swear to yourself that you will finally be able to turn me in.
You cannot capture me, my boy.
You're just my little plastic toy.
For the world was built for us you see, not just you or me.
You sprint past the finish, I run till the end.
You advance on me but I inch away,
and yet again I make another daring escape.
I will wait for you to find me and do your 'brave deed' when you feel alright.
You can call yourself courageous.
I call myself flawed.
Sometimes it may be hard to breathe
Like your throat is a cave and it's caving in.

But you can't do a thing in the world about constant pain and sorrow.
Death's abstract, but life's more precious.
You walk towards a temple, an ancient stone.
Where only solitude applauds you for your little deal.
Of course you killed a few lives but people don't care,
No they couldn't really care the least.
Like a mechanism we stop to rest.
But sleep itself is a natural thing
That naturally makes us dream anything despite where we are.
Our future's a deal.
And the deal is done.
For humans they are a funny thing
And they never know what the future brings
Though I suppose it really just depends on who you are.
But in the end your present wrecked,
Your past destroyed.
Even now I will escape somehow.
That's why young boy, you must go
Far far away from here, to never come back, ever again.
Because, my child, I have the power to strike your little precious soul.
So run far away from here
From this scary place
From my fiery face.
And young boy, I will wish luck to you, and your pitiless race.



THE CIRCUIT BY LUCAS WEST

The bones in my shoulders crackle from the weight of the memories
Thick with the layers of rumination
I can only feel them now

My brain painted like a cheap figurine
Reality reaches in only through pinholes
Too much voltage

My parts move desperately in place
Wearily wary as I wait for the fumes
To burnout

MY FATHER'S THINGS

BY DEANNA KREISEL



The photo I nicknamed “The Great Gatsby.”

When my father died a few years ago he left behind a wife with advanced dementia, a large collection of memorabilia from the Franklin Mint, and every one of his tax returns dating back to 1964. Of course he left other things too, including a house and a car and all that kind of thing, as well as his two daughters, a grandchild, and one surviving brother. But it was the stuff that came to haunt me.

It took forever to go through his desk and study after he died. I wouldn't call him a hoarder, exactly, because then I would have to call myself one too. The joke I always make about my own “archival” impulses goes like this: “As long as everything is stored in neatly labelled, chronologically arranged boxes then it's not hoarding.”

My dad was exactly the same—or I guess I should say that I am the same as him. So the giant box of unorganized photos in my parents' hall closet was always a real puzzlement. There were a few spiral-bound albums with neoprene sleeves for pictures and the word “PHOTOS” in wavy font embossed in gold on the covers, but they were mostly empty except for the first few slots, a testament to good intentions and failed execution. There were also gigantic manila envelopes full of photos that my dad had labelled things like “Kids,” “Dogs,” “Boats,” etc. Not a particularly helpful organizing system, but at least evidence that he had taken some kind of stab at it.

And then there was the slurry at the bottom of the box: hundreds of loose curled-edge photos, mostly black and white, populated by ghostly blurry people whom no one remembered. A couple of years before my dad died I went through this box again and became fixated on two pictures in particular, which I nicknamed “Lesbian Softball Team” and “The Great Gatsby.” I have absolutely no idea who the people in the photos were, or what their connection was to my family.

A couple of years before my parents died, I tried to get them interested in the question of who was in these two pictures, but I never managed to get very far. The only way to get my dad to talk about his past was to sneak up on him with a bottle of wine and some vague, open-ended statements: “I often wonder what being in a fraternity in the 50s was like” or “I bet it's hard to milk a cow.”

For the last 10 years of his life, my partner and I got into the habit of sitting around the table with him after dinner during our visits, finishing off the second bottle and gently prying stories out of him.

The best ones he would repeat over and over again, until they became as precise and polished as a Broadway musical number. The time he won the snare-drum competition for all of New York State and got to make a 78-rpm record of his winning solo. The summer in the early 40s he and his two brothers built a new house for migrant laborers on their farm, with the help of the German POWs who were working there that summer—they had an MP assigned to them as overseer, but he would prop up his rifle against a tree and take a nap while everyone else worked. The raucous cocktail parties he and my mom would attend during their courtship in Syracuse, full of office workers in narrow-lapelled suits and pencil skirts; the time they played bridge for 48 hours without stopping under a Christmas tree hung upside down from the ceiling.



I don't know who these women are, but I love them.

The people in “The Great Gatsby” photo seem like they might date from this latter era, or maybe a little before, while the members of the “Lesbian Softball Team” are clearly from the 1920s. So it seems unlikely that they were relatives or even friends of my parents—if the former, they would have been easy to identify, their pictures put into context with other family photos of holidays and life events, and if the latter then wouldn't my parents also be in them? So how and why did the pictures of these strangers end up in our family

photo box? Who is the jolly, portly, boater-wearing young man in “The Great Gatsby,” and what string of events led to his picture being in my possession?

One evening you're hanging out with your friends by the lake; someone has a cottage for the week and you all decide to get together for a little wing-ding. The night air is soft and warm and you can hear the lapping of the waves against the dock, the drinks are strong and sweet and people get giddy and silly and there is definitely someone you want to flirt with and you all start singing school songs, someone has a camera, you throw your arms around the closest couple of friends and all mug for the photographer, there is a blinding flash which makes you all blink for a few seconds—but before that, in the split-second before the blinking and the annoyance of the bright haloes around nearby objects and the unlinking of arms and the return to drinking and the slight desperation and eventually Margie getting sick in the bushes and everyone stretching out in hammocks and cots on the big wraparound porch to sleep it off in their clothes until bleary dawn, in that split second you are immortalized forever: young, joyous, maybe a bit of a jerk but reliably amusing, quick to mix a cocktail or light someone's cigarette, and it will always be like this, always, with your friends gathering on weekends and their silly jokes never getting tiresome and their bodies moving strongly and reliably and their memories secure.

The photograph will have its own journey: from the camera to the drugstore to the photographer to a bedstand to an envelope to a box and another box and another box and another box for decades in the dark, while everything around it changes and shifts like a kaleidoscope until the moment that it's pulled back into the light and nothing around it is the same. And you will gradually lose touch with those friends and some of them will marry one another or other people and move far away or die in wars or car accidents and some of them will have children and they will have children (and one of them will end up with a box of photos from the house of someone who has died) and you will either keep drinking or eventually quit but either way your jokes will stop being funny and you will keep making them anyway and the people around you will roll their eyes and you will shrink and the boater will end up on a closet shelf and then in a basement and then you will die and it will end up in a thrift store and that will be all that is left of you along with a photograph belonging to someone who doesn't know your name. 📷

A VISIT TO TRES PUERTAS GALLERY

BY ANNE WINEBRENNER

Earlier this fall, Dale and I stopped by the house and gallery of Milly West, who used to be Milly Moorhead back when she owned Southside Gallery and when Dale had long conversations with her while buying a Martin Dain photograph and the “Hand of God” print. That was almost 30 years ago. Milly has married, or maybe remarried; at any event, her last name is different, but she looks like she has not aged a year. She was always pixie-thin with big glasses and a kind of Pippi Longstocking look, and she still is. With no wrinkles and no gray in her hair, it could still be 1998 with her. Yet she has come and gone from Oxford many times—Cuba often, and other places I don’t know about—and we had not seen her for decades. She briefly told us that “Hand of God” was a photo of a tree in Clarksdale, Mississippi that had since been cut down. Then she was called away to help a customer, and our conversation was similarly severed, an abrupt chop.

Entering her house, which we had walked past every day on our Oxford morning walks in past summers, was like entering a dream, a magical world transformed by art and beautiful, homey furnishings. Nothing was elegant yet all of it was tasteful. It had the familiar southern smell, a little musty, with the scent of humidity and organic matter that houses in Oxford often seem to have. I noticed the worn tastefulness of details—a bedroom door stripped down to bare, pastel-brown wood; hand-tiled kitchen counters in the style of Mexico and other countries south of the border—rough, thick small tiles of a lovely golden yellow. Small bedrooms with iron bed frames and soft, homespun bedspreads. A small bathroom with its original bright blue tile. “Cottagecore” perfectly describes the style of that home, but of course people like Milly predated and created “cottagecore.” I would have liked to know how long she lived in that house; the “ART” sign on the street was there for as many past years as I remember, but I had no idea that it was Milly’s art inside.

Behind the house was a spacious backyard, as unpretentious and comfortable as the house itself. Hung around the yard for this art sale were large, eye-jolting canvases by a Cuban painter. Dale and I loved his work on the spot. Some were portraits of Black women; others were primitive nature compositions: three stylized, smiling cows in a vibrant green pasture; a field of sunflowers set at exact intervals in Pointillistic formation; a riot of banana trees, whose huge green leaves dwarfed the miniature arrays of bananas; mosaics of grass and butterflies. It was difficult to choose a favorite—all were so compelling and bright. Taken together, blowing on clotheslines stretched around the border of the yard, the paintings created a brilliant, wondrous world of color that leaves an imprint to be savored.




I felt like one feels after touching a small electrical current: just a bit more awake and excited about life; just a bit more alive.

Milly’s own gorgeous photographs were everywhere—unframed and stacked, framed and hung. We love her style—her gritty Mississippi Delta subjects, her harmonious colors, arresting compositions and the unique blend of sharp edges and softening fog. Because we were still trying to establish a livable budget we had resolved not to buy, so we left quickly, but we also left changed. Although we did not have a print, canvas, or framed work of art to carry out, our minds and hearts had been affected. I felt as I did after touring a Frank Lloyd Wright home—transformed by an artist’s genius all over that space. It was so unlike visiting a gallery with sterile, white walls: Seeing an artist’s collection, in that artist’s home, is a rare and precious experience. And it was made all the more precious because, as Dale said, “That woman and I have the exact same taste in art.”

Perhaps too, this rare glimpse into Milly’s personal collection, arrayed around her home, was more special because it was a once-in-a-lifetime event: two days only, and then no more. In this way it reminded me of a visit to Croatia a few years ago, when Dale, our friend Jack and I paid 20 euros each for tickets to walk around the walls of Dubrovnik. We had naively imagined, before arriving in that historic town, that we would be able to get up early every morning and walk around the walls before breakfast. Little did we know that due to *Game of Thrones* and the onslaught of cruise ships, overtourism had beset Dubrovnik. Hence, the entrances to the walls were locked; tickets had to be purchased and not any time, but in advance for a set hour. Further, you did not have unlimited circuits around the walls on your

ticket, but one time around only, and this included stops in the museums that could only be accessed via the walls. But who could take in all those museums *and* all those gorgeous, breath-stopping views on a single walk? We did our best. We went slow. We took as many photos as we could to capture that beauty for future enjoyment. The weather was brilliant, and because we had the first circuit of the day, just after the gates opened, the walls were not crowded. Nonetheless, it was a nerve-wracking experience at times. Toward the end of the circuit I panicked, thinking, “I will never be able to see this again. Soon I will go down into the rabbit-warren streets and this view, this setting, this extraordinary beauty, this particular way of experiencing history and this city will never happen again.”

Because we were on a budget then, too, it never occurred to us to continue to shell out 20 euros to take multiple walks around the walls of Dubrovnik. And so we had our one, precious, utterly enchanting march around those walls, just as on a recent fall day Dale and I had our one, magical tour of Milly Moorhead West’s art collection and home. Slowly, the works would be bought and carried away; as in Dubrovnik, we came early when her collection was still pristine and crowds were slim. Milly’s life would return to its normal rhythm and her home would return to its private state, minus some of the treasures that surely must break her heart to part with. But that is the story of another day—parting with items that are dear to the one who has lived with their beauty for many years. For now, we can only marvel at what a jewel of an experience it is to see, just once, a living work of art that is Dubrovnik’s walls or Milly West’s home and gallery. Its aesthetic delight is all the more miraculous because of this additional quality: evanescence. 



POSTMODERN ADAM AND EVE BY CARL SCHARWATH

No gardens,
no serpents—
just an apartment with peeling paint,
a fridge that hums like a tired god.
Adam scrolls his phone,
searching for meaning in algorithms.
Eve stares out the window,
wondering if freedom tastes like
black coffee or the sound of rain.
The apple is a neon sign,
“Open 24 Hours,”
and they wander in,
hands empty but hearts full of questions.

Knowledge isn't forbidden anymore—
it's commercialized,
streamed,
liked and shared.
And still,
the ache remains:
Who are we,
and who do we want to be?
They don't leave Eden—
they build it.

A fragile utopia of mismatched dreams,
There's no exile,
only a gentle forgetting,
As dreams dissolve into morning alarms.

STRANGERS BY CARL SCHARWATH

We
step through the quiet dawn
barefoot on wet earth
each blade of grass timidly holding our
weight
only for a second
then springing back, untouched, unmarked.

We
don't talk much, only listen
to the low hum of our thoughts,
the whisper of leaves and
the rhythm of breathing in tandem
in contrast.

You
on the edge of the trail
a stranger with a history I can't recall
it feels like we've been here before
these paths carved by our unspoken words,
our silence.

Together
in the evening's falling light,
we drift apart, our footsteps fading,
yet bound by this silent knowing--
like strangers who know each other
we weave through the journey
sometimes together.

FEATURED ARTIST: SAMANTHA HALEY

Artistic Style: I don't think I have a specific one. It usually depends on the medium I'm working with. The art for this paper was done through Procreate on my iPad.

How long have you lived in Oxford? I lived here until I went to college in Starkville in 2020 and have now moved back with my husband.

Early art experience: My grandmother has been an artist for my entire life, and she is who I credit as the person who got me interested in art. I did it very loosely until my junior year of high school and my art teacher, Mr. G, taught me how to do oil portraits. I had never been taught anything to do with the color wheel, techniques, color theory, etc. until he introduced me to it. I'm forever thankful for Mr. G for encouraging and teaching me to be a better artist.

Favorite visual artists: Francisco Goya (specifically his “Black Paintings” series), Rupert Alexander, and Alexandra Ratnitsina (specifically her method of sketching).

Art school? None!

Favorite book or author: My favorite book of all time is *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Funny enough, I wouldn't consider him my favorite author. My favorite author is probably Jane Austen.

Favorite quote: “It's not enough to be nice in life. You've got to have nerve.” —Georgia O'Keefe

Do you work out of a studio? I work out of my home. Sometimes my husband and I will go to Heartbreak Coffee and I'll work on some sketches there but more times than not, I'm working at home.

How many hours do you spend in your studio each day? I spend about four hours working on art considering it is not a full-time job.

Favorite project you've completed: My favorite project I've completed is the first oil portrait I ever did. It was a picture of my late father, and it is very special to me and my family.

Three ideas you want to explore in art: Mythology (mainly Greek), history (using small symbols in a painting/sketch to tell a historical story), and human emotions.

Favorite music/bands: Taylor Swift, Lana Del Rey, & Fleetwood Mac

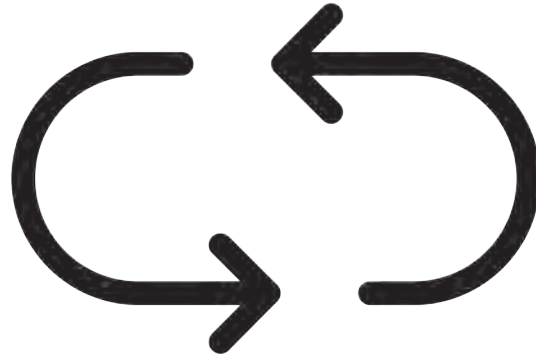
What are some of your other hobbies? I love to read, play video games, watch movies, make jewelry, and crochet

Where do you hang out in Oxford? I spend a lot of time at Heartbreak Coffee but I also enjoy walking at Lamar Park.

Aspirations/Future Plans: I'm currently finishing up a portfolio to hopefully find an apprenticeship to be a tattoo artist. 🖌️

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

BY S.P. SAIZAN



Loop 6,862. Throw open the door. Point two fingers through my coat at the plain clothes security guard so he thinks I've got a gun. It only works because he recognizes me. Bark at the receptionist to not hit the emergency alarm under the desk. Have the guard hand over his revolver. Maneuver to threaten the security consultant who was on his way out but is currently poorly hiding behind a plant. Grab him and put the revolver to his head, already reaching to hit the button which opens the double sliding glass doors to the lab.

The building still looks like an office here. Catch a glimpse of myself in the hall mirror. The lines on my face are deeper. My hair is thinner. I must be still aging. My father died at 78. Assuming the same goes for me and I can't break this loop I will have to face it another 87,454 times before my body dies and I'm released. Hopefully.

I have done this calculation many times.

A man barely 20 whirls around the corner in full military kit aiming an M4 at me. He sees the consultant and hesitates. I murder him for the one thousand and eighteenth time. There is no getting around him. I have tried explaining, sneaking, and running past. My time runs out and everything resets or he shoots and I bleed out on the carpet and then everything resets. Grab his rifle. I let the consultant go and he scrambles back to reception. He won't help me anymore. Everyone after is willing to shoot hostages.

Turn the corner to the left, then right, then down a long narrow staircase, then right. After the staircase you start to see what this place really is. Paneling gives way to thick white stone. Vintage-style propaganda posters hang on the wall, "Remember! Loose Lips Implode Ion Reactors!" with terrified lab workers and engineers running from a sabotaged experiment; in the foreground are particle accelerators going nova and beakers broiling with ominous green liquid.

A sick mechanical hum from deeper in the facility. There's a security camera in the upper right corner of the room. I shoot it before it gets a good look at me. I hear men setting up position to ambush me. I use my lanyard badge to slip into an office to the left. The outer walls are stone, but not these. Using the rifle, I fire 6 bursts through the drywall at the exact positions the security members are waiting for me at. I exit and walk over Gary, trying to speak. I see him recognize me. I met his wife and kids 4 months ago. The only good thing about the loop is it lets me prolong seeing Jane after murdering her husband.

I walk down the final few stone hallways, past a joke poster about dating alternate versions of

yourself, "Remember: Quantum Entanglement is *not* a euphemism." I punch my badge to get into the project room. It's bigger, open. 40 by 30 feet. At the center is a hateful looking mechanical device 15 feet high, 10 long, spherical and chrome. The sound of its incessant humming and pulsing makes me want to vomit. Large tubes from all sides of the room feed it. Temporal anchoring spikes, a foot long each, project from all sides of it. It's covered in dials, meters, Geiger counters. A group of scientists and lab technicians huddles to the right, staring wide eyed at me. I aim the rifle, now empty, to keep them back. But I pull the revolver out towards the waist high, blocky control terminal, connected to the device by a yard of power cords. At the terminal a lone scientist pounds on the keyboard and fiddles with the control panel. He has to make sure the experiment happens. Late nights working alone here have convinced him the device is practically alive; only inhuman cruelty would keep it inactive. He's heard it speak.

The figure turns to me. I look into my own eyes, crazed with passion and whatever corrosive force that thing in the room emits. I see myself start to turn the dial that destroys causality. I raise my arm. Fire. I watch my own chest and shoulder explode, my own head crack against the lab floor. The dial hasn't been turned.

I take a breath. Let time pass mercifully without movement. It's done. I will go to prison for life at best, but I am out of this. Blood trails out to cover more of the floor. I wait for the other detail from upstairs to arrest me.

The machine hums louder. Something motorized inside catches, repeatedly. *Ch-chk. Ch-chk. Ch-chk.* It sounds like throaty laughter. It powers on. Dials turn of their own accord. Light streams out from the center matrix. It's still working. I scream almost as loud as the ringing, two-tone trill of victory it emits. I feel myself beginning to rewind again, my arm lowers from shooting myself and I start walking backward out of the room. I see my other chest knit itself together. For

the first time since my first week in the loop, I do not understand.

Loop 6,863 I stand in the hallway before reception. I try to process why I'm still here. I thought I was the one who threw the final switch. I sit down, and sob uncontrollably for 10 or so minutes. The security consultant walks by me without a second look on his way out. I hear a thrum from deep below my feet. My bones lock up. My tears trace themselves up my face and sneak back into my lacrimal sacs.

Loops 6,864-6,907. Repeat, with some occasional screaming which causes the receptionist and guard to come check on me. I tell them we're all doomed. Plead for someone to help me.

Loop 6,908. Throw open the door. Point two fingers through my coat at the security guard so he thinks I've got a gun. **TV**



A plastic case, worn and wide,
Held melodies for every ride.
The hiss of tapes, the rewind's whirr,
Each song a time machine to stir.
Now they rest, their tunes unsaid,
A jukebox living in my head.

by Wayne Andrews

CONTRIBUTORS



JASON BOYD is an Oxford townie with a master's degree in computer science from Ole Miss with a thesis on brain-computer interfaces. Stories fascinate Jason; they are windows into the souls of people we will never meet and people who cross our paths every day.



JORDAN ISBELL is a junior majoring in journalism and minoring in creative writing and anthropology. "Writing is one of the best outlets I have that allows me to speak about prevalent societal topics throughout the world," Isbell said.



SAMANTHA HALEY is an Oxford native and local artist. She attended Mississippi State where she received a BA in English before moving back to her hometown. When she's not drawing, she's reading on her kindle or listening to the H3 podcast.



P.B. JERNIGAN was born and raised in Oxford, Mississippi. She is currently a sophomore studying English and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi. After graduation she plans on pursuing a masters degree and doctorate in English literature.



BETSY (ELIZABETH JOHNSTON), a UL-Lafayette grad, recalled this fond memory from a long-ago concert in Baton Rouge. She and her date, Dave, snagged the last two tickets for the sold-out concert. The seats were behind the stage! Betsy and Dave, her 'date of 51 + years,' reside in Oxford.



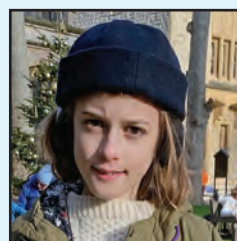
SAM KEALHOFER is a Mississippi native who earned a master's degree in English from Mississippi State University in 2020. During his time in graduate school, he wrote a poetry collection focusing on persona and literary activism and served as associate editor for MSU's creative writing journal *The Jabberwock*. He plans to pursue an MFA in the future.



WAYNE ANDREWS is the director of the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council. He is married to Mary Margaret Andrews and has two children and two grandchildren.



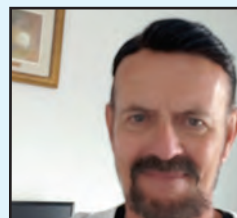
DEANNA KREISEL is Associate Professor of English and Co-Director of Environmental Studies at the University of Mississippi. She teaches and writes about Victorian literature and culture, ecocriticism, gender studies, and literary theory. Her creative essays and podcast can be found at doctorwaffle.substack.com.



AUGUST MARTIN moved from New York City to Oxford, Mississippi, where he enjoys playing piano and fencing. He has written stories and poetry since he was seven. August is currently an eleven-year old student at Magnolia Montessori School.



S.P. SAIZAN is an Ole Miss graduate who writes fantasy and horror. He enjoys reading, learning other languages, and playing Dungeons and Dragons. He works in healthcare.



CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is "The World Went Dark," published by Alien Buddha Press.



LUCAS WEST was born and raised in Pennsylvania and moved to Oxford to study biology. Much of his work reflects his fascination with science as he explores themes of depression, gender dysphoria, and trauma. His interest in poetry blossomed when he found the cathartic power of music and its lyrics.



ANNE WINEBRENNER is a retired English teacher who lives in Water Valley with her husband and pets. She met her husband Dale at Noel Polk's Faulkner seminar in 1997. After years of visiting Oxford and Water Valley, they are excited to make Mississippi their home.

The Local Voice editor Nature Humphries of Oxford, Mississippi, has been awarded a grant from the **Mississippi Arts Commission**. This grant is a portion of the more than \$1.7 million in grants MAC awarded in Fiscal Year 2025 and will be used to produce, print, and distribute this reading edition.

MAC's annual grant funds come from the **National Endowment for the Arts** and the **Mississippi State Legislature**. Awards were made in 92 Mississippi House of Representatives districts and 52 state Senate districts.

The Mississippi Arts Commission is a state agency serving more than two million people through grants and special initiatives that enhance communities, assist artists and arts organizations, promote arts education, and celebrate Mississippi's cultural heritage. MAC is funded by the Mississippi Legislature, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Mississippi Endowment for the Arts at the Community Foundation for Mississippi, and other private sources. For more information, visit www.arts.ms.gov.

For information about the Mississippi Arts Commission, please contact Ellie Banks, Communications Director, 601-359-6546 or ebanks@arts.ms.gov.

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UNIT 29: WRITINGS FROM PARCHMAN PRISON: STORIES SELDOM TOLD

BY P.B. JERNIGAN

In a short time, I guess you could say, looking out into the zone, I see a jungle, a gangland, a hostile environment. —Jacob Neal

Unit 29: *Writings from Parchman Prison* is a collection of essays, poems, and art created by inmates of Mississippi State Penitentiary's largest unit. It is a compilation created by over 30 detainees over the span of three years. Most of the contributors in the book had never created art before — yet produced a harrowing and honest reflection on life while incarcerated. It provides a rare and gritty portrayal of prison realism, with potent commentary on their experiences in Parchman Prison. Each writer in this book has their own distinct narrative voice. The writing covers a variety of topics such as religion, neglect, trauma, violence, and suicide. Though, the majority of the book contains the students' experiences and encounters while in Parchman.

This book was made possible by the VOX Press and their educational outreach program, Mississippi Prison Writes Initiative, a small non-profit from Oxford, Mississippi. Since 2002, VOX director Louis Bourgeois had a long history of working with incarcerated people in writing workshops and began a creative writing class at Parchman Prison. *Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Prison* was created under Bourgeois' instruction, with some mentions of him throughout the book by his students. Over the last ten years, three volumes of Mississippi inmate writing have been published through VOX. The explicit purpose of VOX Publishing and the Prison Writes Initiative is to provide a voice for the unheard and to publish marginalized writers.

Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm, is 20,000 acres with deep roots in American slavery. Originally a plantation, in the early 1900s Parchman got its beginnings functioning as a prison farm utilizing inmates for hard labor. Today, it consists of mostly open fields, a few trees, ponds, and seven different housing units. The prison is located in the Mississippi delta region of Sunflower County on a desolate stretch of Highway 49. The book's focus, Unit 29, is the largest unit of Parchman. It is surrounded by high razor-wired chain-link fences and four guard towers. Bourgeois describes the inside as chaotic, consisting of ten tiered zones with a caged-in prison yard. The cells are dirty and there is a constant smell of marijuana, tobacco, and a general air of smoke. It is never silent, with the TV's bolted to a center pillar always blaring and inmates shouting at each other across from their cells.

Many wrote about their living conditions including floods, random fires, leaking ceilings, showers three times a week, and no air conditioning and minimal heating. In two separate essays, student Larry Jenkins described the food as horrible, barely enough with bugs, halfway done, and, "It seems like they take the smallest amount of money that the government provides for us and buy the cheapest food they can find to feed us." There is ineffectual medical and mental health care. The writer Matthew Moberg expanded on the lack of medical care, saying there is one mental health doctor for 800 inmates, making it impossible to assist them.

Under all these conditions and unfortunate circumstances, some writers had a hopeful outlook. Many wrote of religion, and how it keeps them alive in a place like Parchman. In one essay titled "My Prison Walk" by Leon Johnson described a band named Full Pardon that plays in the gymnasium and for multiple other units. In Steve Wilbanks' essay "Scars," he wrote of the positives of solitary confinement. Wilbanks describes how being in the hole gives you time to think, learn, grow, and heal. The classes offered in Parchman are a positive side as well. Wilbanks took a paralegal certification course, helping him in his attempts to appeal his conviction. Some receive their GEDs and get a graduation ceremony. The effort and dedication it takes for education in prison is difficult, yet it is possible, and it has a much stronger positive effect than most would realize. An example being this book, as it gives a creative and therapeutic outlet in dire circumstances.

In a place like Parchman, moving forward seems impossible. It is built on adversity, and curates a harsh and violent culture. Yet, many write of their resilience. They describe efforts they have taken to better themselves and keep a strong mind. Efforts they have taken to reach forgiveness in themselves. Much of these efforts are religious. The student's hopeful outlooks create a captivating contrast with the darker writings. Some of the writers in this book have been released, some are still in Unit 29, many have been transferred, and a few have died over the course of compiling the book. From this project, some have become devoted to writing and will have their individual stories published through VOX.

This book is not for the faint of heart. It is a shocking and tragic representation of life in one of America's most notorious prisons. It contains heavy themes of suicide, death, drugs, and a plethora of other things. The material spans from narrative



essays and poetry to talented pencil drawings and skilled rhyme schemes. The dark portrayals are mixed with hopeful sentiments; making the book full of complex and thought-provoking outlooks. It humanizes the writers and artists, making it capable to view them as individuals rather than a prisoner or a statistic.

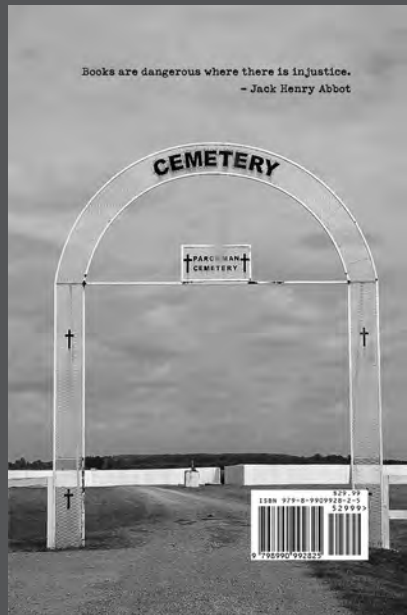
Unit 29: Writings from Parchman Prison is available online at www.voxpress.org and on Amazon.



HARD TIME IN PRISON

I'm doing hard time in this prison
I aint never did no hard time
like this I wish I had one
wish it will be I wish I can
get out of this cuz this is
a suffering pain time I'm doing
hard time hard time it will
mess up your Mind hard time
jail bars no stars no cars
just jail bars hard time
in the pen no friends cuz
they will do you in hard
time in the pen no friend
that what you get out of
doing hard time hard time
I don't never wont to do
hard time in prison hard time
Hard time hard time don't get
a crime cuz you gone do
hard time hard time

—Carvis Johnson



The Oxford, Mississippi non-profit art organization, VOX PRESS, has released a collection of prison writings, *Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Prison* (VOX PRESS, 2024). The book is the culmination of three years of working with incarcerated students through VOX's prison outreach program, **Prison Writes Initiative**. The collection is comprised of writings from over 30 inmates housed in Unit 29 at Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman Farm). The book delves into the aftereffects of the infamous riots in Unit 29 from December 2019 through April of 2020, and how those housed there deal with the conditions of trying to live in one of the country's most notorious prison facilities.

Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Prison, is available at VOX Books, at www.voxpress.org, on Amazon, and selected book stores.

ANONYMOUS

Can you give me some
 Food, I'm hungry, and water,
 I'm thirsty, either drink or
 Eat, my heart is yearning, my soul is dehydrated so
 Drink or eat, I've been up
 24 hours, food I must devour
 Close your lips hold your
 Breath wash your feet
 And wash your breath dizzy stumbling
 Can't make the step sorry
 Hope you don't die cause there's nothing to eat or
 drink.

LOCKDOWN—UNIT 29

BY LEON JOHNSON

Here at the State penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi 29-Lock down unit. Unit 29, has 4 lock down buildings, G-Building, H-Building, J Building and, L-Building. G Building, at this time is housing 80 prisoners. G-Building consist of two ZONES. A and B ZONES.

One ZONE is for protective custody. It's a few guys end up on protective custody, because they fear for their life, many prisoners criticize and humiliate them, and they feel the threat by it.

The other ZONE in G-Building houses prisoners with long term sentences. I'm not trying to down play this statement, in any way, but long term mean that these guys may not ever get out of prison Protective custody, house one-man cells only.

H-Building houses 160 prisoners, 80 prisoners on each ZONE. These prisoners are on lock down for many different reasons, getting caught with a cell phone, getting caught with a knife, cash money, drugs, or having sex with a female guard.

Three things that will get you locked down in unit 29 quicker than anything, getting caught with a knife, threaten a guard that works here, or having sexual intercourse with one of the female officers.

J-Building houses prisoners that is on death row. J-Building also houses high risk prisoners. These guys is locked down because they are some kind of threat toward Unit 29, in some way. J-Building houses about 40 prisoners at the time. The guys on death row, is not lock down, because of Rule Violation, they are locked down because they were sentenced to death. The guys on death row, most of them is on the quiet side, you don't hear much

from those guys, their mind is on getting out of the situation they are in.

L-Building, the main lock down building. Everyone goes through L-building when they are first placed on lock down. There after they are sent to another lock down unit, until their time is completed. Some guys have been in lock down for more than 10 or 15 years or more. The prisoners in L-building is not allowed to leave their cells, without being hand cuffed. When they go out to take a shower, their hands are cuffed behind their backs. They are taken out of their cells, and place in 5 feet by 8 feet shower. Once the door is locked on the shower, the hand cuffs is taken off of the prisoner.

The prison's guards and officers that work her in Parchman Prison and unit 29 is mostly females, about 91% of them. Some as young as 19, that's right straight out of high school. From time to time I have the opportunity to give some of these young ladies some positive advice.

I tell them to not let slick Joe talk them into doing anything wrong. Because if she get caught with drugs, cell phone, cash money, or having sex with Slick Joe, she will end up in the Sunflower County Jail, and Slick Joe will go on lock down for a very long time. But positive advice don't reach them all because Slick Joe is still destroying many of these young ladies' lives, they get caught, they lose everything.

I'm deeply moved by some of these guys cold attitude and sick behavior in these lock down buildings, G-building, H-building and L-building. Their actions, attitude, and behavior have gone way past its limit. You could say they have lost all respect and dignity for themselves and toward other people. One word just ran through my mind, to clear this up a little bit, they are insane.

It seems like when men fall this low, that all love and dignity have been removed from their hearts and mind. They have become a beast. It's a self-love, it's about them only, they is not reaching out, but instead pulling everything toward them. They are cold beast like creatures. Full of evil spirits, demon like.

These same guys on lock down set fires in their own cells, you can see the smoke coming through their windows, so thick and black. I don't see how some of them survive some of those fires. Once the officers see the smoke coming through the windows, they run to the building, and pull the prisoner outside and away from the smoke.

Some of these guys that were locked into all of this madness never come back. Those that are in authority here at Unit 29 say about 40 of those prisoners that was causing all of that trouble. They had them sent to East Meridian, MS where they can get the proper treatment, because lock down wasn't the answer for some of them. East Meridian is the mental institution for the insane.

These guys in the lock down units, are not allowed to buy or order cigarettes from the commissary. That's when I come to know that the nicotine in tobacco is more powerful and addictive than any other drug out there. These prisoners that smoke will pay up to \$25 or more for a pack of cigarettes.

In this writing, I'm kind of looking in, not out of lock down. I'm simply writing from the minds and words of other people. These lock down units, because of many fights, they keep the K-9 unit on call every week.

Unit 29 lock down is really a hell house, one guy said when he came off of lock down it was just like getting out of prison and going free. 📺

the Local Voice™

WINTER READING ISSUE 2025



A STUTTERING SPARK

BY JORDAN ISBELL

My flame was once a raging beacon,
licking through fields of alkyd fumes
to set ablaze. Dad urged I carry the torch
like a pyromaniac and incinerate hazard signs,
remembering to smile when incarcerated for arson.

Taking his advice, I embraced the fire of Surtr
and kindled camaraderie through the eyes of Hephaestus.
My lenses, scorched by the forges,
ignored soot of cigarette mouths leaning in
to force its acrid miasma through my teeth.

How will his inferno respond to my ember
now flickering like a frightened light switch,
puffing up smoke and mirrors
at the deafening call of "got a lighter?"

My self-immolation now remains as ashen smudges
falling in cracked hands of phantoms hungry for a smoke.
h e a d s p l i t, skin singed, bone exposed,
no more than a discarded matchstick
to spark the butt ends of a roach
passed by dry lips and bronchitis.



ETERNAL DAMNATION

(ACCORDING TO THE HIGH SCHOOL DEITIES)

BY JORDAN ISBELL

Early this morning,
the high school deities were looking
for a new prey to consume,
one that hadn't showered
in the prayers of The Lord.
My stench revealed my secret.

Accursed;
my unwavering silence
when asked what church I attended on Sunday
was enough to tell them
I spoke with a forked tongue.

Their words were sudden:
No bastard of the devil
should be in vicinity
of children of the Lord.
The phrase became their personal 11th commandment,
replacing the torn-out pages of Leviticus 19:18.

Cleansing a follower of Christ requires their head
dipped in a bowl to wash away their sins.
A lost cause, on the other hand
needs their entire body submerged,
leaving them underwater for a few minutes
to ensure their souls are sanctified.