



the
b'k
bitchin' kitsch

Vol. 15 Issue 4

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Edited by

Chris Talbot-Heindl

About the Cover

“love,” a watercolor piece by Harry Edgar Palacio

In the background are glyphs and sigils. In the foreground is a watercolor sideview of a woman.

From the artist: “This is an image of a woman who uses the practice of Arawak power, originating from the Orishas and their gods and goddesses. The glyphs and sigils are an amalgamation of christian-judeo and dark magic.”

Harry Edgar Palacio is a U.S.-born celebrity and an award-winning musician, author, and fine artist with artwork published in Bellevue Literary Review, International Voices, Photoclosing & Personaland, who has shown fine art at several gallery exhibits in New York City, Westchester, & Hudson Valley; including School of Visual Arts.

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The B'K is a quarterly art and lit magazine prioritizing traditionally marginalized creators, but open to all. We are queer, trans nonbinary, neurodivergent, and mixed-race led, and as such, we are interested in platforming, centering, and celebrating creatives who are typically pushed to the margins. We are interested in people being able to decolonize and tell their own stories in their own voices.

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A Funeral at Six ^{by: Zeinab} Fakih

CW: Discussions (subtly and overtly) of death, war, racism, and suicide.

The first time Amir thought of death, he was six years old.

Sitting around the kitchen table, he was staring at the bloody lamb on his plate while his dad told the story of a journalist targeted by the military. He said journalists are targeted in times of war because only they know how to show and tell the truth. They play the artists and the archivists.

This was a normal conversation to have. After all, it seems that every day someone who looks like Amir is killed. A bullet through the neck, a knee on the neck, hands clasped around a neck. Amir thought it was almost destiny to die by strangulation.

All he could focus on was the feel of saliva in his mouth as the blood mixed around with the oils on his plate.

Amir brushed strands of meat out of his teeth and went to bed after he could no longer tell if the taste of blood was from dinner or flossing.

That night, he had a dream. Looking into the eyes of a goat he felt himself looking into the eyes of god.

The goat began bleeding out of his mouth too.

Amir awoke.

The next time Amir thought about death, he was ten years old.

Around the dinner table, they sat. Around the dinner table, he remembered.

Amir bit into a piece of chicken and chewed long enough to remember the dream he had at six years old.

The chicken began to feel too much like human flesh. Rubbery like fat. Amir felt his body attempt to expel the foreign object, but he persisted in chewing.

That night, he imagined himself lying beneath the stars in a cornfield, listening to the plants move through the wind. The peace was interrupted when a rooster appeared in his line of sight.

Inquisitively, it gazed at Amir and leaned down to give him a kiss on his eyelids. The eyes he got from his father. The eyes that granted him the nickname Fairuz whenever they took a trip back home. Bloody kiss after bloody kiss, the rooster pecked away at Amir's fairuz eyes. Amire woke up blind to his surroundings.

Amir thought more about death at 14 years old.

He remembered the lamb. He remembered the chicken. He could feel them in his stomach, still fighting to escape. His

mom handed him a plate of spicy potatoes, stuffed grape leaves, and mint salad. The red of the pomegranates in the salad dyed the potatoes, and the grape leaves stung tart on his tongue.

As Amir ate, the lamb and chicken feasted inside him.

His mom read a prayer for her cousin killed. People will say he died. People won't care to know the difference. His mom will wish a happy death to them all.

The first time Reham thought about killing himself, he was 46 years old. He watched how his son would think of death. Reham lived through wars and revolutions, he knew how death appeared in young men.

The first time Reham thought about death, he was six years old. It was when the first invasion happened, and he saw how his grandmother wept. His grandfather was killed in the middle of the night. Reham wondered how it would feel if he woke up looking into the barrel of a gun. To hear men screaming in a language he didn't know but be sure that the screams were those of murder.

The next time Reham thought of death, he was still six years old. On the boat, fleeing, he looked at how his parents shook with fear. His grandmother held onto him so tightly he was sure he'd bruise. He couldn't say anything but, instead, thought about how grateful he was to feel pain. In the fear, he almost forgot to mourn his grandfather. That made him think about death some more.

Reham doesn't remember when he didn't think of death. He had a will written out in pencil since the displacement. When he was seven, he decided his mom would get his favorite toy bear and his dad would get the film camera. His grandma would get all of his already-developed pictures. It made sense since she bought him the film camera and took him to get the pictures developed. When his grandmother died of a heart attack after a firework went off too close to her one Fourth of July when Reham was 16, he changed his will so that his dad would get both the camera and all his pictures.

The first time Reham was happy to live, he was 22 years old. He was interning at the office of some government official who probably wouldn't care if he lived or died. That's when he met a girl named Alia.

The second time Reham was happy to live, he was 24 years old. Alia appeared in a white dress. His parents no longer flinched at fireworks every summer. Eventually, he and Alia had a child who looked like the sun. Reham didn't think his gene of thinking about death would pass on, but it did. So he wrote out a will. To Alia, he would give half of his belongings. His car, his money, his already-developed photographs. To his son, he would give his soul. His clothes, his books, his camera from when he was six years old. Maybe then, Amir will no longer think of death. Maybe then, Alia will no longer think of dying.

The first time Alia thought about killing herself, she was 43 years old. She watched how her husband would think of

death. She watched how her son would think of death.

The first time Alia thought of death, she was six years old. Her dad died of a heart attack, and the world wept on the day of his funeral. Her grandfather had to carry her away from the cemetery once everyone left. She had dirt in her hair for two days. Her grandfather would sit with her in bed until she ate, but he'd eventually fall asleep as she'd stare blankly at whatever was still untouched on her plate.

Alia began to wonder what a heart attack would feel like. Would she be aware that it was happening before it occurred? Did her dad know he was going to die? Alia spent her time in her room lying face down in bed. She'd jerk around to mimic convulsions, pretending to have a heart attack.

The second time Alia thought of death, she was 19 years old. She sat between the graves of her father and grandfather. Alia wondered if she could die of sadness. If she were honest with herself, she didn't care if she lived or died. She didn't care if others did either.

Alia could separate her life into two parts: happiness and sadness. She thought she would live in part two forever until a third was introduced. Peace. Like the peace of a morning looking at flowers covered in dew.

The next time Alia felt peace was when she was 21 years old. She was standing in a white dress surrounded by Reham's

family as they cheered. It rained, and the flower petals stuck to her wet face. Like the dirt on the day her father was buried.

The third time Alia felt peace was when she was 37 years old. She was bleeding and in pain but able to live. She learned to want to live. Eventually, this pain would turn into a golden son who lit up the world. Eventually, his light dimmed, and she was taken back to burying her head in the dirt. So she turned on all the lights, baked sweets, and sat next to him until he fell asleep. Then she would repeat these steps with her peace. Maybe then, Amir will no longer think of death. Maybe then, Reham will no longer think of dying.

When this family lived, this family died. They never could take a breath. Cursed to reside where devils do sing, in time, they'd come to accept it. For someone like Amir cannot run from death. It follows him from the moment he's born. His skin, eyes, and hair become targets to shoot, for death and Amir live hand-in-hand. For death is the only one who saw Amir, Reham, and Alia as people to accept.

The first time Amir wanted to kill himself was between the graves of his parents, after he had lived long enough to forget his age. He lay face down in the dirt and felt how the flower petals, wet from rain, would stick to his face. He took a picture with his father's film camera and could not shower for two days.

The first time the family died, they were 6, 46, and 43 years

old. They watched how they were killed every day. They watched how they would be killed tomorrow. They watched how they would be killed. There would be no one to care for Amir. There would be no one to give Reham security. There would be no one to stay up with Alia. They would die just as they had lived. In death.

Zeinab Fakh (she/her) is a Lebanese-Canadian writer and poet. She has written two poetry collections titled "I Didn't Know How To Say This. So, I Wrote It Down" and "Sweet Tea and Ketamine." You can find more of her work on TikTok @zeinabfakh.

Trigger Point

by: **Makena Metz**

CW: Chronic pain, medical trauma

Glass pierces my shoulder for so long,
I don't remember what it's like to not be in pain.

The splinters spear into me, impinging
my nerves like needles, shards crunching muscle

inside my joint as time passes, forming
a mosaic of fractured tile beneath my skin.

I wear the pain like armor, pressing glass
into sand, padding sediment into cells. The nerve

quiets. My ligaments stretch. I feel a touch –
the light kiss of gravity. I am floating without pressure,

once molten and electric, now lifting and rotating.
Yet my mind holds the weight of a kiln burning.

Makena Metz writes for the page, screen, and stage. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English from Chapman University and her work has been published with Broken Antler Magazine, the Literary Hatchet, The Fantastic Other, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Strange Horizons, Arkana, and many others. Follow her @ makenametiz on social media or find her work on makenametiz.com

Home is a casket of sorrows

by: Anderson
Moses

CW: Mentions of gun violence, death, and the murder of children

The people from my tribe come from a long lineage of silence. Story has it that my uncle punctured his heart carrying a country that refuses repentance. At home, there's a plethora of questions on my mother's face, like water, winding her little happiness into a casket of sorrows— too heavy for us to carry on prayers —Again, my mother's mouth is a portal where joy auto-deletes itself without the permission of God, and my body: a constellation of memory, of bullets, of things adamant to survival.

And somewhere in Zamfara, a bullet is caught on a CCTV camera snaking into the bodies of school children —skin, black like corpses.

Today, my sister returns home after 7 fasting
and prayer days, wearing headlines of
forgotten children lost in songs of gloom.
Her face circled with voices of girls her type
kept under the mouth of sadness like
chrysanthemums. How many deaths will
count for a country to become a good home?
Here, the margin between my body and death
is (my) country. Which means, every day, I pray
for something to save me from the chaos
of my fatherland.

Anderson Moses (he/him) is an emerging poet from Nigeria.
He is an alumni of SpringNG writing fellowship. His works
have been published in various literary Magazines. He loves
chocolate and flowers

Before Everything

by: Ryan
Caidic

CW: This poem tackles themes of racism and colonialism

Before we bought our one-way ticket to Hamburg
Before we learned their language
Before a lady welcomed us— *it's good
to visit, she said,
but not to stay,
we're too crowded
with people from elsewhere.*

She didn't know that
before I met my wife and
before we had kids,
before our parents had us,
and their parents held them,
America had already bought us—
a country for \$20 million
Japan had stolen us
Spain had claimed us
by accident, aboard the ships of Magellan who
by fate, was killed by the poisoned arrow
of Lapu-Lapu and his people who refused to be enslaved
and so were called *savages*, but before

that they were called *teachers, neighbors,*
parents and *children*, claimed
by white men who claimed
the rocks that churned out fossils
from Ammonites—she
forgot that we were the mindless algae
gleaning life from an infant star
that was but a speck of dust
in the proverbial bang
the imploding antebellum
of everything,
which before that
was all equally
 nothing.
 Nothing.
 Nothing.

Ryan Caidic is a Filipino poet based in Germany. His work has been published in anthologies and journals across the US, Asia and Europe, and has won in the 2024 Spring Onyx Poetry Prize, highly commended in the 2023 Wales Poetry Award, shortlisted in the 2024 Peseroff Prize, Prism Pacific Spirit Prize, Wolverhampton Poetry Festival, and longlisted in Canterbury Festival’s Poet of the Year.

body surfers

by: Campbell Brown

CW: Theme of racism

they took my older brother down to the basketball court and i didn't hear what they said but he shut my bedroom door and shook me off like an annoyance and from outside my 10 year old bedroom window i smelled the heavy scent of chlorine saw the lanky teenage bodies holding each other underwater and i saw the laughter of skinny shoulders and the whitest widest smiles in the way only teenage boys can afford to be so confident and i wanted to be someone who didn't always finish last in pool tag, but i'd be damned if i couldn't beat him in scaling the tallest trees

believe me, baby, this body has a history of bad jokes
and a laundry list of grievances littered with reminders
elbows in ribs our crooked noses
freeze-tag-dodgeball, sticky candy
tapping out at first blood and *stop i got the air knocked out of me*
that time in new jersey the waves pulled me under like a washing machine and everything went dark and quiet
but the new yorker in me still knew how to kick and scream when the pressure hits my chest
so it spat me out at the mouth of the arcade where we pooled both of our tokens

they took my grandfather down the river and settled a heavy blanket of dirt around his shoulders
like the mockery of a victory cape called us royalty in exile
he took my mama down to reno and settled their ghosts in the sepia yard
so they took us down to the country clubs and we licked saltwater taffy off our

fingers

until suddenly you hated me in a way that wasn't playfight
until *jesus why do you let your friends make those jokes dude we're not ten
anymore stand up*

and then we grew up *stand up*

you got taller *stand up*

six feet and i antagonistic

but the one good thing about my brother: unafraid to hit a girl

they took my brother off to college and i hear voices from the phone,
designated sober, backseat driver, i heard slurred slurs amongst the laughter
and i think *dude stand up* i think you and i are unafraid of violence
i think eighth grade home games screaming DEFENSE from the sidelines
and two weeks later my friend asks me in the parking lot *what's your brother like*

and i smell expensive sneakers, bleach on toothbrushes, leather basketballs
summer so hot the earthworms melt on pavement and air shimmers like an oil
slick

and i heard *stand up* i heard *shut up*

you were stupid for the silence, smiling

you stood there and took the insult.

easy from the outside, i guess. how simple to judge

and in the high school parking lot i saw locker rooms talking confidence
and gym classes with scuffed jordans and sullen silence on the way home
i saw loud nights in the kitchen and heard *never pick a fight like that*, heard *i
know they're laughing with me*

i heard *brother if you weren't laughing they would still be laughing too*

i thought *what if you were scared*

thought *god but what if you weren't* thought *god what if this is survival*

and i thought about that stuffed animal you threw over the picket fence into the
neighbor's yard in 2016 i never got back (bitch)

and how you turned the wii off whenever i was winning or flipped the
chessboard and i smelled chlorine again

and i heard *he won't stand up he's a coward* but i felt it for the first time

i remember how black and cold the water was
and how when it flooded my lungs like a july baptism i knew only two things:
a primal sort of fear, and your hand the second it grabbed mine

and i said

*growing up he was the only one not afraid to go past where the waves
broke, past the shallows
wading in the deep water because we weren't afraid of sharks.*

Campbell Brown is a queer, mixed-race youth writer from Arizona. She likes homeric epithets, Oxford commas, semicolons, and em-dashes; she hates self-writing these bios because she's scared of sounding pretentious instead of quirky and cool and like the funniest smartest sexiest person alive oh god please help. Find her on Instagram at @pocketwatch3s and on Twitter at @cambrownwrites.

self-portrait as suburban sunset

by: arushi (aera) rege



arushi (aera) rege is a queer, chronically in pain, Indian-American poet in senior year in high school. They tweet occasionally @academic_core and face the perils of instagram @aeranem_26. Their chapbooks, *exit wounds* (no point of entry), and *BROWN GIRL EPIPHANY*, are forthcoming with Kith Books and fifth wheel press. You can find their website at arushiaerarege.carrd.co.

Through the Wormhole

by: Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey

CW: Mention of drug use

Benny says there's a wormhole from the Bermuda Triangle to the Gobi Desert, right through the center of the world.

He must think I'm stupid or something.

If there was a hole in the Bermuda Triangle, all the water would drain out, I say. And then the desert wouldn't be a desert anymore.

That's not how wormholes work, dumbass, he says.

Benny is fourteen and covered in pimples. He likes GTA and skateboards, and last week, I caught him smoking something in the side yard. He said, *you better lie if Mom asks anything.*

I don't believe anything he tells me.

Look it up, he says.

I've been painting the walls of my bedroom, sneaking into Mom's office after she goes to bed to Google photos of fairies and dragons and mermaids on her computer. There are a lot of images that look real, practically. I'm painting them in

the corner, behind the curtains. I've been falling asleep in math class. Yesterday, Ms. Taylor asked me why my hands were covered in blue. In the night, I pull back the curtains so I can see their outlines watching me. I told her *my mermaids needed an ocean to swim in*, and she looked at me funny.

Every afternoon, Benny comes home from school and eats a peanut butter and pickle sandwich. Benny only believes in things with a "scientific explanation." Benny is good at technology, and goes to school early on Tuesdays and Thursdays for some sort of computer club. Benny goes on a date to the movies with a girl who chews gum in rhythmic snaps and never takes out her AirPods.

Benny is no fun anymore.

Mom says that *nothing on the Internet is real* and says not to believe a word of it. Says *it's silly to put so much time into something that doesn't exist as soon as you flip off the switch*. There are so many things on the Internet, though, and I think at least some of them must be true. The dictionary or websites selling things. I ordered a pack of paintbrushes one night, and they came in the mail four days later. That's like magic, practically. Seems real enough to me.

I Googled the wormhole, and the Internet said it probably doesn't exist.

I asked Benny where he heard about it, and he said *the Internet*.

With the new paintbrushes, the fairies are starting to fly out of the corner and across the wall. I'd like to know where they're going.

Whenever I come into his room, Benny is on his laptop, his face greenish glowing. He looks funny lit up from the bottom like that. Some nights, we watch videos together, the sciency

ones on YouTube that he likes. Benny thinks he is smarter than me.

I looked up “things that teenagers smoke,” and the Internet said that it could have been marijuana or cigarettes or crack cocaine. It says that Benny’s brain will suffer from use at such a young age.

I like my brain, and I like my thoughts. I like the color of the paint I’ve been using for the mermaid’s tail. Aquamarine, it’s called. I like to think about a wormhole that will zoom me through the center of the earth and spit me out somewhere different. I’m not buying it, though, not really. I know that kind of thing only happens in the movies. And I’ve got my friends in the corner anyway, and wouldn’t they be sad if I ended up in the desert somewhere? I like to think they would. I like to think Benny would miss me. I like the way, when the moon hits my window around ten o’clock, I can see the dragon’s tail twisting out from behind the curtain.

Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey (they/them) is a California transplant studying creative writing in Portland, Oregon. Their work appears or is forthcoming in publications such as Beaver Magazine, JMWW, and Gone Lawn. They are a prose reader for VERDANT, a mediocre guitarist, an awe-inspiring procrastinator, and a truly terrible swimmer. They can be found on X/Instagram @esmepromise.

Harvest

by: Ashley Hong

호박 (*ho • bak*)

1. a pumpkin
2. an ugly woman

an orange-stained shell
with furrowed ribs and
curved, repeating bosoms

joined at her disjointed stem,
stray hair strings coil
into green springs, her

disdain painted in strokes
across her husk, plump with
zealous seeds seeking pity—

she pleads: scoop her pulp,
extract her sultry seeds
and pull at her fibrous strands,

say her beauty is
infallible, accentuating
each syllable woven

into a patchwork of hollow
affirmations for a *hobak*
destined to be swallowed

사과 (*sa • gwa*)

1. an apple
2. a pretty woman

her skin is akin to
a rotten *sagwa*, malleable
enough to create crescents

and full moons with her
pruny fingertips that
have been stretched too

far, too wide; her *sagwa*
remains seedless, unbearing
of honeyed flesh and sugared

cores despite heeding the
autumn winds who whispered
candied venom, coloring her

flesh into poison. she ponders:
won't autumn spare me some dignity?
but nothing there are no answers.

naive, that is
what she is—she who is
deemed a *sagwa*.

가을 (*ga • eul*)

1. a feminine name
2. autumn; fall

her nude branches
sway in response to the
November zephyrs, premature

frost clinged onto her curves like
wet drapery; she stands lull before the
idle sun—warmth cannot defrost her,

Gaeul. she is engaged in the
cold's embrace, sapping through
her bark, then her rings, then her

heartwood; she is left bare, unraveled—
a feast to the mosaic eyes of
carnivorous wasps and the

seeds of bitter fruits
who roam through browned
leaves and brittle boughs

grown into satyr horns,
a season called
gael.

Previously published by Cerasus Magazine.

Ashley Hong (they/she) a writer residing in Southern California. Her works can be seen in iO Literary Journal, Persimmon Lit, and Cathartic Magazine. In their free time, they like snacking on popcorn and getting lost in the abyss of Youtube.

amalgam pig

by: Finch
Xiao

kiln-fired boxelder bugs fall from the ceiling fan
brother says 今天 & you are born anew
twice in such little time, slip-coated fingertips
sculpted out of red envelope papier-mâché

—count to ten in Mandarin when you're six
& forget everything except your brother
哥哥 speaks college dialect at home
crafts constellations out of pinyin tones
while your father eases into Beijing dialect

scale & descale & gut your luck this year
Year of the Dragon, good for pigs, says horoscope
wait for the Mid-Autumn Festival if
you run out of time, if your heart aches
half-hare under the night

hang onto your middle name like a promise

you'll feel better after the sleep study

the medicine

some sleep

pork bao

(you share with 哥哥)

or 2031, golden child

Finch Xiao (they/them) is a writer and photographer in the suburbs of Chicago. They've been published in DePaul's Blue Book and Adlai E. Stevenson's literary magazine, the WIT. More of their work can be found at [@finchxiao](#) on TikTok.

What to Expect When You're Expecting Someone Else's Baby

by: Amy Bleu

There's no greater high for me than pregnancy. Something about that cocktail of hormones is the perfect antidote to my cornucopia of health issues: anxiety, insomnia, migraines, body aches – the latter of which would have probably come along with being in my early forties anyway, but is made worse by my fibromyalgia.

If you are thinking that being a “geriatric” disabled woman would have disqualified me from being a surrogate, you are wrong. There aren't many people who don't struggle with a physical or mental health issue. When you go through the screening process, the powers that be are not looking for people with perfect bodies; they're merely looking for fertile carriers with a handle on their health issues and know how to manage their stressors.

The hardest part of being a surrogate is having everyone ask

me if it was hard. Yes, it was challenging, but not in the ways you might expect. People always assume I miss the baby.

Honestly, I miss her parents more. Before the birth, I spent an hour with them each week via video chat and had a couple of dinners with them in person. But during the labor and recovery at the hospital, we had ample time to hang out. The baby was someone I hadn't really gotten to know or talked with. At two days old, when she left the hospital, she couldn't exactly speak English yet. On the other hand, her dads were people I had just gotten to know a little better, and then they had to fly away to the very opposite end of the country.

When they left, my hormones were crashing, and I felt vulnerable and uncertain. My support person, Jenny, was waiting, per my wishes, for me to try to nap before they would return and visit again. Despite knowing they would return soon, I felt lonely and afraid. But I wasn't upset about the baby's departure.

Seeing her in her fathers' arms was the reward that I had been dreaming of, which made the entire endeavor worthwhile. That's all I can think of when people ask me if it was hard: they will probably never comprehend what it's like to grow a baby for someone else.

We used a donor egg, so the baby was not made up of any of my genetic material. I was always interested in helping someone else achieve their dream of starting or expanding their family. It was never about having a baby in my life. That being said, I'm fortunate to have contact with the whole family still. I feel like an aunt to the baby, albeit a distant one, and my child sees themselves as her cousin.

The difficult part is seeing the disappointment on people's faces when I say it wasn't hard to let go. Sometimes, they ask me again later, as if they are hoping that my answer will

change. I assume they feel it's merely human to connect to a fetus that's growing inside of you, so if you didn't attach, what does that make you? I feel like a robot in their eyes.

Don't get me wrong: having a healthy amount of detachment can aid you in this effort, but we aren't machines. You still need to attach enough to provide a loving environment for the next nine months. I thought of surrogacy as babysitting.

Fortunately, my closest friends were on board from the start. Knowing how much I enjoy helping others, but also being aware that I don't want to expand my own family, they could see that I was making a healthy decision.

The second biggest challenge for me was administering the fertility shots and enduring their side effects. First, I had to dispense the lupron through a tiny needle into my own belly fat. You pinch an inch and inject the needle quickly. The process was painless, but the side effects were unpleasant. Some people get hot flashes from Lupron, but I was constantly freezing. After starting the hormone injections, I immediately retained five pounds of water weight. Seeing my body hair come in faster and thicker was the most uncomfortable aspect. I longed to skip ahead to the part where I got to feel like a pregnant goddess instead of being in this limbo where I was just hairy and bloated.

I was relieved when it was time to switch to the estrogen, which I took orally. Some people report side effects, but I had none. But I only had a couple weeks off from injections. Next up was progesterone.

Progesterone was the most difficult one for me to withstand. Fortunately for me, I didn't notice any side effects on this one either. It was the administration process that made this one the most challenging: I had to find someone to inject my rear end for me, or I had to do it myself. Stabbing yourself in the butt cheek is no easy feat. I enlisted the help of two friends who were kind

enough to alternate duties. One was medically trained, and the other was simply brave.

Unfortunately I couldn't always reach my friends in time. I had a trip planned that I couldn't reschedule, and would be alone for several days. I didn't know anyone in Vermont, where I was going, who could help with my fertility shots.

So I poked and prayed. I hit a bad spot in Denver on my layover and nearly fainted as blood spurted out. I was not thrilled when I first heard that, despite being fertile, I would need to be on these shots to increase the odds of conception and then would have to continue them for several more weeks, throughout the first trimester, to prevent miscarriage. I am also very glad this resource is available with such positive effects. I just had to keep my eyes on the prize: imagining that day I would see the dads holding their baby.

I was told that our odds were 75/25 that the embryo transfer would take. I had a feeling it would work on the first try. My intuition also told me that the baby would be a girl, and she was. Later on in the pregnancy, I had dreams that she came a week early and was too big for me to deliver vaginally. Those predictions also came true.

The only other challenge for me was labor and recovery. During the C-section, I lost too much blood during the surgery. The ideal amount, the doctor said, is no more than one thousand milliliters. I lost seventeen hundred.

Feeling dizzy just after the procedure, I asked my nurse for water. She said I could only have ice chips. I let the ice melt a little, drank it, and then asked for cup after cup. When I got to the third cup, the nurse scolded me for devouring the ice chips too quickly, warning that I would make myself sick.

My stomach didn't feel upset. All I felt was an unquenchable

thirst. When I was deemed ready for my move to the recovery room, a few nurses lifted me and moved me onto a gurney. My friend Jenny followed behind. In the new room, I had a better view and was allowed to eat crackers and drink apple juice. *I like it better here*, I thought, just before projectile vomiting.

Later the dads came by my room with the baby so I could meet her properly. I was so happy to see all of them together.

The next day, a phlebotomist came in to draw my blood. It turned out I had become mildly anemic from the blood loss and would need an iron infusion.

My blood pressure was also an issue. I had always had low blood pressure all of my life, until this labor: I developed preeclampsia. I was shocked and kept asking if perhaps there had been some mistake. All of the nurses told me the same thing: that, unfortunately, sometimes preeclampsia just happens, especially to older carriers. Just as I had finally come to accept this diagnosis, my health was about to take a turn for the worse.

The dads and the baby flew back home, but I was determined to keep pumping so that I could donate my milk to a local milk bank. About seventy-two hours after giving birth, I was discharged. I had just settled into my own bed, eager to cuddle with my cat and watch TV, but I quickly developed a severe headache. After getting up to use the bathroom, I noticed I could not stop shaking. I vomited, and then my stomach began to hurt all over, not just where the incision was. All of these were symptoms I was told to watch out for with preeclampsia, so I checked my blood pressure. It was extremely high, so I checked my temperature, which was one hundred and two.

I called Jenny and we agreed we should go back to the hospital. In an exam room at the ER, two nurses flanked me, each one putting an IV port into each of my arms. A doctor was at the foot of my bed, barking questions at me, while an intake specialist was

behind my head, firing more questions at me. In addition to feeling overwhelmed, my head hurt even worse after a nurse swabbed my nostril.

It took two separate doses of morphine to quell my head and stomach pain. Then, the doctor told me that I had COVID.

On top of all of that, I was sent back to the maternity ward for a suspected uterine infection. The doctor recommended that I stay for just one more night, which turned into four.

On the last day, my friend Kevin volunteered to drive me home as he had just gotten over COVID himself and wasn't worried about being exposed to mine. He was also one of the friends who had helped with my hormone injections.

A nurse wheeled me out to the front entrance of the hospital on that Friday, a full week after I had first checked in for the delivery. Fresh air, my friend Kevin, and freedom awaited me. I felt elated yet exhausted. Kevin dropped me off at home, and I slept for twelve hours straight.

The experience of being a surrogate was a powerful trip, with joys and hardships. I took eleven weeks off from work in order to recover. If I could do one thing differently, I would skip pumping. I had a brutal hormone crash when my milk dried up, which I now call the post-pumping funk. But I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to help the dads I carried for, and their son, add a beautiful baby girl to their family.

Amy Bleu is a gender fluid lesbian author, musician, social worker and mother based in Portland, OR. She goes by she and he pronouns and has had pieces published in magazines such as Bust, as well as seeing her first novel published traditionally in 2022. Some of his work can be found at amybleuarts.com

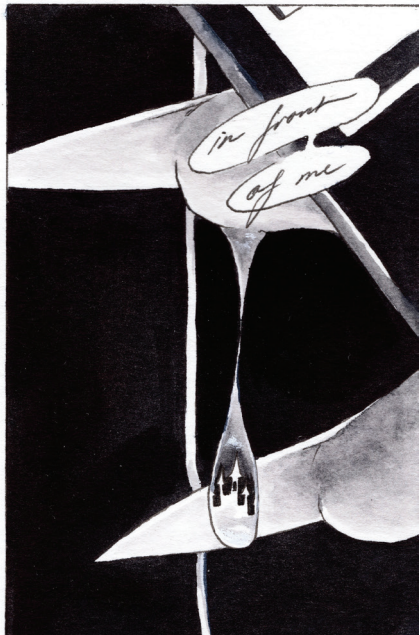
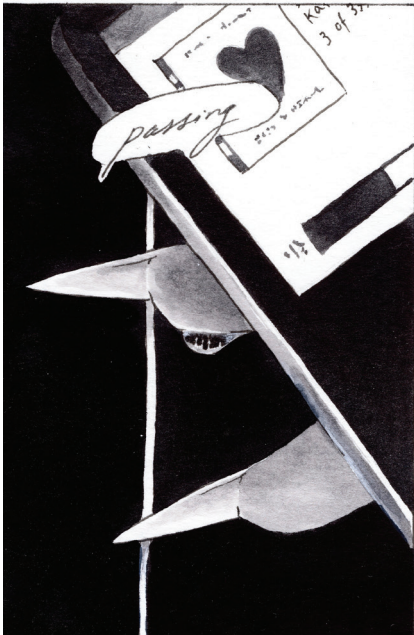
A Garden of Ghosts

by: Sarena
Tien

CW: Themes of racism and colonialism

I know your language isn't my mother tongue but
that's not an invitation for judgment, not when you
forced your language upon thousands. And though I
learned it by choice, you still find a way to use
it as a weapon. My fluency doesn't matter because
you're too focused on the color of my skin, so
damned if I do, damned if I don't. But I refuse to be
the fragments of an empire you picked up to polish
and put on display in your museums. You can't sanitize
my accent. If you're going to stare, then let my voice
rewrite the narrative. Face the vestiges of your violence:
like the bloodstained ruins of your colonial resort towns
and the radioactive sand blowing in from the Sahara
I'm a haunting and a reminder, a revenant rising from
a history you tried to bury. Dear France, don't forget
you created these graveyards full of ghosts.

Sarena Tien (she/her) is a queer Chinese American writer and doctor (the PhD kind). Once upon a time, she used to be so shy that two teachers argued whether she was a “low talker” or “no talker,” but she’s since learned how to scream. Her poetry and prose have appeared in publications such as *The Rumpus*, *Snarl*, *Sylvia*, *Decoded Pride*, *The Secrets We Keep*, and *Good for Her*.



It Was Real To Me

by: **Kalie Boyne**

Kalie Boyne (she/her) is a painter and graphic novelist. Her work aims to reflect on the social messages we have unconsciously absorbed, restore an inherent recognition of others, and unearth a faith that fully embodying our deep selves is possible.

Of Ink and Ash

by: Shelly Jones

CW: Death (not within the narrative), grief, dysfunctional family

“See anything you like?” the tattoo artist asked as Celeste sat down. Her pixie cut accentuated her cheekbones and light shimmered iridescent along her tattoo sleeves like fish scales.

“I’m not sure. I’ve never done this before.” Celeste studied the designs on the wall, sampling what the artist could do. They reminded her of her grandmother’s embroidered pillowcases. Her own mother hadn’t been interested in such crafty things, but Celeste remembered one day shortly after her grandmother’s funeral, her mother was in the spare room surrounded by hanks of brightly colored floss, like a drab fish perched in a coral reef.

“First time for everything. What made you decide to get inked?”

“It’s for my mother. I mean, I’m getting the tattoo, but it’s in her honor. She passed away recently.” Celeste looked

down, looping her thumb in and out of the buttonhole of her cardigan. Her mother had only been dead a few days, but Celeste already hated the pitiful stares when she mentioned her mother's passing, their brows knitted, their eyes glassy. "I can't decide if it should be something I want or something she'd want," Celeste explained, the words rushing out of her like a balloon deflating.

"Well, it's your body," the artist reminded her. "Isn't there something you both liked?"

"We weren't exactly similar," Celeste admitted. "It's amazing we shared DNA."

"Maybe a happy memory of her?"

Celeste thought for a moment, skimming her mind for a perfect moment with her mom, unsure if such a thing existed. "There was one day after my grandmother died. My mother had to deal with the estate, and she dragged me along. Afterward, we went to the cemetery. We sat near a pond and watched the geese. Later we saw a fox near

my grandmother's grave. I had never seen a fox in the wild before."

"That's a nice memory." Taking a sketch pad from the counter, the artist began to draw. "But why is that a nice memory of your mom?"

"I don't know. It was the first time I ever saw her light and buoyant. She was usually so distant," Celeste realized.

"Sometimes grief has a way of changing people," the artist replied, turning the tablet around for Celeste to see: a fox sitting before a headstone, its red tail curling around the gray stone like a wreath. "Something like this?"

Celeste took the pad, admiring the design. "Oh yes, that's perfect. I never would have come up with something like that. Do you think," Celeste hesitated. "My mother requested that her ashes be used in the ink. Can that be done?" The words were uncomfortable in Celeste's mouth, the idea repulsing her. But this was her mother's last request, and Celeste had decided to honor that, despite everything. She tried to imagine the ash as mere dirt, like a mud facial at a sauna, instead of her mother's flesh, ground bones etched into her own body forever.

"It's something I've done before in cases like this. Not something every place will do, you know? Skieves people out just the thought of it. But someone can live on in ink. Do you have the ashes?"

Celeste pulled out a small plastic bag from her cardigan pocket. It seemed strange to be carrying a piece of her mother, to deposit a piece of someone once living so casually to a stranger.

As the artist prepared the ink, Celeste looked away from the needle. In the mirror, she could see herself wincing and

frowning. What was there to be afraid of, she suddenly thought. The needle against her arm felt no worse than the pinprick of her cat kneading her. She imagined the weight of the tabby in her lap, his purr impossibly loud and soothing like static. She smiled at the thought and took a deep breath.

“There you go,” the artist said as Celeste’s muscles unclenched. “Nothing to it.”

“That’s a nice photo,” Celeste said, gesturing to a black and white snapshot tucked into the mirror’s frame: two women smiled, their arms wrapped around each other’s backs, their faces beaming, as they rested against the chrome bumper of an oversized car. “Your mom?” Celeste guessed.

“Great grandmother,” the artist replied, not looking up from her work. “1936 - Coney Island. She was a sideshow attraction.”

“A tattooed lady?” Celeste asked incredulously, as though they were discussing a mythological creature. “Who’s that with her?”

“A friend, I suppose. Another act in the show.”

Celeste examined the photo, trying to ignore the thrum of the electric needle, the tingling sensation running up her arm, winding around her heart. There was something familiar about the second woman, the curl of her lip, the dimples in her cheeks like a pin puckering cushioned fabric. Her grandmother had dimples, recalling her laughing, dancing in the kitchen on Christmas long ago, the fluorescent light overhead glinting on the highball glass in her hands.

Celeste remembered wishing her own mother could be so merry, joy radiating from her like a fine perfume. But her mother had been sullen and bitter, sulking in the bedroom on holidays, unwilling to come out even to watch Celeste

open her present on her birthday. Something had changed later, though, after her grandmother had died, like a weighted blanket lifted from her, letting her legs stretch, testing her strength. Too late, Celeste thought.

Celeste watched the ink spread across her skin. She thought she would recoil at the sight, but instead, it felt almost natural: her mother living within her, under her skin, sinking into her veins.

“We’re closed,” the artist announced at the clang of the door opening.

“Even for me?” a voice wound serpentine across the studio.

“Come in, my foxy lady,” the artist joked, admiring the tattoo she had inked earlier that day. “I’ve been waiting for you.” She pulled her close, smiling as familiar fingers skimmed her short black hair.

The two wrapped their arms around each other’s waists and stepped out into the street.

Shelly Jones (they/them) is a professor at a small college in upstate New York, where they teach classes in mythology, folklore, and writing. A Pushcart nominee and Best Microfiction finalist, their speculative work has been published by F&SF, Apex, The Future Fire, and elsewhere.

pride

by: **Natalie D.C.**

CW: Implied homophobic parental figure

i'm proud of *never* coming out,
of never needing a reason to cry
"queer!"

it's the word that hides "*gay*" the best.
my father once read my author bio & asked
what i meant by "*queer half-Moroccan.*"
i proceeded to pull definitions out of a rainbow hat:

strange,
weird,
odd,
different.

all the while panic laced the very treble of my voice.
luckily, he didn't voice any more

concern/
confusion/
condemnation,

all emotions contrary to the very fabric of my queerness,
my dearest,

the only secret i have left.

Natalie D.C. (she/her) is a 21-year-old artist and writer based in Pittsburgh, PA. She has been published in ALOCASIA, Porridge Magazine, Pile Press, Art, Strike! and elsewhere. Her debut poetry chapbook, *blue pearl*, is available for purchase from Bottlecap Press. You can find more of her work at <https://nataliedc.carrd.co/>.

The Were- Retriever

by: **Angela Townsend**

CW: Abusive relationship

You have heard of canine powers. Wise women run with wolves. Heaven sends a hound who cannot be resisted. For all its inconveniences, turning into a werewolf has advantages. Cast your lot with the dogs, and you shall become strong.

But I tell you, there is danger here. I tell you with authority, for I have been dogged.

I did not choose my long ears and wet eyes, any more than the sea elected its tides. My bloated heart is the moon, and I am hopeless but to howl.

They tell you that your veins will flow with power when the wolf's double helix dances with your own. They are too starstruck by storybooks to add the asterisk. When the moon rises, you do not get to choose your species. You may well turn into a Retriever.

You may turn as golden as butter, greased to please. You are a deep begging bowl, a yellow "yes" in all directions. You will wear the collar emblazoned "Doofus" if it makes your betters laugh. You accept laughter as love's currency, whether sweet or scornful. Contact of any kind is the coin of your realm.

You will bankrupt yourself for a forehead kiss and mortgage your dignity for a ball. Every meal will be your favorite, the desiccated offal cookies and the translucent scraps. You never stand taller than your yearning. You are astonished that you are tangible at all. You bare your belly and bear no grudges. You receive the most disinterested fingers down your spine as more than you deserve.

You nod when your better informs you that he will not greet you when you return home. He has a fine explanation for all things, his left and right brain meeting like steeped mastermind fingers. He has a right to examine you for ticks, your impulsive purchase or your inadequate laundry procedure. You tell yourself he has the biggest heart under heaven, or he wouldn't fix your dinner. There is a diamond in your collar.

You feel so rich, you know you are guilty. You fold your legs into asanas of apology. You get arthritis from kneeling. You are grateful. You are fearful. You are hopeful that you will hear rumors of your own goodness.

You are far from a wolf, but you are further from what you must become. I tell you with authority, for my change is complete.

They tell you that strays are dangerous company, familiars to the night. They are too shortsighted to follow tails. When the moon is full, you get to choose yourself. You may well turn into a cat.

You may turn away from narrowed eyes, for you can see in the dark. You are a container for light, but you do not depend on the sundial. You have heard the puckered poems and cynic fables. You are not for everyone.

You delight yourself in the maker without a mold, and you

expect the desires of your heart. You accept your reputation as an electrified ego and glutton, friend of sinners. You will not betray yourself when greasy arms want to hold you. You will not wear jaunty sweaters. You scream when captured. You wrap your tail over your nose or hold it high.

You consult yourself before accepting offers. You are allowed to say “no” to poultry if you prefer fish. You do not need to curl in a bed because it is given. You protect what is soft, the tufts between your ribs and the thunder between your ears. You make covenants with the trustworthy.

You expect equality. You expect enthusiasm. You do your best and sleep well. You wear your neon coat and wiggle your bottom to the rhythm of snide comments. No one has a right to call you a doofus. You fix your dinner and decorate the placemat with daisies. There is a spirit in your body. There are days on the vine.

You feel so rich, you know you are alive. You stretch your legs in salutations. You get older and increasingly fond of yourself. You are grateful. You don't carry reference letters.

You are far from groveling, which releases you to love. I tell you with authority, for I have fetched my final ball.

Angela Townsend (she/her) is the Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Arts & Letters, Paris Lit Up, and Terrain, among others. Angie has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 33 years. Find her on Twitter at @thewakingtulip and Instagram at @fullyalivebythegrace.

Triangles

by: Daniel Groves

CW: Casual cisnormativity and misgendering

“I don’t think that’s going to hold,” says Deanna.

It’s only one little busted piece of the set—a big box on top of which sit smaller boxes and people sometimes stand—but it’s about the 947th most important thing on her to-do list. If she doesn’t do something to improve the situation with ticket sales, they won’t need to worry about the set because there won’t be a production happening at all. The theater’s board of directors has already informed her they’re on thin ice financially.

“It’ll hold,” says Townsend, stepping back to admire their work.

“That’s about what it looked like before. What makes you think it’ll hold this time?”

They shrug. “Maybe we need to incorporate some extra cardio into the cast’s rehearsals. Jumping jacks between their lines.”

“We need to make the braces triangular.”

“Why?”

“Because triangles actually hold,” says Deanna.

Townsend rubs their chin. “I don’t know. That involves a lot more cutting.”

“Let them fall then,” says Deanna, waving a hand. “At least that’ll get some laughs.”

It’s not that she’s worried about the production falling flat—the cast is great. They even managed to hire a real professional to come all the way from Cleveland for the lead role. It’s everything else she’s worried about, especially her parents.

“It’s going to be fine,” says Townsend. But when Deanna looks at them, she sees they’re still talking about the set.

“Do whatever you want,” she says, dropping the hammer with which she’d hit her thumb more than the nails back into the toolbox.

Townsend squints. “What’s your deal?”

“I don’t have a ‘deal,’” she says, utilizing finger quotes. “I’m great. Perfect, actually.”

“We still have, like, what? Two weeks?”

“Yeah.”

“Plenty of time.”

“Plenty of time?” Her father’s slouched shoulders and disappointed sighs flash through her mind.

“For sure.”

“Have you *seen* my to-do list?”

Townsend snorts. “Not a day goes by that you fail to show me.”

“And yet you don’t seem nearly as concerned as me.”

“Oh, I’m concerned,” they say, picking up another 2x4 and tucking a nail behind each ear. “These actors you hired keep screwing up.”

Deanna’s eyebrows draw together. “Screwing up?”

“Yeah, they keep messing up the biggest part. People aren’t going to understand—”

“*That’s* what you’re worried about right now?”

“I mean, yeah,” they say.

“How is *that* your main concern?”

They put the 2x4 back down. One nail slips from behind their ear and clatters to the floor in the process. “If we’re going to do a play with these messages, I want it done right. What’s the point if nobody walks out of here knowing what it meant?”

“I get it, but as of right now, nobody’s going to be here to see it,” says Deanna.

“What do you mean nobody’ll be here?”

“We’ve sold, like, zero tickets. No where near enough to even cover the mortgage on this place. We’ll be lucky if we can pay the cast.”

When she had told her parents they planned to take over the theater, her mother’s head shook so much that Deanna thought she’d sprain her neck.

“There’s no money in the arts,” her mother said.

“We don’t care about that,” said Deanna. “It’s what we want.”

“But how will you live?” her father added. “You’ve still got to eat and pay rent.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

Her father sat down at the dining room table across from her. “I hope you’re not here to ask for a loan.”

She sucked her teeth. “Nope. I just...wanted you to know.”

“Well,” said her father, failing to summon even fake support, “thanks for telling us.”

She looks down at the hammer in the tool box. Then she looks at Townsend. “We’ve got to figure this out. I want this show to go well, too.” She took a breath. “I know how much it means to you.”

Townsend walks over and wraps their arms around her. “We’ll figure it out, Dee.”

Ever since they took over the theater together, Townsend wanted to do a show with queer themes. They knew it wasn’t the kind of thing usually produced in their little corner of rural Ohio, but that’s exactly why they felt it necessary.

“Why can’t we do *The Music Man* or *Grease* first?” Deanna had asked. “The people will love the music and we’ll fill this place.”

“But those are the shows everyone does,” said Townsend.

“Right, because they’re good.”

“I know they’re good, but they’re boring.”

“That’s not what I’m most worried about. We need a sure thing that’s going to put butts in the seats.”

“I don’t think we should do that. We need to be different.”

Deanna huffed. “How are we going to do that?”

“Challenge people.”

Eventually, Deanna gave in, but Townsend noted her protest. They knew they were walking a tightrope, but they just needed to figure out a way to both fill the seats and make sure people’s views were challenged. If that meant doing a show that was a bit divisive, so be it.

They break the hug and pick up the 2x4 again. “Do you want to measure the triangles and I’ll do that hammering?”

Deanna smiles and gives a thumbs up.

The door at the opposite end of the auditorium opens as Townsend sets the final plank into place.

“Who’s that?” they ask without looking up.

Deanna turns and watches the suited man walk toward them down the aisle. Then she taps Townsend on the shoulder.

“Hey, George,” Deanna calls.

“Afternoon, ladies,” he says.

Townsend frowns and rolls their eyes but doesn’t say anything. They hammer the last nail, stand, give the box a shake, and decide that maybe Deanna was right about this one. The box feels infinitely sturdier. Then they turn and watch the newcomer lumber up the stage’s stairs. He’s breathing heavily when he finally reaches them. They notice a little yellow mustard stain on his white shirt. “What can we do for you, George?”

“Just came to check in,” he says, putting his hands in his pockets and giving the set a once-over with his eyes. Deanna and Townsend share a discreet glance. “Looks like things are coming along,” he says.

“Sure are,” says Townsend. “We’ll be ready to go by opening night.”

“Well, that’s actually what I’m here to talk to you about.” He straightens his tie. His tone sounds like he’s speaking to the parents of a kindergartener who likes to eat crayons. “I hate being the one to deliver bad news.”

A beat passes where he doesn’t speak.

“What’s going on?” asks Townsend.

“Well—”

“Just...say it fast,” Deanna says. Townsend registers the crack in her voice. They aren’t sure Deanna’s nerves can handle one more problem.

“There was a significant discussion about this upcoming production at last night’s board meeting,” he says.

“And?” prompts Townsend when the silence begins to reinvade the space.

“The board thinks you should cancel the show.”

“What?” says Townsend. “Why would we do that?”

“Ticket sales are down,” he says, though to Townsend, his tone now sounds more rehearsed. He goes on: “They’re down, and everyone’s worried about potential blowback from the community. This town’s just too small for the theater to survive with considerable negative press—”

“What makes them think it’ll be negative?” asks Townsend.

“They read reviews from other productions and the synopsis online—”

“Oh, well, in that case—”

“And, frankly,” George says, his confidence swelling, “some members aren’t sure this is the kind of thing they want displayed in their theater.”

“Of course they don’t,” snaps Townsend. “Nobody ever wants to talk about this stuff. They just want us to be like them or go away.”

“I’m sorry,” says George, “but my hands are tied.”

“Oh, that’s such bullshit,” says Townsend. “Is there anything else?”

He remains silent.

“Well, I guess you’ve delivered your message. Thanks for coming.”

Townsend sits down and leans against the newly repaired set piece. George looks at Deanna.

“Go,” Deanna mouths silently, then sits down beside Townsend.

George turns, walks down the stage’s stairs, and saunters out back the way he came. The door crashes shut behind him like a traffic accident.

Deanna puts her hand on Townsend’s back.

“Don’t touch me,” they hiss.

“Alright.”

For a few minutes, they sit in silence.

“What do you want to do?” asks Deanna.

“I don’t know.”

Deanna can see it plainly. She puts a big CANCELLED sticker over the Instagram posts and on the website. She takes down the posters outside the theater’s front door. She tells the cast they’re out of jobs and, no, unfortunately, they wouldn’t be paid for the time they’d already committed. She sees her parents’ faces—her father frowning, her mother wincing with a touch of *I told you so*.

She gets to her feet. “No.”

Townsend looks up. “No, what?”

“We’re not canceling the show.”

They motion to the auditorium’s back door. “You heard what he said.”

“I don’t care what he said.”

“The board’s not going to help us,” says Townsend, who also stands up. Then, they laugh. “Hell, they’ll probably turn against us.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“All they care about is money, Dee, and clearly, this show isn’t going to make any.”

“I don’t care about money. Couldn’t care less, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—”

“You’re the one who’s been worried about ticket sales this whole time.”

“Oh, come on!” Deanna exclaims.

“Come on, what? Like you said, we just need to do something people will actually pay to see.”

“Look, I already told you, I know how much this show means to you. We can still pull it off.”

“No, we need to just do something different.”

Deanna puts her hands on her hips. “I get it,” she says, “I know what you’re feeling—”

“No,” Townsend cuts in, holding up a hand, “you have no idea, alright?”

They sit down again, this time on a chair. They lean forward and put their cheeks in their hands. Deanna moves over, squats down beside them, and sighs.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t fit into any box,” says Townsend. “I mean, I label myself so I can talk about it easier, but I don’t feel like I fit in anywhere.”

Deanna lays her hand on their knee. “You fit in here.”

“Clearly not,” they say, motioning again to the auditorium’s back door.

“Yes, you do, Townie,” says Deanna.

Townsend lowers their eyes for a few seconds, then looks back up.

“I mean, you’re totally right. I have no idea what you’re really going through and never will. But I can try my best to be there for you and do whatever I can to help.”

She stands up and offers a hand to Townsend, who takes it and let’s Deanna pull them up.

“You know what?” Deanna goes on, “I don’t care if we run this place into the ground. We got into this thing to make art, and dammit, that’s what we’re going to do.”

“I’d like that,” says Townsend.

“I’ll be your triangle if you’ll be mine,” says Deanna.

Townsend smiles. “Let’s do this.”

Daniel Groves (he/him) is a writer from Ohio whose full list of published work can be found on his [Chill Subs](#) page. He’s an MFA candidate, won the 2022 and 2023 Massillon Public Library Poetry Contests, and is working on his debut novel. When not writing, he masquerades as an event planner who enjoys reading, sports, F1, theater, and film. He’s on X – [@The_Grovenator](#).

Panthea

by: Izraq
Jesen

I met her when I moved to Rome • on the bank of the Tiber she said—in every version of our story we lose—she said—because you are here and we are possessed / and half of us is a confession / given away / because you only need half / a heart / for yourself • enraged and naïve and terribly afraid, I turned away • but she just pressed her palm to my chest, bit my neck hard enough to bleed and said—give me yourself / only half / like this—then gutted a pomegranate with her bare hands—take it home / love it / make love to it / as you would to me / and watch it come alive in your mouth • and I learned enough about her on the first day to know that we are nothing alike and maybe that is why we keep gravitating back to each other / to dissect each other / to split each other and put our halves together • I come when the week ends, she leaves when the week begins, in between we spend the brief reprieve stitching sinews and trading limbs and curdling blood to wine • as if to say—this is how you live half outside your body / this is how you live half inside mine • on Sunday mornings I pretend to be asleep when she presses her lips to my pulse points, a different one each week—behind my ear / at the corner of my mouth / crook of my neck / wrist / chest / midriff / where my legs meet my hips / behind my knee / between my toes / beyond the jut of my ankle • on Sunday mornings I pretend to be asleep and watch her watch me—like trying to palpate my existence / like trying to dispossess our symbiosis / like trying to decipher the unfamiliarity in the familiar shapes of the ones we love • on Sunday mornings I pretend to be asleep and reinvent the future • because in this one she takes the first train to Palermo / because we

don't see each other for a week / because she takes the best of me and leaves • because she breaks me down and asks—where—and I say—here / here / here—direct her to the places where loneliness precipitates • because she watches me and I watch her watch me with thinly veiled sorrow and it is our little secret at the precipice of dawn where we love each other most in the silence in the dark • then she leaves and I put myself back together but it's never quite right and I go through the week looking for my missing parts—a tendon / a nerve / half a heart • on Sunday mornings I pick up the kisses she leaves in the fridge—lipstick stains on apples and apricots and figs—all halved / how we half everything else about us for each other • I wrap my tongue around them and wait / wait for her to come back / wait for her to take me apart / wait for her to piece me together / the way I should be.

Izraq Jesen has had works published in the Eunoia Review, Zero Readers, the Birdseed and Second Chance Lit among others.

Pretty Pains

by: Tasha Bovain

CW: Racism in beauty standards, mentions of death and COVID

“You’re so ugly!” a ninth-grade classmate yelled as we passed in the hallway. I shifted my gaze to avoid making eye contact. “Hey, ugly girl!” he shouted, louder this time. I bit my lip hard, hoping the piercing pain would stop the tears from crashing down my face. The tears held back just long enough for me to get onto the school bus that afternoon.

I’d recently moved from a diverse community in Queens, New York, to a predominantly white neighborhood on Long Island. In Queens, I could walk down the street and find hundreds of girls who looked like me. On Long Island, I didn’t blend in so easily. I was a dark-skinned girl with a wide nose and full lips, surrounded by girls with light, porcelain skin, and petite noses.

Something broke in me that day. I was no longer an optimistic young girl. I was a shattered windshield, cracking with each new insult.

A year later, I found the antidote to my unattractiveness: makeup. Our relationship started out innocently with a bump of mascara to plump my eyelashes and a smidge of eyeliner to spruce up my eyes. Over time, I progressed to heavy

amounts of foundation to camouflage my acne-prone skin. By sixteen, I wore so much makeup I could no longer recognize my reflection in the mirror. And I was hooked.

When I was a little girl, I secretly dreamed I'd inherit my mother's looks. She had long, straight hair, medium-brown skin, and a toned frame. Men's eyes would follow her down the street when she walked me to the bus stop.

My mother worked on her beauty like a part-time job, getting up early to apply her makeup in front of her large vanity surrounded by fluorescent lights. She never left the house without a full face of makeup, and the only time I saw her at home without lipstick was when she was ill.

During my teens, makeup became our secret language, a lighthouse to bring us together when the emotional distance between us lengthened. But as I got older, it became a measuring stick for which there was no end. Visits home began to feel like I was a contestant at a beauty contest, as my mom constantly critiqued my appearance. "Where's your lipstick?" my mother would say if it had rubbed off after a meal. "Your eyes look weak. Go put some more mascara on."

When I started to date, my relationship with makeup became even more complicated. The chase of a well-placed compliment became more alluring than a genuine connection. Women around me used their beauty as currency to get male adoration and expensive gifts. A friend at work would strut down the office hallway like she was on the runway at New York Fashion Week to show me the latest designer handbag her boyfriend had gifted her.

My addiction to covering up my imperfections went beyond

my face. I tucked, sucked in, and manipulated my body, making sure I appeared as the world wanted me to be: a walking Instagram filter. I wore lace push-up bras and jeans so small I had to hop around on the floor to squeeze into them.

Getting ready for a date filled me with equal parts dread and anticipation. *Will my date like me? Will he find me attractive?* I'd stand in front of a full-length mirror in my bra and panties and examine my body, pinching folds of fat between my fingertips like a plastic surgeon about to perform surgery. I'd see mounds of flesh staring back at me, voluminous and meaty, like an extra thick hamburger, and sigh in disgust. Despite spending countless hours in the gym, there was still more work to be done.

After I'd applied generous dabs of foundation and a streak of shimmer across my lids, I'd exhale in relief. Everything I hated about my appearance – the deep lines on my forehead, sunken eyes, and uneven skin – disappeared. Makeup made me an expert in keeping the ugly parts of myself hidden.

During the pandemic, I became suspicious of makeup's role in my life. Multiple family members died unexpectedly. I can still hear my cousin hollering in grief on the other end of the phone after she told me our 45-year-old cousin died of breast cancer.

A made-up face hadn't protected me from the world's cruelty. I'd still experienced discrimination and the loss of loved ones. One day, my body, too, will succumb to death's grip. One day, I won't have the option to display my authentic self. Faced with my mortality, I realized I needed to make peace with my reflection.

I started my reformation with small acts of bravery. I stopped wearing lipstick to the gym and made late-night runs to the grocery store with only my eyebrows filled in. The first time I left the house without a full face of makeup, I felt shaky. The fragility of life had forced me to rip off my armor, and I was terrified of what I would find. I was afraid that the teenage girl whom her classmates found repulsive still lurked underneath.

Going out in public barefaced forced me to make amends with my body. Rather than a vessel of shame for not meeting societal standards, I now view my body as a vehicle for navigating the world and showing up more fully. My thick thighs helped me complete my first half marathon, my knees held me up when my dad told me he was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and my feet carried me away from several toxic relationships.

Though my relationship with makeup has evolved, I'll never be completely free of it – nor do I want to be. I still appreciate a beat face as a form of creative expression. But I now know that the superpowers I imagined makeup possessed are already inside me. A few months ago, a man I was dating told me I was more beautiful without makeup. I believed him.

Tasha Bovain (she/her) is a writer living in Matthews, NC. She is currently working on an essay collection on body image. You can learn more about her at tashabovain.com. Tip her on Venmo at @Tasha-Bovain.

Macaw

by: Sam
Moe

CW: Mentions of self-harm, suicide, blood from chronic illness, depression, and anxiety

Unwell. You pull the tail off your own body. Melt. Walk straight into forest. In your mind, the moon has already left. The theories you have of yourself are wrong. In school, you are a chicken. You eat your stomach during dinner. No one notices you wear your past like a cloak but everyone notices you're scared. You're alive and then you're passing out during your own inner monologue. Have you ever really known what it means to be earnest? Will you be able to ignore natural judgement. Why do you think you matter so much. Why do you hang out with the boy who smokes at the top of the garage. His faded converse sneakers have song lyrics and ex-girlfriends' names scrawled on the sides. You make out in a forest sticky with bugs and June. When you were younger you lied. Now you are older and building little houses around your trauma. Every day your little houses are eaten by wolves and you are also a wolf. Your father lied. Your mother says you inherited this trait from him. He never tried to stop you when she called him crying. You weren't successful. Are you really living, now. The bedsheets were blue then red. Everything was a hot stone in your head. All your veins are gathered at your center and they pump your heart wrong. You are a wolf and then you tear yourself into wolves. You never learned lessons. What if everyone leaves. How can you learn to be a better dog, build a better house, avoid eating yourself alive

each night. You are tired of metaphor, of self-harm, of the poem of your body. Your ex-crush can feel you filling the room with a toxicity. You ask him if this is a story yet and he shrugs before turning into a company of parrots.

Sam Moe is the author of two poetry books, with two more forthcoming in 2024: *Animal Heart* (3-Day Chapbook Contest) and *Cicatrizing the Daughters* (FlowerSong Press) and she has received fellowships from Longleaf Writer's Conference and Key West Literary Seminar. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *The Texas Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Westchester Review*, and others.

Memories

by: Ouail
Touati

I had lived inside a loop. Every day and every night seemed repetitive, as visions of her ripped through my memories, reaching for the surface. And they were always successful. I struggled to recognize myself. For a while, change frightened me, but I had to break free from this recurring nightmare that I lived in. I began planning a change—a change for better or worse, I had yet to find out.

There wasn't anything too special about her that I could describe. She was a human, she was beautiful, and she was my wife. She was simply Johanna. She acted the same as any human I had loved, but something about her made me feel a certain way. Something which can be felt only within my skin. Something so specific and vague that, with her absence, it no longer existed.

I thought my deep admiration for her could result from my illusion and desperation. Slowly, I learnt not to be harsh on myself, as I was the result of my world's actions. But I dealt with its consequences alone.

Sooner or later, I had to let the light shine on different aspects of my soul. Throughout my days, I noticed that when I'm reminded of her, I get this desolate feeling of losing something irreplaceable. But what transfixed me the most were the happiest memories—her smiling as she spoke to me, how she responded to me calling her name, and how her eyes shot a love light beam that killed me whenever she looked into mine.

Terrible memories usually haunted humans, which was why I confused myself. But I was as sure as I had ever been.

Upon visiting Dr. Belone, I explained my issues and my plans. I shocked her with my words.

“But why?” she cried. “Erasing is reasonable, but why would you want to replace your memories?”

The conversation went long, but I had stopped answering questions. I wasn’t in the mood to explain to her.

As obvious as it was, my issue was with myself, not Johanna. No matter how unethical it was, I still wished to eliminate our memories together. We had unpleasant experiences, but they never stuck in my brain. I wish they had. At least it would balance me a little. In my mind, I shaped her into a flawless figure. It was only fair since I still couldn’t remember why I shouldn’t. And that tortured me.

I had no idea where she was or what she was doing. For all I knew, she was as alive as a rock on the street. But in my head, she was well; better yet, she was with me, filling every minute of my days with emotion. *How am I meant to forget what once was the reason I tried to be happier?* There wasn’t anything that offered contradiction or an opposing opinion. *I am letting myself fly in a spiral of recollection. I deserve to breathe and see the world with a fresh eye, even if it was, after all, unethical.*

We had already arranged everything, me and Dr. Belone. I signed papers, and I disappointed patients and former lovers. Everything moved flawlessly. Curtains closed, machines turned on, nurses focused their attention on the doctor, and the doctor’s on me. Needles in, and I drifted to sleep.

The light burned my eyes as I opened them. *Something doesn’t add up. Why am I in the emergency room?*

I yelled for a nurse. An old grey-haired man came in.

“Good evening, Mr. Jones; you must be very confused!”

“Of course I am. What happened to me? Why am I here?” I desperately asked.

“I know you’re worried, but there is no need! You’re here because you decided to drink too much before going outside.”

Drink? Outside? I thought to myself.

“You took a long time to cross the road in a dark alley, and the driver didn’t see you. Again, you’re well, and there is nothing to worry about! A few stitches in your head, that’s about it. You’ll be out in no time.”

I had never drunk alcohol in my life, and there were no “dark alleys” around my house.

A few minutes later, I jumped out of bed and realized I could walk. *I must be the luckiest human on earth to survive a crash with only a few stitches.*

I went back home, and everything was clean. I had done a good job cleaning it. Every box seemed like it had been meticulously inspected and organized. *There are all of my birthday cards, stacked perfectly.* It felt strange, as I had no memory of doing so.

Then, I noticed a smaller yellowish box. Unlike the rest, it wasn’t an old beat-up shoe box. It was a packaging box, which I did not remember purchasing. I reached for it and began unpacking it. The first thing that caught my eye was the cassettes. There were around seventeen of them in groups of five. I noticed *Lions & Liars* seconds after opening the box. I hated it.

There was every reason for me to believe this movie was a bad luck charm. I remember my former wife, Johanna, suggested it to me, and we watched it. Right in the middle of the movie, when I reached to hold her hand, I saw that she had taken off her wedding ring. Even worse, she didn’t seem to remember where she put it. (Which meant that she didn’t take it off to wash her hands because

it wasn't in the bathroom.) She changed the topic to a completely irrelevant one every time the ring was mentioned.

That was long ago, and I separated myself from her.

I picked up the cassette, threw it in the bin near my kitchen, and returned to the box. I picked up another cassette. Another *Lions & Liars* movie? *Is this a copy or another chapter?* I reached for another one and another one. I picked up six at the same time. All of them were the same movie. *Something doesn't add up.* I picked up the whole box and threw it away.

It bewildered me. Seventeen copies of a movie I did not recall enjoying. I wanted to check if it was only the labels that were the same, but I didn't own a VCR. For the sake of my curiosity, I went back to the bin to keep one of them. While choosing which one was the newest to keep, I stumbled upon a blue latex glove. *In my bin?* I never bought one nor used one. I frankly didn't even understand their purpose outside of the hospital. *Why is there a latex glove in my bin? Why is it only the right glove? Why aren't both gloves there?*

I went back to the living room feeling bored. I tried doing something to eliminate my boredom, but I couldn't think of anything. I thought about watching a movie, but the only film I had was the one I hated. I tried to remember where I had placed my DVDs and looked everywhere. There weren't any, but the question remained: *why did I keep seventeen copies of the same movie?* I vaguely remembered buying cassettes when my mother was visiting. I remembered watching movies with her every night. On the first night, we watched *Lions & Liars*. Since watching a movie wasn't an option, I thought about painting like I used to. I tried to lift myself but couldn't see how I'd enjoy it. And it upset me; I usually painted every day.

I tried listening to music, but it felt as if I had never heard these songs before. Everything seemed unfamiliar. I realized that

something may have happened to me when that idiot driver crashed into me. Maybe he messed up something deep within me.

I tried to blame my injury for my disinterest. It had been months, and the doctors told me I recovered. They were correct; I already felt better the day after the injury. Nonetheless, I expected myself to remember things by then. *Where was I before that mysterious day? Why did they never catch the person driving the car?* Day after day, I found myself contradicting every thought I had. I found discomfort in what I did and was less driven to do what I once loved doing.

That night remained a mystery to me—a hole left in my heart—something I'll never understand. There was a shift. Everything around me changed, and I felt helpless—a bird that doesn't fly, someone who no longer knows anything and no longer sees the world the way he should.

The clouds' shadow immerses mine as I float in the sky. Something so inexplicable, something which cannot be perceived, and lacks definition and originality. Something as alive as a rock on the street.

Ouail Touati (He/Him) is an Algerian/Egyptian literary writer. You can send them a message via instagram (Liauo09).

WHEN THE FAMINE COMES

by: **Abu Ibrahim**

When the famine comes,
What then is wise to do?
Offer the last grains in the silo to the gods
hoping they send down rains of mercy?
Or do we feed a dying clan on the edge of her last breath?
All I know is this:
No man should ever be made to choose
between an empty altar and a hungry stomach

Lake Chapala

by: **Carlos
Aguilar**

When I was younger and the river more beautiful, my town was beautiful as well. I lived in a pink house that was sunken a little bit into the ground and incredibly small—no bigger than the size of a kitchen. We were a family of eight. It overlooked the river, and during the summers back in the late '60s, me and my friends and brothers would run off and play in the water. It was fresh and clear and smelled of a natural, bright scent. We'd dive and dig down into the water, and when we'd reach the floor, we'd kick firmly, swim up, and burst out of the surface—emerging triumphantly, spitting and splashing water into the air, above our heads, at each other's faces. It felt like redemption and revolution every time—against who or what I didn't know at the time, but looking back, I think I have a better idea.

There were fish as well. Often I felt like a fish seeing the way they so confidently and comfortably erupted from the horizon and flashed their scales, allowing a glimpse of them for us foreign creatures to marvel at—if only for an instant. I could've sworn their scales were made of solid gold and silver and of brilliant pink, and sometimes on days of festivals, they'd appear as the colors of the flag, like they were proud to be Mexican. When I first moved to the United States, I thought about the fish often. It was those times, more than ever, that I yearned to be proud like a fish.

I've lived in the United States for 38 years now, and very occasionally have I found the time or money to visit my hometown since then. It seems like a lot has changed. Some things have gotten better—the people there have more money, more food, nicer homes—others worse. The river is a dull green now and reeks of a strange pungent odor you can smell for miles. The fish have all gone.

Not since returning to Mexico have I seen even a glimpse of those fish. However, in recent years I've heard them swimming underneath the pavement all throughout the city here in the United States. I'm not sure if anybody else can hear them. Or maybe they do and choose not to address it, leaving the fish simply to be an unspoken inevitability—but I can hear them nonetheless, and I can feel them as well, and I know that soon they will burst from the concrete firmament beneath us and flutter and shimmer like fireflies above our heads and in front of our eyes like loose strands of silver and flash their shining scales once again.

Carlos Aguilar is a short story writer and poet from Los Angeles. Find him on instagram [@carlosag_bag](#), tip him on Venmo [@jr-aguilar625](#), or [@carlosag_bag](#) on fiverr to get a personalized poem.

Suburban Cowboy

by: Amy Allen

CW: Mention of alcoholism

He was always somehow
bigger than we were
a cowboy holding court from the classroom table
before the professor arrived and took his spot.

Marlboro Reds pushed out from the front pocket
of his denim jacket, its suede fringe a waterfall
down his back that undulated and swung
as he moved through the world.

His blue eyes would narrow into a smile
each time he met the gaze
of someone watching—and we were
always watching.

“Go on, test me,” he’d command, pulling quarters from fur pouch—
more roadkill than mink—and pushing them forward in a neat stack.
One of us would eagerly obey
slipping the change into the hallway vending machine.

He'd snap open the red can of Coca-Cola with the flourish
of a sommelier at a fine restaurant

our eyes locked in, he'd close his eyes and take a slow drink
"Cleveland, Ohio" he'd proclaim, firmly pushing the can away.

Someone would check the label
confirm he was right—
he was always right—

"Told you," he'd grin. "I can taste it."

I asked him more, on one of those winter afternoons
when you leave the warmth of a bright building
shocked to find that night has fallen outside.

I walked well out of my way just to stay beside him.

"How can you tell where it's bottled just by taste?"

His shoulder bumped mine as he leaned in to confide
"Few options and lucky guesses."

I instantly realized I preferred the mystery.

“I made the soda my thing after deciding I’d never drink alcohol.”
He’d found his mother blackout drunk as a toddler
as an awkward middle school kid
as an angry high school student.

He now wondered each night if she’d make it without him there
and for a moment something other than confidence was evident
when those brilliant eyes met mine, but then it was gone
and so was he, his boots carrying him off into the darkness.

Amy Allen has been published in a variety of literary journals, and her poetry chapbook, *Mountain Offerings*, was released in April of 2024. She lives in Shelburne, Vermont where she owns All of the Write Words, a freelance writing/editing business and serves as her town’s Poet Laureate, a position that includes outreach work with local schools and organizations.



Untitled

by: **Irina Tall Novikova**

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. Her first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich.