# REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE OF *GRAVY*

The best stories remind us to put down the book.

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

THIS MAY WILL MARK TEN YEARS SINCE I moved to Oxford and joined the Southern Foodways Alliance as a full-time staff member. That's forty issues of this publication and 161 episodes of *Gravy* podcast. A book about cocktails. A marriage. Two children. Twenty coworkers. A home. A grown-up life, the contours of which I dreamed of a decade ago but the interior (and physical, for that matter) evolution of which I couldn't have fathomed.

Melissa Hall's then-middle-school–aged sons, who helped carry my duffle bags and books into my first Oxford sublet, are now kind, thoughtful, hard-working, and very funny grown men. I admire them, and I admire the woman who raised them, the woman who is now my boss and the codirector of this organization.

Back then, before I had children of my own, I called *Gravy* my baby. Sometimes I still do. But my relationship to this endeavor has changed—in a healthy way, I have to believe—as two very real, very human babies nudge me to continually reassess what I'm working on, and how much, and why, and for whom.

Guilt is a largely useless and self-indulgent emotion, yet it's one that I feel often and acutely, especially since becoming a mother. When I'm at work, I miss my children. When I'm with them during business hours, as I'm lucky enough to be with some regularity, I feel guilty for not working. "Mom guilt" is a cliché for a reason, a beast with so many heads. (Screens. French fries. Piles of laundry. Neglected professional obligations.)

Early in the pandemic, my brain decided to fixate on a new breed of guilt that has dogged me intermittently for the past two years: the guilt of not being a frontline care worker, specifically a nurse. Never mind that I am terrified of needles, blood, and hospitals; never mind that my mind struggles to grasp most concepts of hard science; never mind that I already have a fulfilling job, one which helps support and sustain my family. If I'm going to spend time away from my children to work, my logic went, shouldn't I be engaged in a vocation that helps others more directly, more immediately, and—here comes that loaded 2020 buzzword—more essentially?

I'm still trying to untangle the extent to which this guilt is fed by a warped sense of how much one person can or should do. I'm still working on balancing the attention and worry I direct inward, toward myself and my family, with the

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attention and worry I direct outward, toward a world that sometimes feels heartbreakingly, paralyzingly filled with suffering. And from a comfortable orange chair in an office located in a literal tower (albeit one of board-and-batten, not ivory), I often feel small, and abstract, and sometimes even useless.

While I am mostly an editor, and only occasionally a writer, I have undoubtedly made it my vocation to traffic in narratives. Most of these narratives relate to food, a subject that I occasionally tire of, only to find myself surprised and delighted by something new just when I seem to need it. Most of them are set in the South—my home—a place I find real and beautiful and and infuriating and full of possibility. If pressed to distill a decade's worth of stories into a few words, I would say that the best of them are either about places worth protecting, whether built or natural; or about unfamous people doing work that matters very much. These places and people frequently overlap.

Ten years ago, I might have said that stories can save us. I no longer believe that, but I offer an alternative that's still on the side of hope. The last two years have led me to believe that what will save us (in a purely secular sense) on both an individual and societal level is connection. By that I mean connection with the natural world and with other people. Connection that is physical, not modified or mitigated or algorithmically filtered. We tend to say that stories can take us places we've never been and introduce us to people we'll never meet. They can't—not really. But they *can* remind us how vital these experiences and connections are. I believe they can stoke curiosity and raise questions we carry over into real life. I believe they can alter our perspectives, if we're willing to bring that open-mindedness to the messy, difficult reality of everyday life, where beginnings, middles, and ends are never as orderly as paragraphs or as clearly delineated as section breaks.

I don't know where I'll be or what I'll be doing in another ten years. My father worked at the same law firm for nearly forty years before retiring. Many of my peers switch jobs every two to five. I imagine I'll still fret over things beyond my control. I imagine I'll still have pangs of unhelpful guilt. I'm pretty sure I'll have my nose (or ears) in a book every chance I get. But with any luck, I'll remember more often to put it down and live.