

the
b'k
bitchin' kitsch



Vol. 16 Issue 1

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Edited by

Chris Talbot

About the Cover

“Slow Stitch Self Portrait Told in Five Hormonal Parts,” a mixed media piece by Chris Talbot.

The piece is a five panel comic strip. In the first, there’s a photograph of the artist as a baby in a pink mesh bag. In the second is a slow drip in brown, rust, and red. Next to that are rows of dots mimicking Estrogen. In the third is a photograph of the artist crying. In the fourth is a photo of the artist’s chest after top surgery and the prescription for Testosterone. In the fifth is the artist, masculinized.

Chris (they/them) is a queer, trans nonbinary, mixed-race artist, educomics creator, and nonprofit laborer trying to build spaces ready to celebrate when they turn up authentically.



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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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The Warm-Dark-Small

by: **Sophie Najm**

CW: Implied death, spiders, bugs

Tapinoma sessile

A line of tickled flesh on her arm jolts her awake. Her hand moves with precision, squishing the ant between grooved fingernails.

“Yi!” A sharp sound of annoyance at wrinkled skin streaked black. Francine pulls herself from the left side of the bed with a great exhale, hobbling to the closet and swinging on a silk morning robe with sewed-off pockets.

The bathroom tile is cold, but she’d given up slippers a long time ago. Anything warm-dark-small is prime for invasion. She runs a finger over the bristles of her toothbrush before wetting it. As she brings it to her mouth, an ant peeks out from a crack where plaster meets counter. It’s bigger than the others, and its antennae twirl around with vibrant curiosity. It takes one look at her and scurries back in.

She passes Catherine’s old room and the other one, creaking with the stairs as she descends. As she flicks on lights, dark dots retreat to dark places.

Rose-vinyl tile decorates the kitchen floor, slightly yellow with wear. A few poke out with sharp edges, but her skin has long hardened against it. She rubs the dust from her eyes and spots a long crack on the ceiling leading to the pantry—no, a line. With a click of her tongue she whips the door open. Swirls of legs covered every item, clustering around jar lids

and box seams, crawling above and below shelves, carrying crystalline sugar into unseen holes, and dripping from the ceiling like dew drops.

“What did I tell you about sugar so early in the morning?” she snaps, pulling out a broom from the black depths and shaking off the aggressors. She bats it around the shelves until the ants rain onto the floor, running into cracks and crannies. The curious ant from the bathroom lingers behind, hesitant to leave a box of ice cream cones.

Can I have one? Just a crumb? it asks.

“No. Shoo before I squish you,” she sweeps threateningly.

Pleeeease. Just one?

She clicks her tongue and she’s thirty two again and Ramsy is six and he’s standing on the shelves, reaching for the very top where the ice cream cones are, but he’s teetering as he peers across the wallpapered wood so high up, a view he’s never seen, and an ant crawls along his little fingers and he’s kind to it, guiding it back to its nooked home and breaking off a crumb of his cone as a *thank you for being here! thank you for being my friend!*

She knows it was an accident (as all things are), and she knows this is just an ant, and patterns are cruel and coincidental, but her hands are gentle as they peel open the box of ice cream cones—just a crack.

Apis mellifera

The house is not much older than her, and she remembers the day she bought it with Elias. They dreamed for a long time before closing, imagining weddings under grape vines and Christmas parties over mini bars. The biggest sell was the patio and garden that wrapped around each edge of the house. It fell off into a steep slope blanketed in vines and

thistle, one she immediately fenced off. When Catherine walked too close, she yelled at her loud enough for the neighbor's dog to bark. On the left side of the house were small garden plots where she planted mint, oregano, basil, tomatoes, rosemary, garlic, and thyme. They planted apricot, kumquat, lemon, and fig trees when they settled in, wanting the branches to grow with the kids.

Fifty years later, the house is infested and the lemon tree is the last one standing, still producing fruit with a housewife's efficiency.

When Francine steps barefoot onto stiff grass to harvest, she sees what looks like a spotted snake weighing down one of its branches. Instead of a hiss, it emits a loud buzzing that rattles her ears. She brandishes a basket-ended pole and approaches slowly. As it comes into clarity, she realizes it's not a snake, but rather a massive cluster of bees. They crawl over each other, moving like a beating heart.

She swings her hand at the bees that fly too close. They allow her to approach, wiggling their bodies in greeting. When she gets close enough, they start to crawl over each other until they shape into her father's head.

Ya, Franci, the bee-mouth moves. Where are they?

"Who, Baba?" she replies, ten years old.

Eh? Ah. it buzzes.

Her father was a beekeeper in Baalbek. Despite working with African bees, the most aggressive species, he never wore a suit. The bees let him scoop them up bare handed, wiggling between his fingers and spitting honey on his palms. They liked her much less.

Tell Selma to put out sugar water, he instructs.

Ah, she's nine then, and Selma is alive and in her room, whispering French poetry to a make-believe prince, and Francine's heart is light.

"Okay, *Baba*."

Her father starts to hack—the bees move to make him take in a great gasp. He spits out the queen bee onto Francine's neck. With a great rear, it stings her and falls, dead.

Euborellia annulipes

She remembers when her granddaughters were small and begged for "sleepovers at *Teta's*," filled with nightly water glasses and morning omelettes. One night, after her youngest tucked into the king-sized bed with her, Francine prophesied: "When you grow older, you won't want to sleepover at *Teta's* house anymore." Francine brushed back Violette's soft curls and pulled the lace comforter up to her nose, burying her into the barely-used pillow to forever be small and loving and kind, not a girl quite yet, but a granddaughter in antiquity. As she slept, she dreamed of tiny sap-soaked fingers reaching for fig branches, sticky cheeks begging for apricot sandwiches, dancing feet on rose-vinyl tile, glittering eyes pointed at gold-cherub mantles, unpracticed Arabic on twisting tongues, knotted curls under crying brushes, whole-bodied hugs, and the simple "No, *Teta*, never!"

It was such a wonderful lie that she let it linger beyond her dreams.

Now at least twice a week, the house needed to be emptied and Raid'ed. Shelves, drawers, cabinets, and closets were scrutinized for pinching aggressors. She removed every box, jar, and bag, crushing their bodies between her fingers until the pads were streaked black.

It was an endless war—and she was quickly losing. It was

only in the past five years—since Violette stopped sleeping over—did the bug issue grow dire. They crawled between the wrinkles of her body. They tickled her ears and danced between her toes. If she slept without shaking out her pillow, she'd wake up with unwelcome roommates.

Violette refused to visit, most terrified of the earwigs. Their long bodies squirmed unnaturally and their pincers clicked at every obstacle. They moved faster than the others, crafty in their escapes. Not even promises of fresh dough or sugar cubes can keep them still.

“Ya'allah, slow down, I can't keep up,” Francine pants as one races down the stairwell.

It doesn't stop, turning the corner before she can scoop it up and keep it forever. All she can do is watch as it races, faster and faster, farther and further, until it's beyond where her legs can reach.

Pholcus phalangioides

It's harder to stand now. She tends to only hear buzzing, and her throat can only cough out Arabic. The insects have taken hold completely without her whacking.

Psst, Franci! A whisper from the rafters.

Moonlight reflects over silver thread. Within an intricate web, a spider postures with its front legs wiggling in the air.

Look what I made!

Squinting, she can barely make out the Arabic swirling between the silk. It's the Lord's Prayer, same as the dish that used to hang in their kitchen.

“Selma, it's the middle of the night.”

Let's stay up like we used to!

The spider dangles down from its web, lowering onto the pillow next to Francine.

“You’ll just read again.”

No, we can play!

Francine’s chest sinks. She musters the strength to move the little spider onto her finger.

“I don’t want to play anymore.”

The spider stills. It lowers itself, curling its legs tightly to its body.

You’ve punished yourself ever since it whispers sadly. *Let me tuck you in.* It crawls over Francine’s hand, webbing her fingers together with gentle thread. It sticks to her like that forever guilt of midnight games, crumbling slopes, and fateful falls.

Francine doesn’t respond, letting the spider entomb her. It threads her hands, then her arms. It moves down her torso and onto her veiny legs, tying together her feet and pointing them east. Finally it makes its way back to her head, going through her ear and wrapping around her mind. She closes her eyes and lets it weave, weave, weave, until only a beautiful blanket remains to keep her warm-dark-small.

Sophie Najm (she/her) is a Lebanese-American author from the San Fernando Valley. She’s currently a UC Santa Barbara undergraduate for Writing & Literature with a focus in screenwriting. You can find her agonizing over Arabian Nights adaptations, perusing the earring rack at Hot Topic, or at her website sophienajm.com.

Moose Antlers

by: **Jen Persici**

There's something holy in meeting him

He has my sister's eyes, he has my brother's smile

And for awhile we say nothing at all and just study one another

The mother of his father is the mother of my father

He has sharp eyes, puzzling, studying, piecing me together

As I piece him together

Who will figure the other out first

He laughs as says, "Being Native is a blessing and a curse."

He holds himself like a stone, something hardened by time but softened by water

He nods when I introduce myself like, "I am my mother's savage daughter."

He carries with him food of our people, feeding me, wiping his fish oiled hands on his

pants before passing me an Eagle feather.

"Our people" he said, "are the only ones who can truly taste the change in weather."

The moose antlers behind him frame him let a set of wings untrimmed

Does he know I'd fly into the sky and blot out the stars for him?

Does he know because he carries the same light inside that I keep?

We do not fear the dark when the light shines from inside- most deep.

Jen Persici is a Gwich'in Athabaskan poet living in the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington. Find them on instagram at @jenpersici or on tiktok at @persiciwrites

Djembe

by: Regine
Jackson

When your spunk
has grown like wild sassafras,
That's when you know you've made it

When your words drip
from your lips like honey,
But bite like a carolina reaper
That's when you know you've found your voice

Dancing to your own drum is a learned practice,
and I pray that one day
You have your own jubilee

Gyrate with the freedom of your audacity

Previously published by Gnashing Teeth Publishing.

Regine Jackson (she/her) is a writer in Springfield, Massachusetts. While Jackson mainly writes short stories within the science fiction, horror, and fantasy genres, she also writes poetry and prose about life in an inner-city. Jackson hopes to not only hone her own craft but to bring more creative work to her inner city. Find more information at reginejackson.com.

River Crossings

by: Jay Castello

CW: Afterlife imagery, implied death

The woman walked. She walked for days, maybe weeks. There was no way to mark the time, or rather, there was no time to be marked. The sun floated pink just above the horizon; perpetual sunrise or endless sunset.

(If she had turned, she would have seen the moon, near full, patiently motionless behind her, and known the sun was hesitating on its way down. But she never looked back.)

She didn't know where she was going, exactly, but she knew she was going in the right direction. She didn't stop to think about how she knew this. She didn't stop to think about much at all. She walked across a grassland that stretched as far as she could see and that brushed against her ankles for perhaps several static months.

She heard the voices before she saw the people, and she saw the people before she saw the river. There were dozens of them. Hundreds, maybe. The woman didn't stop to count. She eased herself through the crowd until she reached the river's bank, her feet sinking in the soft mud, water running over her toes.

Her destination was on the other side of the river, but for the first time since she had set off, she paused.

"Hello," she said to an old man sitting on an old tree stump, who looked for all the world as if he had been sitting on that

same tree stump since the world was young.

“Hello, love.”

“What’s going on?”

“Boat never showed,” the man said.

To her left, a pier. Old, pitted wood caressed by weeds. Rope coiled, waiting. People sitting, talking, looking into the water below. But no boat.

The woman couldn’t see the far bank; it might as well have been an ocean or a vast lake. But she knew it was a river, and that she had to get to the other side.

“How long have you been waiting?” she asked the man.

The man looked at the unchanging sky. “Hours,” he said.
“Hours.”

“He’s been here longer than me,” said a voice from behind them. The woman turned to see two identical crones hunched over a game of cards. The faces kept changing: first eight of hearts, now ten of clubs, now ace of spades.

“How long have you been here?”

“Years,” said the crone on the left.

“Forever, maybe,” said the crone on the right.

The woman with her feet in the water said nothing for a while. Then she turned back to the man.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Don’t rightly know,” said the man. “Don’t remember what came before. No one does.”

There was a murmur of agreement among those in the crowd close enough to hear. The woman thought to herself and found that he was right. She couldn't remember what name she had had before, or anything else that she had left behind. But she remembered one thing.

"Well, I need to get across the river," she said.

"We all do," said one of the women playing cards. "But what can we do except wait for the boat?"

Her companion set down the four of spades. The woman who had spoken laid Temperance crossways over the top of it.

The woman with her feet in the water waited, but not for long.

She started slowly at first. One step and then another. The water covered her ankles. Then more steps: calves, knees, thighs. It wasn't cold or warm. There was a current flowing from her left to her right side, but it wasn't strong. She kept going. Hips, waist, and then she bent and pushed herself forward, arms-shoulders-head as she started to swim.

When the woman had been walking, she had not been aware of her body. But she felt the swim. Her fingers pruned. Her arms began to ache. Her neck craned to keep her head out of the water, and eventually she gave in, letting it wash over her face.

As she swam, it began to get dark. She flipped onto her back and began to kick, resting her muscles. She could no longer see the place she had come from. There was only water, in every direction except for up. Up: the moon, now mirroring her progress across the river.

By the time she could see the rabbit craters in front of her, she was trembling with fatigue. She kept swimming. She

kept swimming, and kept swimming, until it was sinking into the bank in front of her, and then it was gone and she was scrambling out onto land as the sky began to lighten behind her.

The old man was sitting on a tree stump. He was alone here.

“Hello,” said the woman.

“Hello, love,” said the old man. “You made it.”

The meadows beyond the old man were glittering with morning dew. “What is this place?” the woman asked.

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” the old man said. “What would you like?”

“I’d like a boat,” said the woman.

The old man smiled softly. “This place is for those who swim.”

But the woman turned, and on the shore there was a rowboat, squat and bobbing in the water.

“Well,” said the old man, not without a chagrined humour. “Suppose I can’t argue with that.”

The woman stretched her arms and felt the sunrise on her face. Then she climbed into the boat and began to row.

*

The woman rowed the river dozens, then thousands, and then countless times. Each time, she took one person across with her.

Sometimes they tried to give her things: silver coins, shiny trinkets, morsels of food. The woman politely refused. She rowed. After a while, things began appearing in her boat of their own accord. Small statues, clutches of herbs, gemstones

in every colour. These she tucked around the boat for cheer, temporarily. After a few trips she would give them back to the river.

The woman took her payment in stories. Accidentally, at first. People began to remember things as she rowed them across the water and they liked to talk. But the woman found that she liked to listen, and so as the moon passed overhead again and again she heard about lives that had been lived. She heard about bright, shining moments, and the people who shared them. She heard about struggles and victories and defeats, tribulations, loss, and heartbreak.

And love. She heard about love most of all.

When she reached the sunrise bank, her passenger would depart into the meadow, and the old man would greet her only when they had left.

“Is there anything you’d like today?” he would ask.

“Another story,” said the woman, and she would row back to the sunset bank.

At the sunset bank, the old man would say nothing, unless someone offered for him to get on the boat next. Then he would shake his head and smile and say that he was waiting his turn.

Occasionally, the woman’s passengers were silent. She didn’t push them. She listened to the sound of the boat through the water instead, telling its own story.

She thought that Erminia was one of those passengers, until, with a sudden, shining grin, she asked the woman her name.

“Well, I don’t know,” the woman said. “I don’t remember.”

“Me neither,” said the other woman, “but I think I’d like to be called Erminia.”

“Erminia,” said the woman. “It suits you.”

Erminia grinned again. “So? What about you?”

“Carrie.” She didn’t know where it had come from, but it seemed it had always been there, just waiting for Erminia to ask.

“Nice to meet you, Carrie,” said Erminia. “How did you come to be rowing this boat?”

And so Carrie told Erminia her own story. Walking, swimming, and then rowing. The old man, her passengers, and the gifts.

“Wow.” Erminia picked up a coin from the prow of the ship and tossed it once. Heads. “We should build a bridge,” she said. “That way you wouldn’t have to row all the time.”

All of a sudden Carrie felt the exhaustion in her arms and the callouses on her hands.

“I don’t know how to build a bridge,” she said.

“Neither do I,” said Erminia, “but someone will.”

When Carrie dropped Erminia off at the sunrise bank, she did not immediately begin rowing back. It was the first time she had waited for anything other than the old man’s question. But he didn’t ask her this time, occupied as he was with Erminia. She spoke quietly, but her waving hands were animated and quick. The old man listened with the same patient amusement he always had.

Erminia returned to the boat, hands now still on her hips.

“Wishing for a bridge didn’t work,” she said.

“The river isn’t a part of this place,” said Carrie.

“But we could wish for materials,” said Erminia. “Or, an engineer could. Someone who knows how to build a bridge. I’m sure we’ll meet one eventually.”

Neither of them had suggested it, but they both knew that Erminia would begin to accompany Carrie. She sat on the prow while Carrie rowed, and the boat seemed to skim the water easier, as if propelled by a warm wind.

There was no engineer for some time, but the trips were different with Erminia. She was good at asking questions that made the stories richer. Carrie rowed easier and listened better. Sometimes they told people about their plans for the bridge. Sometimes those people agreed to help. Soon, a crowd began to form on the sunrise bank, waiting.

Finally, they met Deedee. Like Erminia, she laughed loud and often. She was a friendly teacher and an ingenious problem-solver rolled into one. She sang songs while the assembled crowd moved wood and hammered nails. They caught on.

For the first time in forever, Carrie stopped rowing. She lifted planks and assembled struts and sang with everyone else. The river was a vast distance to cross, but they had as long as they needed. Inch by inch, song by song, they crossed from sunrise to sunset. The moon watched from overhead.

When they reached the other side, the bridge builders put their arms around each other and began to head back, satisfied with a job well done. They were joined by the crowd at the bank, and taught them the building songs. Deedee waved and disappeared into the crowd.

“What will you do now?” Erminia asked Carrie.

Carrie looked around for the old man, but his tree stump was

empty. Feeling very old herself, she sat down.

“I’ll rest,” she said. “You?”

Erminia laughed. “Whatever I want.”

Carrie watched her retreating back across the bridge, knowing as she knew many such things that she would see Erminia again. Then she turned to the moon, hanging patient on the eastern horizon like an old friend. Before long, a figure appeared, a speck of dust growing until it was a person, coming closer and then pausing at the edge of the bridge.

“Hello, love,” she said.

Jay Castello (they/them) is a freelance writer based in Sheffield, UK. Their work is primarily in journalism but extends into media criticism, fiction, and editing games and books. If they’re not down a research rabbit hole you’ll probably find them taking bad photographs near a riverbank or old tree. Find them on Bluesky @jaymcastello or at their website, jaycastello.com.

Sliver of Glass

by: **Quinn Ponds**

Your name is a sliver of glass in my heart when spoken by
those who were never touched by
your love or hurt by your absence.

Quinn is an author from Phoenix, Arizona who is living and writing in Portland, Oregon. Her career is in behavioral health, and her passion lies in writing short fiction and poetry. She often spends time hanging out with her dogs Olive and Charlifer, watching movies, and playing video games.

Fluidity

by: Ash Reynolds

CW: Gender dysphoria

i.

She stands bearded, crook and flail held tightly in her hands, a slight smile alighting her face. The copper paint of her skin remains in shards: ear, cheek, lips defy three thousand years and a desecration campaign. She is muscled, Osirian: the sharp v of her waist, the curves of her crown. On her smooth chest, an ankh and scepter mark her eternal rule.

ii.

I don't know how to look at my body. Parts of me purr when I pretend they aren't there, or pretend they aren't mine, or pretend they can change shape. I uproot the whiskers from my chin and then wish I could grow more of them. Sometimes, I pluck my vocal chords like a harp, deepening the sound, and I sing girl anthems. I hide my breasts in public, but privately dress them up in dark lace. My round hips squirm in tight clothes, but I ache for snugness.

iii.

Hatshepsut was a builder, a maker, a trader, a king; scholars first call her a woman. And yet they know in her later reign she ordered her feminine statues recarved: *a power grab, a command of respect*. Or perhaps an inundation of euphoria; a hidden wish fulfilled; an opening of the mouth.

iv.

I consult the Amun Oracle, praying to gods I don't believe in. *Bastet, Thoth, Nut, where is the river flowing? Am I the dam?* Bastet runs her lithe body through my calves, nuzzling them. Thoth spreads his wings and looks to the sky. Nut is there, stretched thin—the stars like scars—and she whispers into the darkness, *The river flows north, and no dam can stop it*. I regard her twinkling, undulating body: *Are you made of water too?* I flow on.

Ash Reynolds (they/them) is a nonbinary, queer, ace poet living in College Park, MD, USA with their rescue dog and 41 houseplants. Ash has written most of their life but is new to getting their work published. Find Ash gardening, Lego-ing, and squirrel- and bird-watching from the kitchen window. Tip them on Venmo at @AshReynolds784.

Our Pot Runneth Over

by: **Audric
Adonteng**

CW: Imagery includes themes of death and grief

waakye leaves loiter in lukewarm water
tears dry into salt deposits across my brown face
dirt and grass stains form an x on my denim overalls,
time will pass over this body.
prune juice trickles onto my forehead.
tap, tap, tap.
our eyes do not shift.
soft footsteps cross the roof, and the white settles on my home.
tap, tap, tap
the trees are gone and the world is dead, i say.
why did we rake the children from the trees and make piles of their bodies?
& play as the warm colors filled the air?
why did the world halt and give silence an indefinite revival?

but my mother tells me the leaves will return.
waakye leaves begin to steam.
the water attempts to escape the pot.
i look into her eyes // i don't believe her.

for my mother's eyes are brown. her skin is brown.
the skin of trees, the brief chestnut flash through the
lawn,
the hollow husk bridging both sides of the river,
the maple oak fence, the splinters in my knee.
the leaves (briefly)
so my mother must be a leaf.
when do you turn back green, i ask.
she laughs // i do not believe her

my curiosity is overwhelmed by grief.
she holds me // the tears escape faster

the waakye leaves are screaming.
the pot runneth over.
she holds me.

the air in the kitchen is smoke.
there is no air between us.

Audric Adonteng (he/him) is a Ghanaian-American writer from Massachusetts. His work has been recognized by The New York Times, Polyphony Lit Magazine, and The Empty Inkwell Review. He is the Editor-in-Chief of The Insurgence. A graduate of the Adroit Summer Mentorship Program, Audric attends Harvard University

romantic tragedies

by: **arushi (aera) rege**

CW: Brief mention of self-harm

i am trying very hard to become two things at once: verse-chorus. birth-death. feminine-masculine. light-dark. romance-tragedy. i am trying very hard to tell myself that i know what it means to be endless tragedies & a moth pinned out for taxidermy & a constant reminder of what i could've been if i had cared more. i am trying very hard to become two things at once: how i become yin&yang at the same time, kissdrunk lips and wine red mouths, neverending chorus splits into repeating verse. i think if i was made for the heavens, i'd bring you up with me, baby, just to fall down to hell again. i think the moth & i are not so dissimilar. i'm not quite sure how to be comfortable in my own body & i am not quite sure how to haunt what it means to be queer. i am trying very hard to become two things at once: lover-loved. more-nothing. light-dark. evil-good. i am balancing what it means to be an open wound & a romantic tragedy & all i can think about is how i can touch my skin & pretend i'm not real anymore. i touch myself where i know how to filet strips into violin-string-impressions so that i remember i used to be something else. this is a coming-of-age film, where girlboy finally sheds their skin & becomes freak & this is a coming out story. i am trying very hard to be loved & desired & raw & an open wound & a portrait on fire & i don't know how to do anything but be a tragedy; a warning to stop haunting my own skin. i am a moth pinned out for taxidermy. i am starting to think i was not made for the heavens.

Previously published by Paper Crane Journal.

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.

Purity

by: Paige Eaton

CW: Racism, mentions of gun violence, abuse, and the KKK

One night, on the way home from nowhere, I learned about the annals of my coiled brown hair, my rounded nose, and my olive skin. In the warm embrace of the van through the blustery fall night, my father captured my hand and told me that Mormon blood runs in a quarter of my veins, laid dormant by an excommunication of the racial nature, that the same quarter, my paternal grandmother, faced the abyss between a rifle and shriveling away into poverty. He whispered the secrets of my paternal grandfather, a man taller than life, who I would never meet; my Black family members who lived a quarter-way across the world. I learned that day that when I was called 'pure' by my great grandmother, she meant my complexion, my past, my body, and that she was *wrong*.

Surrounded by twisted granite statues, sparking off the glass chandelier shattering the sunlight above, I learned about the implosion of half my family, the deep fissures that can only be caused by tales of chronic abuse, a woman with shadowed eyes and a broken face. I picked up a partial

manuscript, a half-narrative, and I learned what it was like to ride in a car going a blinding twenty-five miles per hour, the panic that gripped my thrice great grandfather as he clung for dear life to the rim of an old rickety Model T.

Purity is desirable when drinking water is a rain of crystal glass, where in Flint, Michigan, it runs brown with blood and poisonous lead. But purity was also the life-blood of the dancing hoods of the Klu Klux Klan, flickering flames of an innocent house ricocheting off their shadowed white robes. And they too were wrong.

Paige Eaton is a poet who is currently teaching English in South Korea and is originally from Rochester, New York. Her work has appeared in *Word of Mouth*, *Dark Entries*, *Does it Have Pockets*, and is forthcoming in the *Long Winded Anthology*. Her recent work focuses on surreal and dream-like experiences.

Nervous System Refrain

by: Rhiannon
Briggs

Split my tongue
down the middle. When I was young I scraped
the letter S through my teeth. Split my tongue.
Give me scales, I am learning to grow older now,
I am trying to learn. I used to speak with volume
and strength. Where does that go? How do we find it
again? I am trying to learn to grow older.
You can hear it when I speak sometimes—
the lisp, I mean. Give me fangs and venom.
Split my tongue. Listen as I move
through dry grass. I am trying. Split my tongue.
Even then, even now, I was not made to bite.

Rhiannon Briggs is a nomadic, couch-crashing lover of zines, glue sticks, and correction fluid. They are a Best New Poets and Best of the Net nominee, a winner of the Shipsey Prize, and recently completed *Yellow Book*, their debut collection of poems, as a Canterbury Scholar. You can find their work at rhiannonbriggs.com.

The Wonder Once Known Only to the Beguiled

by: **J.D. Harlock**

Come along with me to that cliff by the sea
where the old turbine stands, turning dreamily

We'll saunter the wastelands, stroll through the wild,
glimpse the wonder, known only to the beguiled

Then, beneath that paled light, we'll have sight of it all
Our vined relics are but rough cairns for the fall

Faint remnants of the ills we have now maligned
Shared memories of the lives we must leave behind

But let us not dwell, let us never forget
Lifetimes have been squandered in solemn regret

For, in time, with grace, we continue to learn
And, in these lost lands, life has begun to return

So come along now,
And worry not over what could have occurred
Our past preludes a most wonderful world

J. D. Harlock is an Eisner-nominated SWANA American academic pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of St. Andrews, whose writing has been featured in Business Insider, Newsweek, The Cincinnati Review, Strange Horizons, Nightmare Magazine, The Griffith Review, Queen's Quarterly, and New York University's Library of Arabic Literature.

20-10-20

by: **Tajudeen Muadh**

CW: Themes of gun violence, murder, war

*"i swear, i have been there, i have seen the gun go off,
i have embraced the bullet and tasted blood on my tongue."*

— *Romeo Oriogun*

the night my brothers morphed into embers is the night
that precluded the day we counted bodies on the street.
my tongue shrinks from what threatens to turn me to
a thing as beautiful as stone. & here, i touch the grayness
of my brothers' dreams from the bullets that hit them
i do not want to tell my mother how my scars are marked
by years of wagers. say, i am a saltwater counting the times
i've returned from reefs licked by remains of war.

*(this line is left empty for the bones left to grow into wilderness
of flowers)*

i spill into what wears me like a fragment. i do not
want to search for myself in a light that turns me into
obscurity. i have swallowed enough of this country,
& it pushes lifelessness down my throat. i do not want
to wear tenderness the wrong way— the way my brothers
that revolted wore bullets as trinkets.

(this line is left blank for the wilderness that wounds my body)

i do not want to fill my palm with guilt, but the waters above
washed the dusts off their bodies and glories. i remember
things enough to keep my tongue short of breath.
i spirit what rebels my body and soul— a journey to
measure water in cloudfuls stripped of beginnings

Tajudeen Muadh (he/him) is a poet from Osun state, Nigeria. He has works in Strange Horizons, brazenhead review, brittle paper, broken antler magazine, Ecopunk Literary Magazine and elsewhere.

word search

by: S. Kavi

CW: Racism

Step 1: Place the back tip of your tongue against your two top front teeth.

Step 2: Press your tongue firmly in previously stated position.

Step 3: Throw your tongue down towards your bottom two front teeth.

“Go back to where you came from!

Take your words with you!”

page swirls

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english letters

stuffed

down

my

throat

*pronunciation enunciation
articulation frustration
ha-ha-humiliation*

choking as my tongue reaches
 roof of my mouth for
 right syllable
 right time
 right now
slapped ruler for a straightened accent-shaved tongue while spelling tests snicker

as I cry for ~~matr~~ ~~bh~~asa my mother tongue

S. Kavi (she/her) is a South Indian American poet, writer, and artist from Texas. Her work has been nominated for the Best of the Net anthology and appears in antonym, Ice Queen Magazine, Metachrosis Literary, and elsewhere.

we forgot the word for rainbow

by: Aainum
Khan

CW: Themes of colonization and loss of culture

Dusty windowsill roses & old-fashioned black-and-white figures in '60s poses (big-beehive-hair & gold jewelry that shines through the photograph) & grandmother sits on muddy-brown (fake)leather couch. Thumbs *tasbih*, sends thank-you to God. I never asked what the thank-yous are for; in true second-generation fashion, i expect my blessings to be handed to me; I am not one for putting stock in heavenly bliss.

She is sixty-something, three living blood children, many more nieces & nephews who call her *khala* & whatsapp love for her prayers & she has three siblings & long-dead parents & a house in America (white raised-ranch, east windsor, big yard, white picket fence) & a dilapidated mansion in Pakistan (yours for a billion blood-stained Pakistani Rupees).

Someone somewhere called her "baby" & those people are long gone & she is beginning to forget what I never knew—the smell of monsoon-soaked rice fields behind her home, the embrace of aunts & uncles buried / burned / killed for their words. *whisper*, she says. Whisper the smell of hearth

cooking & prayers ascending & gold-plated pretending to be the real thing. Whisper the smell of life living / burning / dying because one day we will all forget. She remembers that.

Grandmothers should be soft & fuzzy; given the fact I have only one, I expect the hugs scented with saffron, the second helpings shoveled onto my plate. The sitting / smiling / sighing on the park bench while monkey-me swings up the playground & onto the sky. Gaze up at the sky, *look, Aanum. Dekho.* Point raspy long nails at clouds splitting. Somewhere she read me a story about the moon becoming two & cracking under the weight of prophetic tradition. *A rainbow.* She does her “r” the colonizer / English way and strains the corners of her imperialised mind to repeat it in a language I should know but don’t. Smiles vacantly. Calls sister in Alabama. *How funny,* she says,

we forgot the word for rainbow

Aanum Khan is a junior at Loomis Chaffee in South Windsor, CT. Her poetry, known for its surreal twists and breathtaking descriptions, has been published in Journey75 and The Loom.

My lover calls out “dude”

by: **Maggie Bowyer**

CW: Allusion to infertility/childfree by choice dichotomy, disability, and mention of sex

From across the room, and I look up.

He is holding a plant pointing at a cat
 watching a soccer match scrolling through memes.

The day he calls me handsome,
the fissures in my heart both cracked open
 and healed over.
My smile is one of agony, my tears are for the rest of repair,
 and my exhale is an exhalation.

I tell him loving me is gay, and he grins
 (it's okay, oh gods it's okay).
I whisper I can show him
 (it's good, oh gods it's good).

As I scream, shower off the blood on my thighs,
 as I hurl into the drain at my feet.
Cursing more than my disease, I despise the body I was born into
 (I love women and men but somehow not myself).
I declare I am destroying my habitat.
He kisses my forehead, reminds me
 that I was not born to be an incubator
 for a future I didn't want.
He tells me the decision will always be mine
 (but he will love me? And he will love me)

After the wedding, we call his insurance to add me to his plan.
He steadily speaks my pronouns, over and over,
 even as the operator assumes, over and over.

We kiss, and it is gay
 (oh gods it's good).

Maggie Bowyer (they/he) is a proud cat parent and the author of various poetry collections including *Homecoming* (2023) and *When I Bleed* (2021). They've been published in *Chapter House Journal*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Wishbone Words*, and more. Find their work on Instagram @maggie.writes

Dead Names

by: **Ayin
Ships**

CW: References to the Holocaust, death of a family member, assimilation, implied transphobia/unintentional misgendering

The ghosts are quiet—most people ignore them—but numerous.

Every minyan has a dedicated Mourner for the Kaddish. It takes time, going through Ploni ben Ploni and Plonit bat Ploni each time, but no one complains. Well, everyone kvetches, no one means it. We don't know if the ploni prayers really work, though we keep at it. Some kind of communal placebo. What does work, what the ghosts wait for, is family.

They linger around particular gravesites. When they're lucky, they're greeted by surviving relatives: *Uncle Shloime?* And after shiva the ghost has gone. But the generation old enough to recognize them on sight is shrinking in number: it's standard practice now to bring the oldest photo album to cemetery visits. Still—there are a lot of ghosts.

I don't have a photo album with me, just my sketchbook, and I don't know any of the ghosts here by name. But I've drawn them all; we haven't had anyone new in a while. My pad is full of familiar faces. Today I decide to sketch the old woman again. She makes a good subject because she doesn't move

a lot. Some of the ghosts pace, or look around, or search the headstones for something they won't find. This one just stares at one grave. Her scarf doesn't blow in the wind.

I settle with my back against a granite monument, despite the chill that bites through my jacket. I flip open my book, take up my pencil, and outline the scene: a lonely babushka and a grave that isn't hers. I wonder if it's her husband's. Or her child's. I don't know how long she's been dead. I'll check the name on the stone before I go.

The names. That's something the ghosts and I have in common. They want theirs carved in stone, a record of themselves. They read each tombstone like it'll carry their sign. I have my own reason to look at the names these days.

*

Dad's finishing dinner when the phone rings. Caller ID says it's Uncle Reuven.

"Are you sitting down?" Reuven asks, tinny over the line, and my mother goes pale.

My ears are ringing. I don't want to hear this. But when Dad hangs up, he says, "It's Bubbe," and then he puts his head down on his arms as my mother tells him, "Baruch dayan ha'emet."

"Baruch dayan emes," I echo, hollow, watching my father cry. Bubbe?

Bubbe's a survivor. Literally. A tiny Polish woman who had to be near a hundred, who outlived two husbands, who raised her kids from in the New World after everything the old one put her through. Bubbe would pat me on the arm and tell my parents I was a mensch, a good kid, they would shep nachas from me. All the scraps of Yiddish I have are hers. Bubbe's

gone?

My dad's grandmother, Grandma's mother. Bubbe was a firmly Yiddische yid, with enough English to get by. Made in the mold of the Lower East Side type.

*

The funeral attendees are quiet, but numerous: Bubbe had a large family. Has. Uncle Reuven, who helped organize the event, stands with his own family. His eldest folds her hands over her stomach. Without anyone saying it, everyone knows what Rivka's baby's going to be named now.

It's an Ashkenaz thing, the waiting; Mom's side wouldn't have. But Dad's family is the reason I look for dead names.

My yarmulke doesn't sit well on my curls. It's fighting the bobby pins. My hands still smell of the shovel. I keep them in my pockets. The suit itches like a poorly-fitted skin. I need everyone to leave. Since they won't, I let their sounds pass over me, and I watch the ghosts.

...*She's new*. Young, it looks like, younger than me although it's hard to tell with the ghosts of an era. Often they're small for their age: malnourished, emaciated. I know I haven't drawn her before.

She clings to our crowd, staring at the fresh-mounded earth.

*

"Dad," I say, as we clear the shiva table of photographs, "did Bubbe have a sister? Before the war? Or a daughter? A niece?"

"Your mother is the one who knows the families," he says, distracted, and then I watch him realize why I would ask. He sinks back into the low chair, head in his hands, and I'm sorry

I said anything.

“We can daven for Plonit,” Mom says softly, but I know I’m going back to ask her myself.

*

Standing between the tombstones, silhouetted against the sky, she seems a hundred and twenty. She looks lost, green off the boat, dead for decades. My fingers itch for my pencil, but I wait, not knowing what I’m waiting for. I watch her until a noise further down the rows disrupts the air.

A recognition, it looks like: a ghost turning to the sound of his name; someone breathing life into him for the last time; a couple of kids lingering at the edges of the scene, who don’t know their dead without a diagram written out for them. I know the man, I’ve filled an afternoon charcoaling his cheekbones. Before I can think better of it, I’m up, threading the headstones to say, “Excuse me?”

The living adult of the party eyes me, unappreciative of the interruption. Guilt shakes my hands, but I reach into my bag for the artbook as I say, “Would you like, I mean, I’ve got—”

“We’re not interested,” she says flatly, “we’re Jewish.”

This is a Jewish cemetery. I think proselytizers should be shot. I say, “No, sorry, it’s. I draw? And if you wanted.”

I flip through the pages as quickly as I can, searching for the smudge of their ghost’s eyes, the cut of his nose. “Wait,” says the mourner, putting a finger between the pages to pause me. “You made all of these? For all the ghosts here?”

She needs to stop touching my book. I swallow. “Yes.”

Some polite congratulatory sound from her, a nod from me, and then she says, “Where’s this one?”

I look down. She's put her hand on The Page. It's open. My heart rate kicks up, but all she sees is another unfamiliar ghost: a half dozen sketches of a girl with long dark curls, a severe jaw, and thick brows. My brows. I unstick my tongue and manage, "Sometimes ghosts pass." Sometimes they never come to pass.

"Oh," she says, and I finally locate her ghost's portrait, so I tear it along the perforated edge and pass it to her with my eyes on the ground. "Thank you—oh, this is beautiful."

The dead man looks away from the kids as she holds the paper out to him. "Look, Tatty. Look what he made for you."

I escape.

*

But I can't stay away long. The new ghost is still there when I return, hovering a hand over Bubbe's earth. "Hello?" I say, and she turns to me.

She brightens when she sees me, which feels surprisingly warm in my ribs. Some ghosts don't talk. People think they might have lost the knack, alone, unheard. But she says, "Zent ir meyn mishpocha?"

Damn. Damn! "Sorry," I say, knowing she won't understand. "Um. S'licha? Ani lo..."

I'm out of yeshiva and out of practice in Hebrew. And I don't have more than a few words of Yiddish. Third generation out of the old country; Mom, too, swears in French, not Arabic. The ghost is staring at me.

She says something again, too fast; all I catch is *nisht*. Not. "Shalom," I say, because that much I know. I press a hand to my chest. "I'm—" I try again and point to the grave. "This was

my Bubbe.”

“Meyn shvester,” she sighs. Baruch Hashem for Germanic roots.

“Your sister? Achot...ach?” My accent embarrasses me. But the ghost nods.

It’s my familial responsibility to set her to rest, but I never even knew Bubbe had a sister. She came to America an only child. And now my great-great-aunt, skinny and translucent, speaks a language I can’t wrap my tongue around. I need to know her name so it can be carved into Bubbe’s headstone, chipped out from the matzevah, and we can mourn, belatedly.

I’m lost for a moment, but the ghost points at my sketchbook. This, at least, is something I can do for her. To keep her memory I’vracha. I flick to a fresh page.

“Iz az du?” She’s seen The Page. I flush hot and skip past it. She peers at me. “A sheyne maidel.”

Shaina, that’s a name I’ve looked at. “Shh,” I say, and we settle into a rhythm. I glance up, she smiles, and I return pencil to paper. Slowly she takes form on the page.

I’ve never met a ghost of my own. She’s so young. Bubbe never spoke of her. “Dad didn’t want to come,” I tell her, without looking. “Grandma couldn’t come out. So it’s just me. Sorry.”

“Du kleydt zikh vi a yingele,” she says, disapproving or curious I can’t tell. Her gaze is heavy with the weight of the ocean and eighty years between us. We might have had the same jawline.

“What’s your name?” I ask, shading in the final touches,

kneading my eraser so I don't have to meet those dead eyes.
"Um. Ma ha'shem shelach?"

"Naama," says my great-grandmother's murdered sister, and I write the name in careful script along the edge of my art.

Naama bat Mottel. We can add her to our history, pray for her neshama, and try to move on. The cemetery ghosts sway, drawn to the gravity of a naming, their longing thick in the air.

"Naama," I repeat, the sound of it rich on my tongue, round in my mouth. If I look at the art right, her name looks like my signature.

Ayin Ships (any pronouns) currently works within the NYC public school system. As a queer & trans Jewish writer, Ayin is interested in the interplay between the personal, cultural, and historical. Examples of their work have been published in Roi Fainéant Literary Press and in Active Muse. Find them on Xitter @AyinShips.

Lost and Found

by: Cila Warncke

CW: Discussion of homophobia, homophobic bullying (non-graphic), and anti-gay legislation; mention of suicidal ideation; references to self-harm, parental neglect, and religious extremism

In 2004, the Scissor Sisters' eponymous debut was Britain's biggest-selling album and spent four weeks atop the charts: an *annus mirabilis* for American misfits in London.

The album reached my employer, Q magazine, early (all the momentous ones did, or those that aimed to be). Some editors had initial rock-purist reservations about "Comfortably Numb" but soon succumbed wholesale to *Scissor Sisters'* Bowie-and-Boland-boogieing-at-Studio-54-with-Peaches panache.

My reservations were non-existent: every cut was instantly familiar, from the glittery nu-disco of "Filthy/Gorgeous" to the bittersweet "Return to Oz," and the band – particularly singers Jake Shears and Ana Matronic – exuded a playful sex appeal and *joie de vivre* that was all the more irresistible for being so un-American.

While my colleagues dug the band, they couldn't grasp how extraordinary the Scissor Sisters were in the context of US culture. (WalMart refused to stock the album, reportedly describing it as 'a snarling, swaggering attack on conservatism.')

Brits had a tradition of gender-bending rockers, cross-dressing pantomime dames and gay pop

culture icons; *we the people did not*. Of everyone nodding along to “Take Your Mama Out,” only I could map the distance from the States’ West Coast to the streets of Soho.

Erased

Jake Shears reminded me of my husband and his friends: striking, stylish, mischievously sexy; gorgeous without being intimidating, flirtatious but not sleazy.

He came from close to home, too. Two years my senior, Shears was born Jason Sellards in Mesa, Arizona, but eked out adolescence between Arizona and San Juan Island, a bucolic, accessible-only-by-ferry green dot north of Seattle, Washington. In a video for LGBTQ+ youth charity It Gets Better, Shears (looking younger and more vulnerable than his years) described coming out in high school: “I would get sent to the principal’s office with these kids who were obviously torturing me. Teachers would... pretend like they didn’t see.”

That would have been ‘93-‘94, less than a year after fundamentalists in my home state, Oregon, got Measure No. 9 on the ballot.

Nine sticks with me because the Evangelical Church was vocally pro. The measure, proposed by the “Christian” Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA), sought to amend the state constitution to mandate anti-gay discrimination.

Aged 12, I’d heard only whispers about homosexuality. As a younger child, I’d seen the term Gay Rights somewhere and — to my mother’s chagrin — suggested it as a name for our adopted pooch. Gay sounded cute, happy.

Measure No. 9 was an education. For the first time, adults around me talked about gay people — the urgency of “protecting” us from them overriding the Evangelical imperative to pretend sex didn’t exist. From pulpit and pew

came the message that homosexuals were corrupt, perverse, and hell-bound, Word was that anyone with a “No on 9” bumper sticker was servicing a Satanic plot to promote pedophilia and destroy the Family. Prayers were offered for the measure’s success; praises lifted for the courage and Godliness of the OCA.

The ballot measure—the actual words my church endorsed— included:

“All governments in Oregon may not use their monies or properties to promote, encourage or facilitate homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism, or masochism.... Public education systems must assist in setting a standard for Oregon’s youth which recognizes that these ‘behaviors’ are ‘abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse’ and that they are to be discouraged and avoided. State may not recognize this conduct under ‘sexual orientation’ or ‘sexual preference’ labels.”

Measure No. 9 was defeated 56.5% to 43.5%, which, given Oregon’s population distribution, suggests almost everyone outside the Portland metropolitan area voted “yes.” The OCA continued its anti-gay crusade at county and municipal levels, passing more than 25 homophobic ordinances in the following two years.

Shears on the early ‘90s: “I thought about killing myself quite a few times during this period.”

Implicated

Senior year of high school, 1996, rumors milled about a girl seen *kissing another girl*: remote hubbub. It wasn’t until college, with 3,000 miles between me and Oregon, that I was self aware enough to categorize the elevator drop my stomach did when a certain redhead rolled into Dutch class. When she and I held hands in an art museum, I was floored by my own daring.

A year abroad in London unveiled another option: enjoy sex with anyone, of any gender or persuasion, because it's neither a big deal, nor anyone's business.

Despite my university being the kind of liberal-secular education institution Evangelicals prayed aloud their children wouldn't attend, reentry as an emboldened self was a jolt. Nineteenth-century British Literature devolved into a running verbal brawl between my friend B, me, and a kid from Montana who said if B was "born gay" (quotes his) *maybe* a lifetime of celibacy could keep him out of hell.

Furious, I came out as bisexual in solidarity.

Seen/unseen

When the Scissor Sisters' glitter spaceship landed in the UK, it dragged my past into the present. To most, "Take Your Mama Out" was a sing-along party anthem that just happened to be about coming out. Did they even notice the lyric that fish-hooked my soft tissue—the one about the girls liking him because he's so fun and good looking? Barbed steel of recognition: what it's like to be among people who won't see.

The true believers who dominated my early years could spend a lifetime wondering why a genteel bachelor was still single, complacent in faith blinders that obscured any discomfiting realities. Some of us church kids were queer; so totally was this reality denied it took us years, even decades, to see ourselves. Apart from the political paroxysm of Measure No. 9, queerness was ignored out of existence.

This willed blindness extended in dark, even dangerous ways. From childhood, I witnessed adults endanger kids by refusing see. While church members frothed about George Michael lyrics and Madonna's stage outfits, they unsaw self-harm, corrosive family dynamics, hopelessness, frustration, and isolation.

Who can cipher the toll on the unseen?

Sometimes, it's risky to be in plain view. But I've always been more afraid of those who declined to see. People who insist you're waving won't save you from drowning.

Live. Alive.

"Emigration has to be done before we climb the vessel," Robert Louis Stevenson wrote. "An aim in life is the only fortune worth the finding; and it is not to be found in foreign lands, but in the heart itself."

With deepest respect to Stevenson, and all the iron-willed Nonconformists in the warp and woof of my DNA, not all places are equally open to what lies in the heart. Each of us has numerous possible lives, but the wrong environment can shrink those possibilities like boiled wool.

In his 2018 memoir, *Boys Keep Swinging*, Shears recalls the transformative power of place. For him, it was Seattle, where he finished high school. There, the outfits, accessories and attitudes that attracted violence in small-minded towns were objects of indifference, or even the occasional compliment. Instead of living in a perpetual defensive crouch, he could finally walk upright, finally have the space to be who he was and feel what he felt.

For me, vast, disinterested, filthy, gorgeous London was the circle big enough to stand in. By 2004, I was enmeshed in music journalism, club land, and a social circle.

That June, the Scissor Sisters and I converged at Glastonbury. As part of the *Q Review* team, I sludged between tents and stages in calf-deep mud. As ascendant muso press darlings, the Scissor Sisters were too heavyweight for my beat. So I sought them out purely for pleasure. Rain spat against my over-sized army jacket as I jiggled on the spot to keep my

pink-and-yellow polka dot wellies from sinking into the mud. My boyfriend flapped beneath a plastic poncho. As the drops fattened and the crowd swelled, anticipatory glee accelerated my pulse.

Lights flared on the Pyramid Stage. A rainbow burst: Jake Shears in Art-Nouveau-tea-cozy dungarees, sans underwear; Ana Matronic, a copper-curved, barefoot butterfly in Pucci print; Babydaddy sporting trilby and glitter guitar. A field full of drab, mud-splattered revelers roared delighted approval as the opening bars of “Comfortably Numb” shrugged off the clouds. Shears’ falsetto raised rills of pleasure. Everything beyond the moment ceased to matter in the effusion of musical effervescence.

Beauty where you find it

Damned if it wasn’t tough even to look *like that* in much of the United States. Shears fearless in his perfect skin and eyeliner; Matronic all curves, tattoos and glitter, a body language suppressed in the places we were from.

My Seventh-Day Adventist school forbade, on religious grounds: jewelry, make-up, spaghetti straps, “low cut” tops, shorts, or skirts above the knee. Although my taste veered preppy (low-end, Gap; aspirational, Ralph Lauren), my sister had, armed with fashion magazines, inculcated a love of daring, elegance, and individuality. We pored over *Vogue*, cherished the same high-wire *couturiers*: Westwood, McQueen, Galliano.

London was where I learned to play dress up: over-the-knee suede boots, neon mini-kilts, hipbone-skimming Diesel jeans, backless tops, sequins, leather trousers, gold-leaf peep-toe DeHavilland platforms (still the most beautiful shoe I’ve ever owned).

Annus mirabilis: life had transformed beyond imagination

since I'd landed at Heathrow in 2001, unaccompanied except for luggage. Partly, it was reckless determination: when my visa application was being reviewed, I refused to look at flights; departure was not an option. Mostly, though, life was new thanks to friends, lovers, partners, colleagues, bosses, even acquaintances who took me as I was, however chaotic and catastrophic that could be. Surrounded by people who cared for *me*—not for my quote-unquote immortal soul, or their idea of what I should be—I felt something new: I felt at home. To be seen and cared for was to be safe: proof reality existed, and I in it.

Cila Warncke grew up in rural Oregon. She has been a music journalist, editor, teacher, barista, bartender and Subway sandwich-maker, among other things. As a queer, neurodivergent educator, she spends a lot of time developing ways to support queer, neurodivergent and other marginalized learners; the rest is spent catering to her rescue cats. <https://cwarnckewriter.com> or www.writetosuccess.net.

A City as a Self-Portrait

by: Grace
Zhu

1.

It's 2017, and we are selling the apartment. On the edge of the eighteenth floor, the lock loiters at every third turn, and the wood is well sun-stained. We don't live here anymore, except during those gauzy Julys when we return from across the ocean and pretend we do.

2.

The summer sun there is searing; stand too long in the light and the red will make itself permanent. Long gone are the men with their flat stone and cleaver upon which they hawk old coconuts heavy with sweet water. There is now a storefront with fluorescent lights, air conditioning, and neon streamers that writhe against the breeze. Buy your coconut here, and taste the plastic with every sip—you'll need it. The summer sun there is searing.

3.

Shēnzhèn—it means deep ditch. Forty-four years ago it was a fishing village. The waves lap at the rocks, and the myths of Hong Kong and Macau are carried through whispers of its thousands of constant yet impermanent travelers. If one were to spin a tapestry of its human history, the thread may track assuredly far, but the cloth itself will remain sparse and translucent. There in the dredges of the Pearl River Delta, the roots travel deep but the sprouts stay low. In those days, it must have smelled of earth, smoke and sea mist. Evidence of settlements and thousands of lives lived, nothing at all

spectacular to show for it—many people digging many deep ditches.

4.

My first memory is in proximity to the apartment. I am in one of its three lifts, the colors shift and that sliver of chiffon white between the doors disappears in constant rhythm between floors. There is a long-suffering plastic fan hanging on by wires and clouded tape in a corner, it whirls in symphony with the dither and hum of the elevator gears—I am with my grandmother, surrounded by the bloated heat. How many years is it now? someone asks. The tiles are yellow beneath her feet. I hold up my hand with the thumb bent down. The reel cuts.

5.

At the baby steps of the eighties, billboards with the next new rectangular supersize-housing-built-vaguely-in-groups were materializing overnight. The signs rise out of the concrete rubble at the bend of the road; telephone wires line one side, the flat tropical leaves try to hang onto their ebbing reign on the other. Take a deep breath, it must've been permanently dusty—friction, gasoline, sweat—try and smell the salt behind the asphalt. It's reminiscent of the unrestrained, American-esque expansionism. Marshes and farmland are hardly considered when compared to the antique grandeur of gothic cathedrals or the history-sodden palaces and its red-tiled, towering pavilions. Shenzhen is like the West Coast in that aspect: it has no history deemed worthy enough to care about. Build when you want, where you want, promises of communism long forgotten—this is a Special Economic Zone now.

6.

Our apartment complex's name can be roughly translated as Window to the Sea. We are some three kilometers away from the rough coastline. No sand or soft tides, though that is replaced by something heartier: the effusive smell of kelp and the steady beat of the Pacific against black rocks. Once, perhaps, when the first furniture trucks came, one could still catch the seagulls circling above the glint of the

sea straight from their window, but by now, the complex's name is certainly a misnomer. Take a glance and you might find the one-hundred-fifty floor corporate skyscraper with a luxury Marriott hotel on the top levels, or perhaps the geometrically intertwined but no less towering Tencent national headquarters. Where you think you spy the glimmer of a high-crested wave is actually the new socialite-targeting shopping mall with a Hermés and a Louis Vuitton. It'll be a common sight during your time here. The ocean is not so easily forgotten nevertheless, all the building names are still coastal-themed, and the seafood is in constant supply. Whenever there comes a particularly wet and windy storm, try and step out onto the balcony early the next morning, ideally before the first reds and oranges soak through and before the exhaust chokes the sky. That is when you will smell the kelp, and through the kelp—the sea.

7.

Shenzhen is a city of migrants, thirty-thousand to thirteen million. You'd be hard-pressed finding a native Shenzhenese over the age of twenty-five. What remains of a city with no native culture left alive to perpetuate? Where the Hakka and Yue peoples have dominated Shenzhen for a vast part of its history, Mandarin now reigns supreme as the common tongue for most inhabitants. One could hardly characterize a modern Shenzhen as a Cantonese one, when the most conspicuous Cantonese cultural center is a mere forty minutes away by ferry. In fact, Shenzhen is the only city in the province of Guangdong, otherwise known as Canton—the ancestral homeland of the Yue people—that doesn't speak Cantonese. The whole existence of Shenzhen is a seminal event for China; never before has a country with such rich cultural history in almost every street across every province spawn such a sprawling metropolis with absolutely none at all.

8.

Floor to ceiling windows have been popular of late—not quite a true luxury anymore but rather a pretense of accessible opulence diluted by seeing it placed in hundreds of identical apartments. Curtains

closed on that glass represent the ultimate sin; the city lights from the 18th floor make a worthy echo of the night sky that used to hold floods of stars now invisible. If you look straight down, you'll see the ink black roads and the flow of head and tail lights that almost seem to float from this height. It's a pale imitation of—forgive me for invoking something so immense—the Milky Way, like the paradoxical sentiment of focusing in to zoom out.

9.

Forty steps out of the front gates is a serried market indelibly brown with tread. The street cleaners pass through with their mops but the next undulation of footsteps swell unpreventable in its wake—their detritus and froth once more covering the clay tiles. The first stall carries the wheat-rich staples of hearty North-Eastern breakfast cuisine, while across the lane comes the piercing and almost tropical scent of fresh cilantro and chili oil from the Guilin rice noodle vendor; a gastronomic journey of almost two thousand kilometers compressed to the distance of two congested meters. Shenzhen has none of its own cuisine, dialect, dress, or tradition, for a lack of assimilation. Rather than a cultural melting-pot, it resembles more of the innumerable divisions of the high rises dotting its own skyline, each apartment distinct from another and too many to count. Your neighbor may speak with the classic Beijing drawl but you will reply in your staccato southern dialect. Ask for the most traditionally-Shenzhen restaurant in the city, and one might point you to a fragrant and non-performative Cantonese kitchen, while another leads you towards the oil-rich spice of Chongqing. Neat rooms whose contents never mixed or bled for any sense of syncretism, perfectly separate—unassimilated and nothing subsumed into the other.

10.

We were all there that July of 2017 to usher in the real estate agents and buyers like distant family. Make yourself comfortable. Paperwork on the fish tank, strangers in the children's bedroom. We'd always leave when they came, but our furniture stayed, our photos on the walls, our shoes at the door. Nothing more private on display,

nothing more to be revealed. What is it like to live in old homes with years and years of lives lived behind it? We were the first in that apartment, every high rise in Shenzhen is new, I wouldn't know. Would you change the wallpaper? What if it was there for the baby, left up—pink and fading still—in memory? Who are you to punctuate another's story? How would you know the house to be yours, when does it stop feeling like an intrusion? Thumbtack holes in the drywall, remnants of crayons left on doors. Ghost stories are real, in a way, aren't they? There is no horror more distinct than that of losing one's childhood home, which is really losing one's childhood; to be untethered. I got the news some weeks later, when we'd already left. My mother was mowing the lawn outside—I followed in the path left behind by the blades, my tantrum barely audible behind the drone. We don't live there anyway, she said. Well, we won't live there, ever.

11.

A Shenzhener is a strange thing to be. If someone asks: where do you live? A Shenzhener says Shenzhen. If someone asks: where are you from? A Shenzhener will never say Shenzhen. My family is from Fujian and Jiangxi; I can't understand a word of the Fuzhou dialect my cousins all speak and the only phrase I know of Nanchang slang is *fān qiā le bo* (have you eaten?). The city I live in currently is not one I chose, my familiarity with its streets and trees not one gained voluntarily. If someone asks me: where are you from? What can I say but Shenzhen? To come to Shenzhen, one must first experience movement, but what happens in the aftermath of the next movement? Does the city to which one belongs revert to the first, the original? Or is it then, through departure, that one may finally call oneself a Shenzhener?

12.

To leave a city is to birth a new one. There always exists two renditions of everything; the present in which we must inhabit, and the past in which we live. Like the bug collectors who pin butterflies to foam, all asymmetries are remedied in death to create a being

more beautiful than it was in life. Observation from a distance is an embellishing act; worship obligates separation. This is not a new idea by any means, having been stated time and time again—in Ulysses in displacement, in Nabakov in exile. Absence has a way with memory that being in the present cannot accomplish, like a butter that cannot set, Shenzhen will always retain a sense of romanticism for me that it does not really possess. In truth, Shenzhen can be quite soulless, inequality so pronounced in every corner and alleyway, its existence a grating reminder of capitalism in a supposedly communist state. That's not how I remember it; ask me and I'll only recall the palm trees at night, the toads living in the drained out swimming pool, my grandmother, and the shattering of mist against the shore. I think poets are too fond of dramatics, they always try to inflate the beauty of what they can't have, if only to compound the grief. All then for the worship of that grief, weaving it to spawn elegy after elegy, bemoaning what they deny themselves. They want to believe the abstract to be more worthwhile than actuality. After all, was it not Celan who said poetry to be "a sort of homecoming?"

Grace Zhu (she/her) is an artist and a massive Ratatouille fan. She loves traveling and documenting her trips through her camera. More of her work can be found in Astrolabe Magazine and @bringbackflipside.

Yo Mama

by: **Quin Killin'**

CW: Implied unhappy or neglectful childhood

As a mother,
You will never be a job, an obligation,
nor a missed deadline for an abortion.
You ain't gotta audition to be accepted by me and
I will love you without conditions so you'd know that love doesn't require any.

You will never bear the name Jesus, a cross, or be a burden 'cuz
you are my salvation and I'll crucify anyone who prays on yo' downfalls.
You are born of a goddess and if God himself don't wanna answer my prayers,
I'll bleed my own blood just to cover you in my protection.
When you lay ya' head at night,
you ain't gotta worry about the monsters underneath ya' bed
'cuz ya mama gone show them how she mastered her demons.

'Cuz as ya' ma,
the only thing you have to hide in the closet are yo' diaries.
I'll even let you keep a few secrets in them
so long as they don't remain in the dark.
My mouth will be a bear hug of affirmations so that you won't have to turn
to a pill, bottle, or sex to be yo' confidant.
My ears won't load yo' feelings into the barrel of my tongue to shoot you
down when I get upset with you.
Instead, I'll shoot you higher than any Leggo set Mommy or
Daddy will buy you for ya' birthday or Christmas sets.
I'll aim higher than the noses of them people that will look down on yo'

greatness.

I'll gun down any expectations that they try to put on yo' black skin 'cuz chile, you...

You are the child I wish I could have been
and I am the parent I wish I always had.

'Cuz as ya' ma,

I'll teach you how to be loved before I teach how to give it.

I'll love you down but I'll still chew you up if you've done wrong by somebody else.

I'll teach you the difference between what's
right from wrong, biased to validation, from spectrum to technicalities
so that violence and frustration won't be yo' path to wisdom.

Even though we'll have our ups and downs and not every memory will
involve a smile,

I promise to emancipate the trauma left before me so you
won't have to look forward to yo' independence day.

Just 'cuz I became a master of life,
don't mean I have to be a massa in yours.

'Cuz as ya' ma,

I pray that I reach the grave before you do so
that my funeral doesn't feel like closure for the answers
and apologies you've never received.

I know I will never be the perfect mother and

I know I'll make some mistakes down the road,
but at least I lived knowing I wasn't dead to you beforehand.

Quin Killin' (she/they) is a nationally ranked spoken word poet, writer and educator. Other than being a part-time blerd, non-binary baddie, and they are the creator and co-founder of The Blunt Space Inc. You can find their work on their Instagram @queen_y_bihh , and on their website at www.theblunt.space. If you love their work, tip them through [paypal.me/quintinakillings](https://www.paypal.me/quintinakillings)

I consider the fact that joining Merricat on the moon would be pretty fun

by: Bella
Rotker

CW: Imagery includes minor body horror

All girls want to do nowadays is nail
books to trees. I write poems while the world
thunders around me. There are things

I consider about the ways a body can become
an object—my nail polish chipping into glittery
skin cells, the taste of blood. I vacuum

insects off my mother's paintings. Every day
around noon I wake up to rashes all over
and the faint taste of iron. There are things even I

can appreciate about isolation. In a dream
I become Anne Carson except I don't know
what she looks like, so it's just my body

out on the moors, my skin ripping away
from bundles of red nerves. I know what it feels like
to be empty, and this, I've learned,

is not something worth discussing. Nights here
are humid and dark. On Mondays I spray
the lawn to keep out cicadas but they keep

coming back. I've been told I lack
whimsy. This is something the medication
did not fix. There is self-improvement

and then there is ultimate revenge. I rip
saplings out of the ground to make room
for my scapes, garlic and leek. Because

I don't know the difference, I cook with both.
I've made my own recipes. Ever since the rain
came, nothing's worked right. Last night

I knocked another amber bottle into a place
I couldn't reach, then counted raindrops
as they slid down the glass door.

Bella Rotker is a proud Venezuelan and 305 local. A six-time YoungArts winner and Best of The Net nominee, her work appears in Fifth Wheel Press, JAKE, Best American High School Writing (2022 & 2023), and others. When she's not writing or making shadow puppets, Bella's thinking about cafecitos and bodies of water. Find her online at bit.ly/bellarotker

because i need to apologize to my brother

by: **Lydia Mathis**

CW: Mention of parental homophobia

mom is on her way out the door to go get groceries
she needs to pick up corn, pinto beans, and chicken
to go with the green beans and corn muffins she's making for sunday dinner
she'll pick up fish sticks too because i've been craving it
and popsicles because i've never been able to shake that childhood obsession

i stop her before she leaves
i told myself that i would start cooking
buying fast food and eating shin ramyun every night
has finally convinced me
i pull up the vegan instagrammer i found
i'm too afraid of fire and foodborne illness to cook meat

there's this vegan page, i say
as i'm scrolling through, trying to find a recipe to make
so i can give her a list of ingredients
she asks, are you going vegan
no, i respond, almost yelping it out
and she laughs, just asking, she says

and before i think
of the hurt i'm about to inflict on myself, of the guilt
i ask, would you support me if i went vegan
of course, she says, you're my child
and i smile, then she says

i don't like what your brother is doing, but i still love him
i take a breath
i really don't, she says, i don't approve of it at all
that's not what god made us for
but he's still my child and i love him

and i sit at the table quiet
how did we even get here
to who my brother loves or doesn't
to this conflict in her love

she leaves
and i get up to lock the door
and i think of what i should've said
so that i didn't betray my brother

but she's already driving off
and i'm already walking back to the table

Lydia Mathis (she/her) is a black woman and writer from Atlanta, Georgia. On Twitter, she's @LydiaMWrites. On Instagram, she's @noticebooks. Tip her on Venmo @Lydia-Mathis-3; Cashapp @imlydthekid.

My Mentor and Midwife

by: Lev
Raphael

Despite being Jewish, I applied to a Catholic college for just one reason: I'd heard that Dr. Kristin Lauer was an amazing creative writing teacher, and I had dreamed of being a writer since second grade.

When I met her early one morning in a tiny windowless office at the bland, concrete tower of the Lincoln Center campus in mid-Manhattan, I stumbled over pretty much everything I said, even though she couldn't have been less threatening. Dr. Lauer was petite and Swedish-looking with bowl-cut blond hair and a gentle smile. I was terrified she wouldn't let me into her writing seminar since I was only a freshman. I don't remember anything we talked about, but whatever I said and whatever writing I brought along got me in.

I had no idea that she would change my life and that I would fall in love with writing itself, with the art of putting one word next to another and changing both of them by their closeness and opening up myriad possibilities.

I came from a family of teachers and wanted to teach as well, so while I enthusiastically absorbed everything she said about fiction and took all her literature classes, I was also studying her teaching style. She didn't believe in pointing out everything that was wrong with the work my peers brought in every week, in bullying us like a coach, in beating us down because we had to learn that life, and the writing life especially, was *hard hard hard*.

Born and raised in Michigan, she had a wry sense of humor that was always respectful, and I know we all found her encouraging—well, those of us who didn't think we were the next J.D. Salinger or Joyce Carol Oates.

I watched her do her best to approach the piece at hand from the inside, exploring its possibilities and helping the writer make it stronger, more itself. Unlike seminars I took for my MFA later on, nobody got slaughtered in her class, and she headed off anybody hostile who tried to show off their critical acumen. It was all done deftly and gracefully. Sometimes, a simple interruption of “What do the rest of you think?” was all she needed to stop a student bent on an attack.

For her, for us, the class was a community of learning, not a cage match. That made her my inspiration when I started teaching on my own. I've often asked myself in a class or when reading work at home, “What would Dr. Lauer say?”

It's because of her that I ventured into very murky territory in my fiction and launched my career.

Two years after graduating from Fordham, I called her to share a story idea I had about a teenage boy coping with his parents' trauma as Holocaust survivors. I had never really addressed this dark autobiographical material in my writing (which was mostly about romantic triangles of some kind).

“This story scares me,” I confessed.

“Write a page tonight,” she said over the phone, “and read it to me tomorrow.”

I did both. She asked questions and made suggestions, and this went on for a few days until it was done. Her generosity and her enthusiasm still amaze me decades later. She knew I was braving terra incognita and she was my confident and reassuring guide.

Her steadiness has been a touchstone for me in the classroom, in my office at Michigan State University, where I worked with students taking independent study, and now via my coaching and editing.

I was unable to attend her retirement party but did write something in her honor, and I've created a character in my mystery series based on her.

Without that phone call years ago, I doubt I would have published 27 books in so many different genres. But more than that, I doubt I would have been able to freely give so much to students and writers I've been working with.

She helped me give birth to much more than a story.

Lev Raphael (he/him) is a queer, first-generation American living his childhood dream of being a published author. His work has recently appeared in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Spellbinder*, *Visible*, *The Smart Set* and over 70 other online and print journals.

If Not Black

by: Spooky Bee Jones

They say I am
Not Black.
And at that
I must laugh.

West Indies ichor
Plastic-wrap décor

We conquer
in silence

Shatter glass
With melodies

There exists a range
That fails to
Stay in one container.

If I am
Not Black—
As they say,
I must laugh

Kinks at the roots
Skin mahogany
Culture enriching—

What am I, then?

Spooky Bee Jones (she/her) is a writer, musician, and multidisciplinary artist based in West Palm Beach, FL, and New York, NY. She has been featured in Lunatics Radio Hour, Disquiet Arts, Scuzzbucket, and elsewhere. Find her on Instagram at @spookybambina or on her website at beacons.page/spookybambina. Tip her on Venmo at @spookybambina.

hot and heavy

by: **Lawson Hannaford**

Lou wanted to say it back—he really, really did. It would be so easy to look at her hopeful grey eyes and repeat the words back to her like he always did. Like he always had. She waited for him to.

His back was sweaty. A bead of sweat slid down his spine and tickled his skin. It was so hot in this room. It was always so fucking hot in this room, and he always asked her to turn down the heat, and she never did. He looked down at his hands, his ink-covered fingers, the raw skin around his nails he picked even when she told him to stop.

“I—” he started. He looked at his plate of food. She’d made spaghetti. She always made him spaghetti for Valentine’s Day dinner. Why is Italian food romantic anyway? he thought.

“Are you okay?” She asked, and he looked back up at her, meeting her gaze. She looked concerned but not yet hurt. Lou knew she would be. It was inevitable. He did that to everybody in the end. She should have known that going in. Lou had told her. She hadn’t listened. She never listened to him. It was so goddamn hot in here.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” Lou said, all the words in an exhale like they had been trapped at the bottom of his lungs. He looked away again, out the window. It wasn’t the pretty part of winter like December, where snow was fresh and exciting. As he looked out the window now, the harsh

yellow street lights illuminated how brown and gray the snow was from the dirt and sand on the roads, and it was all too depressing to enjoy.

“Do what?” She asked. Lou looked back down at his hands. He thought of Clark then. He thought of how their hands looked in his, intertwined in the half-light of Clark’s bedroom. He thought of Clark’s even breathing, of their warm laugh on his neck, of the deliberate pace of their voice when they read him poetry. He screwed his eyes shut. The guilt made his heart race.

“Like... be together.” The words were clumsy. Lou hated the way he said them. She deserved his best words. He couldn’t even look at her. His leg was shaking, and he gripped onto it with his hand to steady it. He stared down at the spaghetti, which looked like worms. He could feel her looking at him. She was always looking at him, gazing at him. She would stare and stare and stare and never listen to a fucking thing he was saying.

“What do you mean?” She was stubborn. It was one of the things that Lou had fallen in love with, her complete refusal to have things fall apart. He had tried to warn her. He always tried to warn her.

“I just... don’t feel the same way anymore.”

“Why?”

How can I put it into words? he thought. It never happened all at once; it just pecked and pecked and pecked at him slowly until there was a huge crater in his ribs that nothing seemed to fill

except... except for Clark's dark eyelashes and their slender fingers and their beautiful mouth. The simple answer, maybe, was that Clark understood him in a way that she never could. Clark understood the way gender had both scarred and liberated him. Clark could understand the way transness felt like a huge vast valley and an endless cave. But that wasn't the truth, not all of it anyway. No, something else had poked and poked and poked like it always did until Lou had run out of time to grab it by the neck and fling it away.

Lou looked up then, met her gaze, her eyes grey like pebbles on a shore. The tides would come in and out, in and out, and she would stay. She would rather dissolve into fine sand than leave. Lou could do it, he realized; he could grind like a relentless ocean until she was powder in his hands. The thought made him feel sick. She kept staring, waiting to know how she could fix this and what she needed to do to make things better.

"I just—" he started, trying to put it all into words. He was a poet, but not when it mattered. He could rhapsodize about the changing colours of fall or the rind of an orange peel, but when it came to real-life conversations, he was empty. He was all pith and skin. He had no substance.

I have to tell her, Lou would say at the end of his nights with Clark. It cut into the lovely purple hue of the evening like someone turned on the overhead light after they were sitting just with candles. Harsh and cold and real. *I have to tell her*. He would repeat it as if knowing he was failing her made it less terrible. *No*, Clark assured him, placing their finger under his chin and raising his face to look at them. *You know that's a bad idea*.

So, Lou didn't. Lou spent birthdays and parties and vacations hiding this from her. But the crater in his ribs kept getting bigger by the day, and soon, it became impossible to cover it up and pretend it wasn't there.

"I—" Lou started. "I—" But there was no justification. She was

perfect. She was everything he had wanted. She was kind and generous, smart and driven. She saw him for what he wanted to be. She made him feel like a man. Clark made him feel like a person.

Lou felt the sweat seep through his shirt. She waited. She always waited for him. He twirled the spaghetti around on his fork, feeling like he wanted to shed his skin like a cricket and hop out of the window, down the street, and into Clark's tiny shithole apartment. He could turn her to sand, he thought. She would let him.

"Tell me." She thought it was fixable. If she just loved him hard enough, she could fix this; she could fix him. But this wasn't fixable. She could not give him her ribs. He could not keep crashing onto her shore. He gulped and put down his fork.

She's my best friend, Lou. Lou could hear Clark's voice as a whisper in his ear, their breath warm. *We both love her. You know you can't tell her. We'll lose her. We can't lose her, you know that.*

It was so goddamn hot in this room.

Like sand, he thought, clenching his fist under the table, like sand.

Lawson Hannaford (they/them) is a queer, trans, nonbinary artist currently based in Ottawa, Canada who is passionate about telling queer and trans stories both in fiction and in theatre. You can follow along their writing, theatre, and creating journey on instagram @lookitslawson.

she calls me lizard brain

by: Neda
Dallal

finds it easier to picture me with rugged green scales
blood dripping from my limbs, fresh from a kill
and teeth sharp enough to pierce alloyed metal

couldn't be further from the truth, of course
i take no form
i am receptors and neurons firing
i am protection and power and subsistence
i am the shading that brings the portrait to life

doubt is my gift
the curve of the question mark a shelter
where i rest my laurels
refuel, expand

she is foolish
to dismiss the strenuous work of turning love to fear
of spinning a thought like spider's silk
until, when unspooled just so,
it becomes silent captor and safeguard too

if i've done my job right
she will ask you to make promises
you cannot keep

will you just tell her
what do you think
she just wants to know

Neda Dallal (she/her) is a poet living in Brooklyn. Her work has previously appeared in Mixed Mag. Find her on Instagram at [@thebookishpersian](#).

i become a migrant

by: **Rowan Tate**

CW: Themes of migration and poverty

and i remember
peppercorn trees, fanned feathery over dogs
asleep in the spicy dust of the road, their berries
dangling overhead like strings of
pink beads. i knew better than to
leave the place that remembered
the wet imprint of my body, how
i came out of earth red and she
held me at her breast, splayed
hot on her belly so our
pulses fused. for all of time
mortals and the divine have traded promises
like foreplay, one of us taking territory
the way ants eat a body, in
soft invasion.

Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative and curator of beauty based in Oltenia. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.



Good and Evil

by: **Emilia Koziol**

Emilia Koziol (she/her) is Connecticut based artist, best known for her acrylic paintings, and digital works. Her art is greatly inspired by music, botanicals, and anything odd or slightly macabre. When she's not creating art, Emilia enjoys working on her writing, and taking care of her pomegranate tree. You can see more of her work by visiting her linktree at <https://linktr.ee/acrylicturpentine>