

the
b'k
bitchin' kitsch



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Edited by

Chris Talbot-Heindl

About the Cover

An untitled collage by Irina Tall Novikova.

On a black background there is a girl in a robe with blue flowers on her head. behind her on the left there is a blue field of flowers on which there are two statues, a statue of a young man in a helmet and a statue of a boy with wings holding an animal, on the right there is a frieze with statues of ancient Greek gods with a blonde woman laid on top.

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. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bag Bagdanovich.



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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.

Contact Us

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“Who Am I & Do I Love Me?”

by: Mel Eaton

After Chen Chen “Who Are You & Whom Do you Love?”

CW: Body dysphoria

Hard enough that when I looked at my body I couldn't
even recognize the person attached below the neck
where my heart drummed enough to stir the acid
in my stomach like a water bottle tornado.

So much that I could hear Chen Chen's voice in my ears
skipping rocks across my bubbling brain
where a waterfall of questions began to rain
one after another “*Who am I?*”, “*What am I?*”

Swallowing each rising boulder as I stashed the book away
my mind racing faster than my feet could step
one ring, two ring, three ring, “*Dad I need you*”
but my tongue stalls because how could I explain.

That the body he gave me does not feel like home
that his *daughter* cringes at the sound of *she*
and the person I am is a melted mess on the ground
that the breasts on my chest do not belong to me.

Hiccups break apart the words I try to say
until your message pops up across my screen
in a green bubble I begin to read "*I love you,
we all love you, take a deep breath, it'll be okay*"

Previously published by *Inside Voice Zine*.

Mel Eaton (they/them) is a poet and chief editor of the Oneiroi journal. They have previously been published in #Enbylife, Afterpast Review, and Amazine magazine. Find them on instagram @_mel_writes.

Grounding Exercise

by: **Ariadne
Alexis
Macquarie**

CW: Dissociative Episode

X swings the freezer door outward
into the still air, & I watch languid

& splintered as he snatches an ice cube
from the dispenser. He turns

& faces me. I see a worried crackle
of empathy somewhere

in that gold-shimmered face of his.
Nothing feels as though it is mine.

I reach my hands out towards him &
they are appendages I do not recognise.

I don't think I recognise them, at least.
I study their fright-pale contours:

nails // cuticles // knuckles // tendons // skin.
None of it is mine. I swear it.

He takes that ice cube of his
& he drops it into my unfamiliar palms.

Clasps his own hands around mine.
Holds the ice between us (*whole frigid length*

of it) as it melts to tears amidst
our shared friction.

This body has to be mine, then.
I can feel the chill bite

of all of it.

Ariadne Alexis Macquarie (she/they) is a 1st-year MFA Candidate in Poetry at the University of Kentucky. She is the Editor-in-Chief of On Gaia Literary Magazine. You can find her on Instagram @flameazaleas.

Tiira

by: Michael
Imossan

CW: Exploitation and child labor

In the beginning, there was nothing, just the
precious stones of Uganda scattered across

hectares of suffering, The illegal gold mines in
Tiira stacked like bad odds against widowed

women and underage children. I walked through
the mines, accompanied by photographers, taking

pictures, freezing suffering inside cameras like
fishes trapped in ice. How far does this sorrow

stretch? Where does it end? In what universe is
the light placed at the entrance of the tunnel?

Point me to it, point me towards tenderness, I kept
screaming. Yet I was pointed to the girl in tattered

clothes who stooped like defeat before a ditch lofty
with dirty water, whose hands, sifting the precious

mineral from water, sang the song of a child left to fend
for herself. I want to be in school. *I want to sit inside the mouth*

*of knowledge and sing. Survival led me here. Survival keeps me
here,* she said. The void in her voice more palpable than

touch. Somewhere in a country across the sea where
there are tall buildings made of glass and another people's
tears, a woman will walk into a jewelry store demanding
for this girl's sweat—draping it over her neck, staring into a
mirror in search of beauty. There's no explanation for this.
The world works the way the world works. I walked out of
the mine, holding in my eyes the sight of a girl carrying the
heft of the world on her back, wishing only for the noise of
a school bell.

Michael Imossan is a poet/writer of Ibibio descent. He is the author of the award-winning poetry chapbook "For the Love of Country and Memory" (Poetrycolumnnd, 2022). He is the author of the gazelle "A Prelude to Caving" (Konya Shamsrumi, 2023). His full length manuscript "Broken in Three Places" was named Semi-Finalist for the Sillerman Prize for African Poetry '23.

Iraq

by: **Dania**
Alkhazrajy

CW: Mention of war

There's a sweetness to this life.

It's in the lunchtime sunshine fluttering through the kitchen window, kissing the yogurt drink with a smokiness that tastes like a temple massage.

It's in my grandmother's giggle, her eyes glimmering with a love so intense it could burst the teapot. "Here comes my whole heart" she whispers as her husband waddles towards the front door.

It's in hands that never learned to stop giving, every fold and wrinkle glistening with citrus as grandpa hands me a plate of fruit by the fireplace. I peel off the sonder like the skin of a mandarin, and bite into their tender little lives.

But this sweetness is not an escape, it's a telescope view into a world rebuilt on the ashes of war. A hall pass to what could've been home, if only we decided to stay.

Dania Alkhazrajy (she/her) is a final year optometry student in Australia with a passion for writing, her poetry can be found on Instagram @musesmakeformusings



Outside El Rincon Social

by: **nat raum**

Previously published in “Pool Paintings”

nat raum is a disabled artist, writer, and genderless disaster based on unceded Piscataway and Susquehannock land in Baltimore. They're the editor-in-chief of fifth wheel press. Their writing has been published with *Broadkill Review*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *ANMLY*, and others. Find them online: natraum.com.

Soon

by: **Morris
McLennan**

CW: Discussion of an explosion, brief contact with law enforcement

Most of the people at the climate strike were actually over sixty. I'm assuming, of course, but there were a lot of walkers and gray hairs in the crowd. The news usually makes it look like these things are all, like, young Greta Thunberg and the middle school biology club. But Friday afternoon was overwhelmingly an older crowd.

We started off in one of the downtown parks under the train. Organizers in highlighter-yellow vests handed out signs to those of us who didn't think to make one.

We ambled around the block. Grandkids with megaphones shouted chants that we discordantly repeated. I didn't speak to anybody. I wasn't having a great day. I didn't want to talk to anyone because I didn't want to start crying.

That morning was my first morning unemployed since before college. I'd forgotten to turn my alarm off. I was up at 6:30 to the iPhone siren sound. Mechanically, I sat up, brushed my teeth, splashed water on my face. Then I remembered I didn't have any place to be. I stood there in the bathroom for nearly ten minutes. Then I got back into bed. I couldn't sleep. I heard the world through my window sputtering on and heading to work. I stared at the ceiling for about four hours.

At around eleven, I decided I ought to feed myself. I stepped into sweatpants and a hoodie. I hadn't shaved. I looked a bit

like I used to ten years ago.

Outside, the electronic signs of the business district pierced through the early afternoon smog. I covered my face with a paper mask to try and keep the air out.

I couldn't decide if I should pick the cheapest lunch or the most expensive. I could save for my upcoming stretch of bad finances, or I could celebrate the ending of an era. It was between mashed yams and lab-grown salmon crème fraîche crepes with artificial black caviar. I picked up the crepes.

On my way out the door, the automatic turnstile didn't move. I stepped backward and tried again. It beeped at me. I took my phone out of my pocket to scan my way out. It beeped at me again.

A security guard with a gun on his hip approached me.

"What's going on here," he said flatly.

"Machine's broke. Won't let me pay," I said.

"It says your biometrics don't match your payment profile," he said.

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot to shave this morning," I said.

I showed the guard the grocery profile on my phone. In the illuminated picture, I was perfectly groomed and smiling, clothes expertly pressed at every seam.

In real life, I was grungy and smelly and wearing my old college clothes.

The security guard looked at me, then the picture, then me. He sighed. I guessed it was a fifty-fifty toss-up if he let me go or if he called the police on me.

He sighed again and tapped his ID card to the grocery turnstile. It blinked green.

“You ought to update your profile if this is your new look, or whatever,” he said.

“Will do,” I said. The grocery store automatically withdrew several days’ worth of income from my bank account, and I resurfaced to the street outside.

I sat at my desk in my apartment. It was a tiny studio, but I was lucky. From my corner unit, I could see the endless skyline outside. I had a bed in one corner and a desk in the other. I didn’t need anything else.

I cracked open my hermetically sealed case of crepes. I sat my phone down next to it. I opened up the contacts.

I decided to text Sarah first.

“Got laid off,” I sent.

Immediately, I saw her typing. “Oh no :(“

Then, she sent a second text: “Why?”

I considered what to tell her. That I’m incompetent. That I’m a loser. That I don’t deserve the life I have, and I never did.

“Shareholder’s got to eat, too,” I sent.

Sarah replied with a “LOL.” Then the conversation was over.

Then, an email popped up at the top of my phone. I clicked on it, half hoping it’d be job-related.

“Your Upcoming Event: International Climate Strike,” read the email.

I scrolled down. I’d been getting these emails since I was a teenager. I usually deleted them. But this time, I didn’t have anywhere else to

be.

I very slowly ate cold crepes over the course of about three hours. Then I wrapped a scarf around my nose and mouth and wandered into the world.

Out in the world, the workday hadn't ended yet. Everyone on the train was an older person with a cardboard sign they'd crafted from their recycling. We all spilled out into the downtown park. A grandkid picked up the megaphone.

We ambled around in the smog. It was making us sick, but we did it anyway. A lot of these people, I thought, must've been doing this for decades. Some of them probably voted for Al Gore. And now, many years later, they still marched. They still carried cardboard signs and shouted asynchronous chants.

We ended up at the bank I used to work for. I didn't realize that was the destination. I felt like I was going to throw up. I thought about splitting off, but I was encased by elderly hippies.

One of them climbed up onto a bench and borrowed the megaphone.

"We demand the immediate divestment from fossil fuels. We've asked peacefully for many years, but time is up. If we do not act now, we will have no future. Our children and grandchildren will die young and violent deaths. Starvation, dehydration, organ failure, cancer. Today is the final chance. Tomorrow will be too late."

She spoke evenly and softly. There was no anger or despair behind her words. A few older hippies cheered, but most were silent. They didn't look sad or angry or moved or anything. They looked like they'd done this many, many times before.

I could see the window we were aiming our megaphone at. Mike worked in that office. Huge office, big windows, thousand dollar desk chair. My office was twelve floors below his.

I imagined Mike not even noticing. I imagined him on the phone, or at his computer, watching the numbers go up and down.

The woman with the megaphone stepped down from the bench. It was now four p.m. She accepted a wheelbarrow from one of the other organizers. Inside the wheelbarrow was a projector. She wiggled it towards Mike's office.

A beam of red light cut through the smog. Against the glass exterior of the bank: a countdown clock. Eight hours, now depleting, second by second.

Oh my god, I thought. Are the hippies gonna bomb Mike's office?

I'm ashamed now of the feeling I felt. It was a primal and selfish feeling. Filled up my entire body, but mainly, radiated from my stomach. *Yes, yes, yes, I thought. I want to see the whole place splattered.*

But once that feeling washed away, I tapped into what everyone else outside was feeling. I thought about my parents. I wished they were still alive so I could call them. I thought about the honey I ate when I was a kid. The apples. The peanut butter. I thought about being very young and playing in puddles in the rain. I tried to remember the last time rain was safe enough to play in. But it was all fuzzy, all squished together in my head, now.

I thought about all the years I sat at the desk twelve floors below Mike's office. All the time we spent complaining at our coffee lunch breaks. All the mechanically pressed work clothes, all the gym memberships, all the haircuts, all the sputtered out first dates, all the automated turnstiles.

All the empty space in my brain between the things I did so I could

live and the things I did so that one day, none of us could.

I could hear shouting from someplace behind me. Cops, I'm sure. I pulled my scarf up over more of my face, stuffed my hands in my pockets, and slowly weaved out of the crowd. Most of the older hippies stayed exactly where they were. Once I put a good bit of distance between me and them, I looked back. Tear gas, handcuffs, unmarked police vans.

When I got back to my apartment, I called Sarah. She invited me across the hall.

She lived in the mirrored corner unit. She lived a thirty-second walk away from me. We hardly ever hung out anymore. We were always so busy with work.

She let me inside and hugged me tightly. We sat on the floor.

"So what do you think I should do now?" I asked.

"You're good with numbers and stuff. You can do anything," she said.

"But like. What do I do?"

"Lots of stuff, you know, like. You could do, like, accounting for a nonprofit or something. Or like, I dunno. Join a tech startup on something."

"But what do we do?" I was staring out the window. I couldn't figure out how else to say it.

Sarah put a hand on my shoulder.

"C'mon, let's get drunk and watch *Sex in the City*," she said.

Sarah always had sparkling rosé in her fridge. We hardly saw each other, but we used to be girls together. We used to put on all sorts of costumes and drink fruity wine and speculate

about what sorts of lives we'd live when we were older. The boys we'd kiss. The dog breeds we'd care for. The colors we'd paint our big historical houses.

We didn't do that anymore, though.

The night of that last climate strike, we just got drunk and watched TV. We'd occasionally see breaking news notices over our chick flicks, but we'd dismiss them before we could process the headlines. The alcohol prompted me to forget for a while that I'd even been fired.

"Did you see that fucking Debbie is dating fucking Steve? I fucking hate Steve, I hope he never emails me ever a-fucking-gain," I spat.

"He won't email you, he won't, no reason to," Sarah slurred.

"What? Why?" I mumbled, leaning deeper into her shoulder.

"Hey, look. After midnight," she said.

"I didn't even notice," I said.

"Kaboom. Your job doesn't even exist anymore," Sarah said, sitting up straight and miming an explosion with her hands.

I lost support on her shoulder and fell forward. I flipped over onto my back. I gazed up at her ceiling fan, which was the same as my ceiling fan, which was the same as nearly everybody's ceiling fan.

"No more Debbie or Steve or Mike. I wonder if Mike is dead," I said.

"He would've run, I think," Sarah said.

"Yeah," I said. Then I tugged at Sarah's sleeve.

"Do you think we have a future?" I asked her.

Sarah drank another swig of wine. "I just take it one day at a time."

The TV clock read 12:38. It was officially my second day of

unemployment.

I mustered up my strength and stood, wobbly. I raised a glass.

“I think I want to live,” I said.

Sarah climbed up to meet me. She smacked her glass against mine.

“Then let’s live,” she said.

Outside, the wind picked up over the Great Lakes and headed in our direction. It carried the smog South towards Appalachia. For a brief moment, we could’ve stuck our heads out the window and bellowed and screamed and laughed in the fresh air. But we didn’t notice. We weren’t paying attention.

Outside, worms wriggled over in the dirt. They’d been asleep through the winter but were ready to breach the surface, now.

In the world of our apartment building, we held hands and pressed foreheads together and agreed not to pour out any wine for the future. Not yet, anyway. Maybe soon. But not yet.

Morris McLennan (he/him) is a trans writer from Chicago, IL. He holds a BFA in Playwriting from DePaul University. His plays have been workshopped with the support of DePaul University, King’s College, and the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. His writing has appeared in *Adelaide*, *underscore_magazine*, and more. You can view his work at morrismclennan.net.

Fading in the Sunlight

by: Elana Joy

CW: Sex work

With four crisp hundred dollar bills folded into the palm of one hand and a lace bodysuit dangling from the fingers of the other, Lena closed the bedroom door tightly behind her, grateful for a reprieve from the suffocating aroma of latex and Listerine. If she had no use of her senses, she wouldn't mind this kind of work at all. It was the stuffy smells and sloppy, slurping, wet sounds that made her stomach cartwheel and her shoulders shudder when she thought about them for too long.

She stepped quietly in a seemingly endless shadow along a deep-blue crushed velvet curtain hanging from the ceiling to floor. As she pulled it back, daylight flooded the darkened room, momentarily illuminating the kitchen and front door of an otherwise typical apartment before the heavy fabric was quickly readjusted from the other side. Behind the curtain was an office that moonlighted as a living room. A brown corduroy loveseat and matching overstuffed armchair faced a small flat-screen television, creating an illusion of normalcy. A wooden coffee table, a glass desk, and a picture bay-view window in lieu of a wall wouldn't have most people asking questions. If one snooped further, however, they might notice that the television rested on a cubby unit, and that nine cloth cube drawers were

tucked into that unit, organized not by what was in them, but by who— each adorned with a small decorated name tag on the front. One drawer, with a tag that read *Anastasia*, had clearly been closed in haste. The heel of a stiletto clumsily poked out of the top, bending the fabric into a soft U, offering a small insight into *Anastasia*. Every other drawer was discreetly pushed into the cubby unit, far back enough that nothing would seem amiss to any handyman, delivery driver, or Jehova’s Witness that may come to the door.

To the trained eye however, the biggest giveaway of the space’s true purpose was the large plush gold-leafed book, its cover made of crushed velvet like the curtains, but colored a striking black. The book which currently rested in the lap of a young woman, child-like and thin with her legs crossed and folded beneath her, nearly swallowed by the enormity of the armchair.

Lena crossed the small room and placed the four hundred dollars on the glass desk. The pale woman looked up, unruffled by the naked body in front of her.

“That was fast.”

“Yeah.” Lena sighed, and then slumped into the loveseat beside her. “It was only a half-hour.”

“Oh. Lucky.” The woman returned her attention to the book in her lap, and then, without looking up, “I forgot, Cheyenne got a client last minute. I’m supposed to check your money.”

“Go ahead.” Lena closed her eyes and could hear the sound a small body makes when it moves across soft surfaces. Acrylic fingernails gently clinked against glass and paper shuffled.

“All good.” Lena opened her eyes. The morning had seeped into the afternoon, leaving lipstick-stained mugs of cold coffee on every surface and a midday tiredness in her bones that made her feel like she could sink through the corduroy cushions and into the hardwood floor below. She forced herself off of the couch, feeling the weight of her whole body resisting the rise. The young woman was settled back into her position in the armchair with her eyes glued to the black book again. Her hair was dark and smooth like oil, but wispy like a feather, cut boyishly just below her ears. As she read, the longer strands growing from the top of her head occasionally fell into her line of vision, and her hand would gracefully rise to brush them out of the way. Suddenly she looked up, and Lena realized she must have rested dazed eyes on her colleague, seemingly in a stare.

“Uh...are you going to walk your client out?”

Lena blinked hard, shaking her head to wake herself up. “Yeah, sorry Alice. I’m really tired today.” Alice smiled,

“He’s your last client. As soon as he’s out of here you can relax.”

“And tomorrow?” Lena could hear the heaviness in her voice. Alice heard it too.

“Tomorrow will be just another day.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I’ll walk him out.”

Her drawer was no more than three feet away, but every step Lena took toward *Lena* seemed to pull her another mile away from the previous. In the arm chair behind her, Alice turned a

page in the book. The rustle of paper reverberated throughout the room, building upon its already deafening whisper. When she finally reached the drawer, Lena knelt on the ground and gently tugged the tag, pulling it open. Inside *Lena* was a yellow sundress, a copy of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a pair of lavender plush sandals and a matching silk robe, both of which she retrieved and replaced with the lace bodysuit. She stretched and stood, stripped and still, feeling washed out in this space filled with the roar of white noise and bright daylight.

The sound of a door opening broke the blaring quietude of the room and prompted the women to look up in unison. Alice mouthed to Lena, "GO." and Lena went, throwing the robe over her shoulders, swiftly wrapping it around her naked body, silk against skin.

"Here I come, honey!" Her voice sounded nothing like her own. Lena slid her feet into the plush sandals and scurried past the velvet curtain, pushing the fabric out of her way rather than opening it to reveal the living room. Muffled *Thank yous* and *Goodbyes* were followed by the click of the front door closing, and she appeared on the other side of the curtain, once again.

Alice hadn't yet returned the book to its usual residence on the glass desk. Now, she was moving one finger across the page and counting aloud. Every so often she'd look up at the ceiling, deep in thought.

"What are you doing?" Alice jolted and looked up at Lena, startled by the sound of her voice.

"You're so quiet. I didn't hear you come back."

Lena stuck one slippered foot out and shook it toward her colleague, "Slippers." Alice was silent, her attention already

back on the gold-leafed pages.

“What are you doing?” Lena asked again, returning to the loveseat. Alice sighed, lifting her gaze; then she asked,

“Have you ever counted your appointments?”

“Counted?”

“Yeah.”

“Have I counted all of the clients I’ve seen since I started?”

“Yeah.” In spite of asking the question, Alice didn’t seem to be interested in hearing an answer. She wasn’t looking at the book anymore, but she wasn’t looking at Lena either; she was looking nowhere, as if she was somewhere else.

“Why would I do that?”

Alice shrugged, “I don’t know. I’m just curious, I guess.”

“I don’t think I want to know.” Lena rested her back against the loveseat and closed her eyes. She could hear Alice counting under her breath. *Eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five.* Pages rustled. *Eighty-six, eighty-seven, eighty-eight.* Lena imagined her number was higher; she’d been working at the house longer than Alice. *Eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one.* The sun had moved so that it was shining directly through the picture window, reflecting off the water of the bay, the glint of skyscrapers sparkling where the light struck them miles away in the San Francisco skyline. *Ninety-two, ninety-three, ninety-four.* The brightness pushed its way through Lena’s eyelids so she only saw red. *Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred.*

Lena opened her eyes, “Can you count quieter?” Alice looked up

from the book and closed it, “Sorry.” Her eyes hungered for approval and the sorrow in her voice outweighed any guilt, making Lena regret her tone.

“It’s okay, I’m sorry too...I didn’t mean to sound so cold. I’m just tired.”

“Me too.”

The women sat in silence, sunlight filling the room. The contrast between the white walls and everything within them faded away, as if cleansing the space, sacrificing their definition and shapes to the light. To an outsider, nothing would seem amiss. The in-call was just another apartment, where two women sat in the afternoon sun.

Elana Joy (she/her), a lifelong resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, writes rhyming stories for children and prose for grown-ups. She received her B.A. from Arizona State University and currently works as a creative writing teacher for children. This is Elana’s first piece published in a literary journal, but certainly not her last. Tip her on venmo @elanajoy

After Nandy (Shanidar 1)

by: Irving
Benitez

CW: Death/funeral mention

You were never meant to survive, dear brother
at least that's what people now say about you.

:::

Freeze frame,
Rewind the scene.
They unearthed you once again in 1957.
How many years has it been, dear brother
since you were buried so long ago with the
others?

:::

Freeze frame,
Rewind the scene.
Your funeral,
45,000-35,000 years ago,
looking back through the shatter glass of earth
and what leftover history can be made of your bones
and oh what a story they do tell of you.
You were never meant to make it this long,
Go forward

:::

Freeze frame.

I read about you on Tumblr.

Rewind the scene.

Your funeral showed you were loved,

interred with flowers and small gifts

tools and things to help you in next life.

Little did they know that your next life

would disprove everything we thought we knew

about you and every one of our and your cousins.

:::

Rewind the scene.

Freeze Frame.

Something hit you in your left side

and you became blind in that eye due to the damage,

withered right arm, fractured

and healed

in several places.

:::

Freeze Frame.

You could not hear,

left ear damage from the blow and right ear bone spur,

fractured C5 vertebrae.

Your right arm, withered, and you lost the lower half

and right hand. First known evidence of surgery perhaps?

Two broken legs at some point in your life,

both healed, but you walked with a limp.

Unable To Provide For Oneself.

:::

Fast forward.

I'm reading about you on Tumblr.

Who was at your funeral?

Cousins?
Siblings?
Strangers?
Found family maybe.
Laying flowers around your body.

:::

Fast forward.
I'm in the Smithsonian,
it's the end of the pandemic
officially but
it's not the end
and I don't know if there will be an end
and I see your cast behind a plexiglass window
of your skull
and your arms,
Freeze frame.
and I am here.
Rewind,
and you are there.
Fast forward.
Facing each other and —

:::

Pause this moment
freeze frame behind shatter
proof glass,
rewind to see you buried.
Fast forward to moment in history.

:::

Irving Benitez (he/him) is a queer multi disabled poet from
NE Ohio. Find him at <https://seaminor.carrd.co/>

Genesis of the Alcoholic's Baby

by: **Anthony Strom**

CW: Implications of alcoholism, depression

Somewhere very dark is a girl-child
She burrows with the worms
Among bodies never buried
Every night she cries for unfound bones

As Dawn pulls back her rosie cloak, all is revealed
By grandfather's odyssey, she is dug out and shown god
She loves her brand new Father
But the tilled soil still calls

And the girl grew up into a young man
A not-man; he lives somewhere winey— red that hurts to look at
It's a rough red (but softer than blood)
Dirt is again beneath his nails

Maybe one day he'll have a baby
One he'll bury deep in the soil when he's too tired to breathe
But today, the sky is blue as clean veins
And life is finally tolerable.

Anthony Strom (they/them) is a writer based in Sackville N.B. Their work has appeared in 805 and The Parliamentary Literary Magazine. They are currently trying to obtain a Bachelors of Economics, although it is a constant battle against the urge to run away and become a feral hermit.

Wishes for Dora

by: Dee Ó Dálaigh-Rónáin

CW: transphobia, medical gatekeeping, and death of a marginalized person (real, mentioned)

I wish I knew more about you.

Most people featured on the site have their lives split into sections, segmented and easy to consume.

Not you, though.

Your whole life is squished into short paragraphs all packaged into a little biography.

I wish I knew of your youth,
of your siblings, your parents,
what sparked your love of baking, who taught you the craft,
how you felt moving away from home,
and what brought you back.

I wish I knew of your friends,
the one who first called you Dora
and those who called you 'Dorchen,'
the one who convinced you to make your dream a reality.
I wish I knew of your opinion on Hirschfield,

whether you felt that same flurry of anxiety
sitting in that waiting room as many others do on this journey,
readying yourself to convince him that you're not crazy,
that these feelings are real and have haunted you for as long as you knew
of your existence and that you would do anything to look at all close to how
you see yourself and and and—

I wish I knew what you felt
when you woke up after the procedure,
the triumph that came with knowing you made history.
I wonder if you really cared about that,
or if it meant nothing compared to the relief and joy surging through you,
the final piece of the puzzle falling into place.

No, none of this feels right.

In truth, I wish you didn't have an article.
Not because you don't deserve one,
but I want you to be unremarkable.
Just another woman who lived her life
with little excitement and mundane troubles,
surrounded by people who loved and understood you,
and I'm sorry that was taken from you.

Dee Ó Dálaigh-Rónáin (he/him) is a poet studying Creative Writing at the University of Galway. His work has been published in MAW Poetry Magazine, The Elevation Review, and Scapegoat Review. Alongside his poetry, he is currently working on a play based on his experiences with the Irish healthcare system.

To Consecrate Our Calamities, To Commemorate This Carnage

by: J.D. Harlock

CW: Settler colonialism, calls for revolution, mentions of ethnic cleansing

circling shifted soil, shamanesses sway, shapelessly,
in the sand—shrouded in scarred shadows

slowly, the silenced subjects of the state surround
this ceremony, this celebration realized through
the sacrifices of the shantytown shepherdesses, who
call for a revolt, a reckoning, a return to
the equity of Eutierria

for recent resettlements have been razed
reinstating the rule of ravagers, who
rely on, who
revel in
the spoils of savagery, the sacrilege of the sacred
that shall be reclaimed, that shall be requited

because the old world, that of spirit and soul, persists
in passion and pain,
leaving behind
strongholds, safeguards, strategums—
remnants of the revelation reasoned
when we were wise and wilful, sustained on
the sow of sanctified soil, under
the auspices of ageless ancestors, whose wisdom
we once availed ourselves of—only for
the wretched
with their wickedness
to waste the world
and warp its wonder

but fear not, friends, for in time,
with patience and prudence,
the shepherdesses shall retaliate,
and if pressed, shall reciprocate

until equilibrium is reestablished
and Eutierria is reenvisioned

on this night, however, the shamanesses shall sway,
shapelessly, in the sand, so that
one day
when our children ask us why,
why we choose to
consecrate our calamities, to
commemorate this carnage
wrought here
by these
insatiable cannibals,
who have culled us
like cattle
we shall hold our heads high
and respond:

“this barren land is now fertile grounds for
a revolution”

In addition to their work at Solarpunk Magazine, as a poetry editor, and at Android Press, as an editor, J.D. Harlock's (he/they) writing has been featured in Strange Horizons, New York University's Library of Arabic Literature, and the SFWA Blog. You can find them on Twitter, Threads, & Instagram @JD_Harlock.



Save the Date

by: **Mark Myavec**

Mark Myavec has been an urban planner, a teacher, and a stay-at-home dad. He is looking forward to adding grandfather to that list in the near future. He has just completed an extended road trip through a number of states, a trip that has reaffirmed his belief that we are still capable of finding common ground and treating each other with respect.

Pinche Vacas

by: **Viviana
Olvera**

Don Gonzalo's mayoral campaign signs lined the pothole-laden road of First Avenue, which overlooked the rest of the tiny southern Arizona town from atop a cliffside. Plastered on each of the signs was the mayoral candidate's image, which didn't so much smile in the traditional sense as it did stare at the camera with a puzzled look. While absolutely no part of his campaign included fixing the potholes that pockmarked the street, one thing in particular drove his campaign: the pinche vacas. Or, rather, *getting rid* of the pinche vacas.

Lately, herds of cows had been wandering into Don Gonzalo's small town of primarily dirt roads adorned with not much more than a gas station and a Mexican restaurant called Las Nacas. The old man hadn't thought much of it at the time, as he didn't leave the house enough to notice, and his attention was usually only given to the TV and a pack of cigarettes. No, the inciting incident of his mayoral campaign was when the cows had begun eating the roses from the rose bush planted on the fenceline of his front yard nearest the road. Don Gonzalo had gifted his beautiful wife, Lucia, the rose bush seedling, which she carefully tended to every day, along with her dozens of other plants on the front patio.

When November rolled around, Don Gonzalo's campaign turned out to be a complete success; he won in a landslide victory—aided only,

perhaps, by a complete lack of any other candidates.

For the next several months, Don Gonzalo would head off to City Hall—a dilapidated brick building which, while as old as the town itself, didn't carry much history within its walls—with his briefcase, whose contents consisted solely of the roast beef sandwich Lucia made him daily and a yellow legal pad paired with a BIC ballpoint pen. The pen had dried out long ago, but he had never noticed.

Don Gonzalo's only action as mayor was enacting a ban on cows in the town. In an effort to skirt the new legislature, farmers simply stopped branding their cows so as not to be fined when their cows got out. The cows would have breathed a sigh of relief if it weren't for their complete lack of understanding of local politics. Instead, they continued to roam the streets, visiting the savior of their hides' yard nightly for a delicious (apparently) midnight snack of roses.

"Pinche vacas," Don Gonzalo said with a crinkled nose one morning, inspecting the rose bush whose flowers had dwindled overnight. Lucia looked at it with her husband, a sullen look on her face, then handed the briefcase to him as he got into his old Dodge pickup. Pushing sixty, she was as radiant as the day they'd met. Don Gonzalo used to tell her that her beauty made the Sonoran Desert so envious it painted the sunset such marvelous pinks and purples every day in a futile attempt to rival her.

"Have a good day, mi amor," she said, planting a kiss on his cheek that left a bright red lipstick print. He grunted, eyes still trained on the rose bush. Lucia nodded, turned, and headed back up the steps into the house. When she was inside, he got back out of the truck and picked a single rose from the bush, pricking his thumb on a thorn. He stuck his chubby thumb into his messy, mustachioed mouth and looked up and across the street. A regal-looking cow patterned with a caramel brown and white glared at him, closely watching his every movement.

"Pinche vaca."

When Don Gonazlo made it to his office, he headed to his desk, aiming to piss away the few hours a day that he worked—mayoring such a small town was admittedly not a full-time job—by doing the crossword and taking many lengthy smoke breaks.

On his first smoke break, he plopped down at the designated smoke pit in front of the building, adjusting his body weight until sufficiently comfortable, took out a Marlboro Red, and lit up. It wasn't long until, for the second time that morning, Don Gonzalo noticed a cow on the opposite side of the street. If he were a more observant man, he would have recognized the markings as being not dissimilar to the cow from earlier that morning.

“Pinche vaca,” he grunted as he placed the butt of his third cigarette in the ashtray and went inside.

Later that evening, Don Gonazlo sat on the porch, chainsmoking cigarette after cigarette, staying vigilant for the sake of the rose bush. The screen of his iPhone, the model practically a relic, lit up as it sat on the table beside him, nested on his wallet beside the ashtray and a copy of *Cowboys & Indians Magazine*. Inside, Lucia called him to dinner.

“Pinche vaca,” he said, rolling his eyes. He put out the cigarette, grabbed his belongings, and headed inside. On the other side of the road, the cow stood in the brush, watching attentively.

“Frijoles?” Lucia asked as Don Gonzalo stepped inside. He grumbled, plodded to the fridge, pulled out a Dos Equis, and then headed for the sofa.

“Don't want no fuckin' beans.” Lucia nodded, placing just the pan-fried fish, some rice, and a tortilla on a plate before bringing it to him on the couch.

The next morning, Don Gonzalo followed what had now become

his usual routine. He grumbled at the rose bush. Hopped inside his shitty pickup truck. Took his briefcase from Lucia along with her kiss on his cheek. Waited for her to go back inside. Snagged a rose from the rose bush. Drove to work.

Across the street, the cow continued to lurk, ever a silent sentinel.

Don Gonzalo pulled up to a stop sign, brakes squeaking harshly, when his phone alerted him of a text. He turned onto First Avenue, texting with one hand, steering with the other. *You coming over today?* the text read. Don Gonzalo looked up from his steering wheel, happy, for a moment. *Can't wait to see you, mi rosita,* he began to type, knowing well enough to leave out the vulgarities that he really wanted to say. As his lumbering fingers mashed at the phone screen, he looked up to the road he'd driven a million times, his eyes meeting those of his bovine observer, somehow now in the middle of the road.

"Pinche vaca," he grunted out, jerking the wheel to the right, veering his truck off course, through a row of his campaign signs and then into the traffic barrier on the side of the road. The barrier was the only thing separating him from the cliffside that ran along the street, though it gave way instantly.

In Don Gonzalo's final moments, the last thing he would see was one his campaign signs, which clung to the windshield as he careened down the cliffside. *Stop the cows!* his image demanded with the dumbfounded expression that mirrored his own.

Viviana Olvera (she/her) is a disabled, trans, Latina writer and content creator from Tucson, Arizona, where she lives with her girlfriend and cat. She is the founder of Prismatic Press and heads both the press and its literary magazine, Prismatic Magazine, as Editor-in-Chief. Her work can be found in Selcouth Station Press, Chaparral Press, From the Father Trees, and Theta Wave Magazine. **41**

Ocean Invaders

by: Alice Kinerk

My husband would like me to stop talking about my blood, but I refuse. My blood is the finale at the end of my own personal fireworks show. It's the roses tossed at my stage. He shakes his head. My metaphors are doing nothing for him. It's back to his phone. He's frowning now.

We're at Starbucks, trying not to worry while we wait to find out about his mom. We're killing time.

Also, I just got back from the ladies' room, where guess what I discovered. My body is a resentful teenager lobbing unfertilized eggs at her bedroom door.

You've squandered your chances. This is what I imagine my body is trying to tell me with the blood. *You could have been rich with children. There could have been a dozen variations of your face plus his face toddling around, offering up weird crayon drawings with sticky little hands. You could have been the matriarch of future family reunion picnics.*

"Actually, I don't mind the blood." I raise my volume to compensate for his lack of eye contact. "I see blood I go,

‘Hello again.’” It isn’t clear whether or not I am loud enough to be overheard, regardless, Hubs shoots me a death glare while sipping his caramel latte. I raise my spiced chai, like *Checkmate*.

What I would like him to understand is I really do not mind the blood. Blood is like a friend showing up unannounced. An old friend you’ve known since you were twelve. A friend who moved cross-country with you, survived your first marriage, stayed through tragedy and grief. A friend who has been visiting a lot recently, coming frequently and staying late. But you don’t mind, because she’ll be leaving forever soon. You know, and you know she knows. And she knows you know. But it can’t be talked about. These days, every time you see her you wonder: *Is this it? Will I see her again?* And that’s sad.

We’re sitting adjacent to the restrooms, Hubs and I. Eight steps away, ten max. There are plenty of customers, but we’re the only ones by the restrooms. There’s the two of us, several empty feet of space, then everyone else crowded together on the other side. This might bother most people, but we live in

the woods. Homebodies at heart. And like everyone who lives in the woods, each time we come into town we feel awkward, and wonder if the normal people can spot us.

"I found a documentary," Hubs pats his side of the bench. I stand up and scoot in next to him like a teenager on a restaurant date. It's a *NOVA* episode titled "Ocean Invaders." It's about lionfish. Apparently, lionfish have been showing up in parts of the ocean where they're not wanted. They sit around snarfing up everything, and repopulating like crazy. So scientists encouraged people to catch lionfish. The cameras follow a couple of teenage Mexican girls who earn pocket money spearing lionfish and selling them to restaurants. But there are still too many. They're spread into habitats where they never were before, and they're upsetting the natural balance. They keep eating everything.

Lionfish are fringed with venomous yellow-black spines. They are aquarium fish. The impact of the species is impressive, but as individuals they act like dolts. They are easy to catch because they have no predators. You just swim up to them with a special spear. *Pop!* You got a lionfish.

We laugh, seeing this. But Hubs and I have been like lionfish. We saw what was coming with his mom, and we waited. Perhaps we waited until it was too late.

Hubs and I laugh so hard other customers turn to look.

Then Hubs' phone rings. The doctor at last. Hubs pokes the screen. "Hello?" He walks outside.

"It's neurological," he says when he comes back. He's reaching for his cup. "They're keeping her overnight."

It's the news we expected, but not what we wanted. There's nothing left to do. We ought to toss back the last of our beverages and drive home.

But not yet. I pat the bench next to me. We return to the documentary.

There is a priceless scene of a single lionfish moving into a scientist's net. Slow-mo, like the replay on an NBA dunk. Lionfish do not have expressions, but this little guy looks absolutely flabbergasted. We laugh ourselves to tears.

In the car on the way home the radio is off, but Hubs and I can think of nothing to say. The cupholder is filled with his mom's boogery tissues. I would like to think up a metaphor for the tissues, but I can't. I don't know what to tell Hubs about his mom. I don't know how to stop lionfish from taking over. I can't even control my own blood. It is sometimes unbelievable to have reached the age of forty-whatever and still not have the answers. Sometimes I think all I really know how to do is gather up the details and try to find reasons to laugh.

When Alice Kinerk (she/her) is not writing fiction, she loves to play Scrabble. She recently memorized the two-word list, now she's working on words with three-letters. She's been published or has work forthcoming in Oyster River Pages, South Dakota Review, Rock Salt Journal, and elsewhere.

Thicket in retrograde

by: Dorothy Lune

SEEKING

Roll back the firs come close
as if to hug & apologize— lobster
for dinner, died alone in a tank.
You force the role of two primates:
perverted fragments. Movement
being the only artistic direction.
I pass you in traffic, you're
hunting down an orbital of life
like klonopin did to you, &
I force the roll of expiration—
there is a study: we change
& change & behave half-chewed.

SEEING

Roll up your arms & so you
called them Chinese finger traps,
paranoia as side effect to
progress. I learnt much
about people to trust them— I
know better now, don't let me
be held by its blazen bark,
impossible to walk wrapped like
a toothbrush. I know better
now than to act as *homo sapien*:
wisdom carved & disperses
under my nails & overbite, I
over chewed enough to split in half.

SPREADING

I paste protest posters over
my city of love so dim like a sunweak
planet— you burst into anti gravity.
You roll back your clip
after the psychologist charges your
insurance, & all you see is sacrifice.

Dorothy Lune (she/her) is a Yorta Yorta poet, born in Australia & a best of the net 2024 nominee. Her poems have appeared in Overland journal, Many Nice Donkeys & more. She is looking to publish her manuscripts, can be found online @dorothylune, & has a substack at dorothylune.substack.com

When We Were Made

by: Carter Hemion

When we were made from clay,
Our bodies lax shrines to something greater,
Some ancestors' tissues held velvety:
Smooth, soft, like wet earth and silk.

When we were made from starstuff,
Our bodies reverent to impermanence,
Dark matter remained in our bellies,
Tearing apart whirlwinds in every breath.

When we were made from primates,
Our bodies meant to hold each other,
We grasped sticks to survive humanity—
Canes an extension of bodies' freedoms.

When we were made from parents' touch,
Our bodies remembered infinite ways to rebuild,
These cells a work of art unknown and unalone:
Imprints of the clay and stars and creatures before.

Wherein my college boyfriend sends my wife “The Birth Partner”

by: Julie
Woulfe

What love story
was there to prepare me

for how my wife now opens
the folds of thick brown paper
tightly wrapped,
reads me the bold block letters
the scrawled well-wishes to us both.
A talisman they can carry with them,
as they, masked, in the delivery room
are asked again and again
are you the father?

This man gave me flowers
once— a woolen hat
with notes like this
I kept years after he took
one long look at my naked chest
sighed a weary sigh,
and said, *we should stop.*

I thought it was a loss,
that I knew him and then not.
but it was a gift in thick brown paper
unwrapping over decades,
this love story I couldn't envision —

because what love story
starts with a man coming out,
opening the door for you
to stumble behind?

Julie Woulfe (she/her) is a poet and psychologist in Upstate New York. Her previous work has appeared in Breakwater Review, White Whale Review, Crack the Spine, The Clackamas Literary Review, and Wisconsin Verse

Sometimes Jupiter Loses Its Moons

by: **Khalid McCalla**

CW: Mention of death

They are walking.

“Yesterday, the sun started to melt.”

“Huh?”

“Did you not notice?”

“Can’t say I did.”

“Oh. Well, yesterday, the sun started to melt.”

“Can you explain?”

“Well, I guess, I don’t really know if it started yesterday. That might be misleading. I should’ve said that yesterday, while I was walking, just like we’re walking right now, I noticed that the sun was melting.”

“Okay. And how did you notice that the sun was melting?”

“I saw it. How else do you notice when something starts melting?”

“Lots of ways. Like, think about a popsicle. Okay? If I was holding a popsicle right now and it started to melt, we’d both see it. Right? But if it melted enough, it’d dribble down the stick, and onto my hand, so I’d also feel it. And, if either of us had a really good sense of smell, we’d probably smell it, too. I know dogs are like that. And the taste would be different. Like if I licked the part of my popsicle—”

“Your hypothetical popsicle.”

“Yeah. My hypothetical popsicle. If I licked the—”

“Which means it’s not real.”

“Well, yeah. Right. But if I licked the part that was still frozen on my hypothetical popsicle and licked the not real melted popsicle dribble off my hand, they’d taste different too.”

“Probably because your hands are dirty.”

“Would be. My hands would be dirty. Because this is hypothetical. Also, I guess, they’d have the popsicle dribble on them, so that would make them dirty, but I assume you’re referring to them being dirty prior to the popsicle dribble but —”

“Stop saying dribble. It’s weird.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

There is silence.

“I’m sorry, but did I do something wrong? The way you’re talking...I think I did something wrong.”

“Why are you talking to me about popsicles? I was trying to tell you

something serious.”

“Yeah, but c’mon. You can’t really think the sun is melting. I mean, that doesn’t even make sense. How could the sun be melting? It’s the thing that makes the universe hot.”

“That’s probably why it’s melting. If it’s the hottest thing in the universe, then wouldn’t something close to it, or it itself, be likely to melt? Doesn’t that make sense?”

“I guess, but there are thousands, maybe millions, of people across the world who study the universe and are constantly tracking the planets and stars and stuff. Like NASA. If the sun was actually melting, don’t you think that NASA would’ve said something about it? That’d be a big deal.”

“You’re right.”

“Even if there was some coverup, like if the president was like ‘Don’t tell anyone that the sun is melting,’ somebody would leak that information. Like that Snowden guy. There’d be another Snowden. Except instead of global surveillance and privacy violations, it’d be—”

“Okay, okay. I already said you were right. Okay?”

There is silence. They keep walking.

“You know, if you’re interested in the sun, I remember reading somewhere that scientists think that it’s going to go out in like 500 billion years or something.”

“Go out?”

“Yeah. Like a lightbulb. They think that one day, it’ll just turn off.”

“Well, that’s horrifying.”

“How so?”

“What do you mean?”

“How is that scary?”

“How is it not?”

“Okay, but you see, you didn’t actually answer the question.”

“The sun is responsible for life, right? So if it goes out, then won’t we all die?”

“Well, in 500 billion years, we’ll already be dead.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve got a pretty good hunch.”

“Whatever. Even if we’re dead, what about whoever’s here? Imagine living your life, thinking everything is fine —”

“Well, nothing is ever fine.”

“I didn’t say it was. I said imagine thinking everything was fine and then, one day...nothing. It’s just over.”

“Isn’t that what death is, though? It doesn’t matter if you’re eating cereal or on the front lines overseas. It could be a mortar attack, or it could be the sun turning off. Either way, the result is the same. You’re here, and then, one day, you’re not.”

“Fuck.”

“What?”

“Why would you say something like that?”

“What. We were talking about it.”

“No. No, we weren’t. You were. I just wanted to tell you about this cool thing I saw yesterday, and you went and turned it into this massively depressing thing.”

“I wasn’t trying to —”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care. I just want you to listen to me when I speak. I’m trying to share my thoughts with you and you, your head is always somewhere else. You —”

“My head is always somewhere else? Are you serious? You’re the one talking about the sun melting and saying we might still be alive in 500 billion years.”

“You’re not listening. You can never just listen. That’s the problem.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem.”

“You always talk about how you read this or heard that. It’s like you take in all this information, all this stupid, pointless information, just so you can steamroll me with facts and figures from some random corner of the internet. You have to, you always have to be the smartest person in the room. You can’t even just entertain something for a moment.”

“Maybe, have you considered that maybe, just maybe, I’m not steamrolling you? That I’m not trying to prove that I’m smarter than you? That maybe you and the way you see the world are just so absurd that anyone who brings an ounce of reality to your attention will sound like a buzzkill? I’m sorry, I don’t believe that that the moon is melting—”

“Sun! It was the fucking sun! The sun is melting!”

“Well, I’m sorry, I don’t believe that the fucking sun is melting. I’m sorry that I believe in science and evidence and proof. I didn’t realize that made me such a horrible person.”

“You’re not a horrible person because you believe in science. You’re a horrible person because you use that as an excuse to ignore me.”

There is more silence, They stop walking because now they are not sure where to go.

“You think I’m a horrible person?”

“No. Sorry. I was just mad.”

“Okay.”

They decide to keep walking.

“You know, I was—”

“Let me guess. You were reading something.”

“Actually, I was listening to a podcast.”

“Of course you were.”

“Anyways, I was listening to this podcast, and it turns out that Jupiter loses moons.”

“What?”

“Sometimes, Jupiter loses its moons.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Now you sound like me.”

“No. I sound like me. How could a planet lose moons?”

“Well, they said that sometimes moons can break apart and turn into rings. And sometimes they crash into the planet. But they said that, more often than not, the moons are never really lost. We just can’t see them or track them or chart their movements anymore.”

“So, they are lost?”

“No, no, they’re there. We just can’t see them.”

“You’re literally describing what a lost item is.”

“No, but it’s different.”

“If I lose my keys, they don’t just disappear. They’re still there. They

might be in the couch or on my bedside table or in the fridge, but they're there. I just don't know where they are. That's what makes them lost."

"Huh. I guess that's true."

"Plus, just because we can't see Jupiter's moons anymore doesn't mean that Jupiter can't. Like, isn't it really presumptuous of us to assume that, just because we lost them, that means Jupiter lost them too? Jupiter might have its shit together."

A laugh.

"You're right."

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

There is pleasant silence.

"So, what did it look like?"

"What?"

"What did it look like?"

"What did what look like?"

"The sun. When you saw it melting, what did it look like?"

"You don't wanna know."

"I do."

"No, you don't. You're just feeling guilty because you can tell that I'm upset, and you're worried you've ruined our walk. Well, don't worry. It's fine. I've reached my step goal for the day, so the walk is good. Good walk, good day."

"I'd really like to know."

“Really?”

“Only if you still want to tell me.”

There is silence.

“It looked like a runny egg yolk. But not the whole thing. Just the bottom. It stretched until the yolk part of the sun hung just above the clouds, and then some of it dripped down to Earth.”

“The sun...fell to Earth?”

“Not all of it. Not even most of it. Just some of it.”

“Just some of it. Okay. I can see that.”

“And then, the part that was hanging low snapped back up into the main sun. Like a yoyo.”

“Or like a runny egg yolk.”

There is a smile.

“Yeah. Like a runny egg yolk.”

They keep walking.

Khalid McCalla (he/him) is a graduate of Oberlin College. While at Oberlin, he won the inaugural Stuart Freibert and Diane Vreuls Prize for excellence in creative writing. His work has previously appeared in Glass Mountain.

girl-y Hood

by: Victoria

CW: Body dysmorphia

My face is molding clay and I have been trying to massage out the kinks. I can feel the tension holding, refusing to relax, refusing to be something that is not completely and always crinkled in stress. I've watched videos and read how-tos: how to get rid of your stress, how to change your face from wrinkled and sad to happy and free, how to unfold your face, how to turn from stone to wet wet clay.

My face is starting to melt and crumble under the weight of my soggy hands. I've never been delicate, I've never understood how softness works. I think of the times I've disconnected clit from vagina, trying to find any amount of pleasure, any amount of clarity, but my fingers are so so aggressive so so angry so so overwhelmed with femininity. What does it mean to be girl-y? What do girl-y girls do? Do they know how to please themselves, how to cum, how to massage themselves and relax and not stress?

I am collecting clay from the bogs of towns. Trying to find enough clay to reconstruct a face that knows how to re-lax. A face that can come un-done. Perhaps un-hinge and open and let out the bad bad thoughts. A face that I can air out once a week to let the smell out, light a candle, and refresh the space.

My body is flesh flesh fleshy flesh. It aches with human-ity. There's not enough clay in this world to craft a new one, not one that I could love. I dip my body into bogs and cast clay into the shell of what I used to be, but it comes out in one big lump like a candle that someone has burned down.

My body is fleshy and my face is shocked in time, frozen as a clay cast of stress, my muscles carved to be something so un-relaxed. My face is molding clay, but my hands are clumsy, so clumsy, they do not know how to create anything. My body is not feminine enough to create life, I am not god, just a girl who cannot re-lax. A girl who refuses to calm-down. A girl stuck frozen in time time time.

People are trying to help. People are telling me less screen-time as if the world happens off-line. As if the world could unfold in any way that does not furrow my brow. As if that world could exist and people would still somehow manage a sense of being un-stressed.

I do not think these people understand what it means to be made of bog, they do not think about the people who are not all flesh, *only my lower half* I try to tell them. People with their brains, girls with their girl-y-ness. I am just girl, half bog sculpture, half flesh, not all of me adds up.

I am trying to re-lax, trying to be-come something else. I fear I may have to get rid of the clay, throw the whole bog out. I fear I may become half fleshy flesh, half vacancy.

Victoria Hood (she/her) is the author of a collection of short stories *My Haunted Home (FC2)*, *I Am My Mothers Disappointments (Girl Noise Press, 2024)*, and chapbooks *Death and Darlings* and *Entries of Boredom and Fear (Bottlecap Press)*. You can find her on Instagram @toriellen or Twitter @toriellen1. If you have some cents to share you can tip her on Venmo at @Tori-Ellen.

How Can Flesh Tumble and Flow So, and Never Be Any Less Beautiful?

by: Henry Stennett

CW: Suicidal Ideation

Lord Pan had us collect another one—they've a weakness for wanderers and lost things. Always playing the shepherd. I blinked our hundreds of eyes a few times, slowly, and stretched our thousand limbs.

Split is a city of strays. There are many of me; we are one. It would take a while for us all to gather, and some of us would have to guide the poor thing, watch over them. Besides, the sunbathing spot I usually favoured was just two bounds and a trot from the creature's whereabouts.

Humans do choose to spend their time in the most curious places. We prefer to lounge on high walls beneath pomegranate blossoms or, if the sun is fierce, creep to the coolest corners of your old emperor's palace. But Lord Pan's next recruit had chosen to confine themselves to a grey tower. I had to spring between five balconies to spy the child through a windowpane. They were lying on a bed, their body made shapeless by loose black clothes, with another supine body a few feet above. They stared at the bottom of the mattress for several unbroken minutes.

They needed a shove.

I swept my paw through the air, from left to right, and the human tumbled to the floor with a thud. The others moaned and turned in their beds, but didn't wake up. The creature shook their head, setting bright corkscrew curls—white, lavender, rose, and lemon—leaping and falling about their face. They had an abstract expression as though all thought had been knocked clean out of them.

The human left through a door and I shimmied along a ledge and around a corner to another window. They broke two eggs into oil and watched them pop and sputter. Then, with a spasm, they seized the pan and shook its contents into the bin. The creature stalked off, rummaging in their pockets. I unsheathed and licked my claws.

I found them again in the small grassy area opposite their building. They were pacing back and forth, rapping their thumbs against glass, and sucking at a cigarette. I covered my nose and narrowed my eyes. The human held one end of the phone to their mouth and spoke in a breathy staccato.

"I don't want to feel like this anymore; I can't. I can't do it. I'm so tired. I'm so ... I hate the way people look at me, the way their eyes crawl over my body, like they're trying to figure me out, what I am. But this body, it *isn't* what I am—it doesn't fit me, Mom! I feel so trapped, I just feel ... wrong, all the time, I feel ...

"Do you remember that fall when I was a kid and me, you, and Dad watched the starlings fly over Central Park? A murmururation, Mom, flowing together and twisting apart—do you remember? They thundered and hissed like rain. They were one thing, and they were thousands at the same time and nobody had a problem with that. No questions. We just watched, and we understood, and we loved them for what they were. We loved them.

“I think about that all the time.

“Listen, Mom, by the time you get this, I’ll be gone. I’m sorry—tell Dad I’m sorry—but I just can’t do this any longer. At least I won’t be a burden. I’m sorry. I love you.

“Goodbye.”

The human stubbed their cigarette out on the side of a bin and dropped the butt and phone inside. Their hands were shaking—poor child.

*

Do you know what Nature is, truly? You do—like all creation, you know it in the before-knowing. You feel how Nature bubbles, fecund and febrile. Lord Pan is mad, and we are their servants.

Everything needed to make a chick waits inside an egg—it’s just a matter of rearrangement. Take the yolk’s yellow for the feathers, a shard of shell for the beak, and fold the slimy whites up into its insides.

What do you call that? Yes, yes, I’ve dozed on the windowsills of your lecture theatres, and I’ve heard the dry words your professors push between their lips—ugly names for the invisible materials of spells. It’s a word you fear to speak, an idea you’ve chosen to ignore, but it’s true. Such transformations are Magic.

And Nature is always transforming itself. Before it can draw itself up to its full height, the tallest tree must crack free from a tiny seed. Fish switch sex as needed or exist in inbetweens. Caterpillars and tadpoles unmake themselves and set what breaks into new shapes.

All things encompassed in one.

It's only humankind that feels stuck.

*

The human approached a road, too busy chewing their fingernails to look left or right. Rubber yelped. The driver leaned out of his window and told my charge, chestily, to enter their mother's sister's vagina. They flinched and held up a hand but didn't understand.

The market seemed to calm them: their shoulders dropped, and I couldn't see their chest shudder under their clothes anymore. Sunlight bounced off the red-and-blue-striped canopies shading the stalls. Elderly humans stared past heaps of cherries, courgettes, and beans, and their grandchildren darted, shouting prices at tourists' elbows. My human stood still, their hands clenched at their sides, and breathed the air.

Another of me sank from a chair to the slippery marble and slinked to the child's side. We held our ears back and stared at ourselves with beady eyes. I yawned and licked our chops. The other me glimmered between the human's legs and fluttered our tail against their fingers. Jolted from their stupor, the human looked around the market and blinked. My second self winked and skipped off in the direction of the place we'd meet. I meowed.

The human's eyes had fallen on an older human sitting against a patchwork wall. Windows and doors at odd heights held nothing but blue scraps of sky, and weeds tumbled from cracks in the stonework. The man had a beard and, at his feet, an upturned baseball cap. A few silver coins shone in it. My charge squatted before him and unclipped the bag they were wearing across their chest. The older human's eyes widened as it landed in his cap; he tried to hand it back, but the creature shook their head; he tried a few words of English, and they smiled. Finally, he held out his hand,

gnarled and brown like driftwood, and shook the child's. Light burst through their hair, and each colour blazed.

There was a squeak and a pop as they drew their arm back. The man and the child stared at the softer, browner hand still wrapped around his. There wasn't any blood. Where the wrist ended was wrapped in skin, perfectly smooth. The child hurried off, cradling their new stump, while the man continued to stare. His scream tore the air as my charge ducked into an alley. I loped after them, baring my fangs.

I discovered them running a thumb between the ears of one of my youngest selves, curled up in a styrofoam box. We were purring with our eyes squeezed shut, but as I approached, we felt our presence, and our emerald eyes flashed open. I hissed a warning: kitten or not, we knew better. Lord Pan's calls cannot be ignored. Silly-we skittered away.

The human studied the scene: someone had propped umbrellas in a corner and filled bowls with food and water. Humans aren't all bad; there are glimmers of good if you know how to look. I wondered if my charge was thinking something similar. They started to massage their jaw before reaching inside their mouth. There was a sucking sound, and then they were holding something white between their thumb and forefinger and turning it slowly in the light. The tooth had two long pointed roots stained dark like carrots. The human pulled another and more until their palm was full and glistening. They tipped the teeth onto the paving stones and marched away. I stared at the wet pile.

The stairs up to Marjan Forest Park have many steps. More of me emerged on the climb to stalk the child. They didn't notice; their gaze was fixed upwards, and they were mumbling. The sun was high, but as we followed the path, the temperature fell. Lord Pan's pines stood at attention, and their green spice drifted over us to the needle carpet. The

child placed their heels and toes gingerly but still stirred up dust. Our soft paw pads left no tracks.

The human reached the viewpoint and sat at the edge. It was a steep fall down a cliff face pocked with cacti and aloes, but the child moved with an assured feline grace. We gathered behind them and tried to see as they saw. Below were roofs of earth baked orange and walls of white-washed limestone. The mountains rose over the city. We couldn't see where the sea met the sky—clouds and islands floated together in the same blue the sailboats sliced through. The human kicked their feet, one by one, and we watched them fall: left, then right.

There wasn't much time.

I sat at the human's side. Ducking their hand and eyes, I thrust my flank against theirs. They smiled and fell backward onto the grass with a thump. The taller blades slipped through their chest. We watched them sink beneath the soil.

All of us finally gathered; we settled on the warm earth where our old body disappeared. We purred, and our tails twitched in time, as one.

Henry Stennett (he/him) is a British-Jamaican writer. He recently visited Jamaica for the first time and got to sit with Linton Kwesi Johnson for a while. Did you know they mix Campari with Ting in Jamaica? It's delicious! The Bristol Short Story Prize, Edinburgh Award for Flash Fiction, and Leicester Writes have published Henry's short stories.

An Absence of Medium

by: Z Lavway

I find no love in geometry
In the skeletons that lurk beneath each painting
Coarse, sketched lines against barren horizons
Empty and bleak from what they are not

for what they hope to be

I find only anxiety in process
In the throes of each regimented repetition
Patterns, a spinning void of hypnotic rhythm
Static boiling, fizzing to the surface

vacant with no meditation

I find the sum of all in the blankest of pages
In the pale light of sterile white space
Winter, and it's lifeless gaze
A barren landscape smothering the brain

Covered in blankets cold

Vacuums that pull and pull and pull

Z Lavway (they/he) spends their time covered in couch cushions, sifting through the coins and dust. They live their life on layaway in Maine and hope to be packaged and shipped soon. Therapy's expensive, if you'd like to tip their Venmo is @Z-Lavway.

What to Expect When You're No Longer Expecting

by: Lori
D'Angelo

CW: Miscarriage, pregnancy loss

It was a Friday in Spring, and I went to my first prenatal appointment for my second pregnancy alone. As the mother of one mostly happy three-year-old, I was a pro at this, or so I thought. I had been to many pre-baby appointments, and I figured it was no big deal that I had made the appointment on a day when my husband was out of town.

I was pregnant. The pee-on-a-stick test confirmed it. Given that I had already been through pregnancy once, this time should be a breeze. We had just moved to a new town the year before, so this was my first visit to this ob-gyn's office.

This doctor's office did it differently than my last doctor's office had. At the previous office, I saw my regular ob-gyn. At this doctor's office, I would begin the visit with an ultrasound. Then, I would see a nurse practitioner rather than an ob-gyn. The second visit would be my first visit with my actual doctor.

I went in for the ultrasound. The ultrasound technician put clear jelly on my abdomen. A picture of a baby came up on the screen. The technician was quiet like something was wrong, but she didn't tell me

what. *You'll have to talk to the nurse practitioner*, she said. I went from the room where I had my ultrasound to the NP's office. I remember a very large framed picture of her three children on the wall. She came in and told me: *Your baby doesn't have a heartbeat. What do you want to do?*

I was stunned. I was pregnant. The test confirmed it. My body had been feeling pregnant for days. My boobs were swollen. I felt that vague underlying low-level nausea that screamed *pregnancy*. Everything felt normal. I don't know what I want to do, I said. She told me I could wait or have a D and C. A D and C is dilation and curettage. It's where they open you up and expel the contents of your uterus.

But I hadn't been bleeding. What if they were wrong? I sat there in her office crying. She handed me a tissue. I wanted to wait. I cried in her office. I cried while I had blood drawn from my arm by a phlebotomist. She stood there with a needle in my arm while tears streamed down my face. I called my husband. He said that he would come home, but he was hours away. For the moment, I was alone, and I felt the aloneness acutely.

Convinced that maybe this new doctor's office had made a mistake, I made an appointment at another doctor's office. They did a second ultrasound. It showed the same thing—a baby with no heartbeat.

It was possible, they told me, *that the heart hadn't yet started beating or that it was too faint to hear. Maybe the date of conception was wrong.* I went home to wait. Waiting for something terrible to happen is in itself terrible. It's like if you're on a plane that you know is going to crash, but you just don't know when.

I posted a message on Facebook because I didn't know what else to do.

So, today, I went in for what I thought was a routine 8 week ultrasound. But there was no heartbeat. I frantically called around till I found another doctor willing to do one. Still no heartbeat. Now, I'm just trying to make sense of a loss that is almost certain at the same time as I hope it's not. If you want to talk to me, call. I'm kind of not really wanting to post jokes and stuff about politics right now. If you say prayers, pray. If not, just keep us in your thoughts as we wait.

A few days later, the bleeding began. I took another pregnancy test after the bleeding started. Of course, it still said I was pregnant because my hormone levels were elevated. But I could feel my body changing. The nausea was going away. The swollen breasts were going away. My womb was switching from preparing for motherhood to preparing to expel an unviable fetus from my body. It was all very natural. It was all very medical. The nurse practitioner had told me that it was probably chromosomal abnormalities, *which tend to happen as we get older*. I was 34 years old. That information didn't make me feel any better. In fact, it made me feel worse. The March of Dimes says that as many as half of all pregnancies end in miscarriage, some before the expectant parent is aware of the pregnancy. This wasn't uncommon.

That knowledge was what helped me get through it. People I didn't know well, people I barely knew, reached out to tell me, *I've been through it too. I'm here if you need someone to listen*. One was a girl I'd known in high school. One was a relative. One was a grad school colleague whom I mainly only kept in touch with online.

These people knew how hard it was. They wanted to make sure I was okay. This was important because, when you are pregnant, and it seems like the pregnancy will work out,

medical professionals give you pamphlets and books – pages and pages of information about how you should sleep, what you should eat, and how you will feel. Nearly everything you could want to know and a lot of stuff you probably don't.

When you are losing a baby, it seems like the information is far less. I wanted to know basic information like how much blood is normal and how much means I might bleed to death. I'm sure they told me something at the doctor's office. But I don't remember even getting one sheet of paper. I had no idea that so many acquaintances had been through the same thing. Pregnancy is visible, and everyone around you feels free to comment on it, sometimes to the point of ridiculousness. But miscarriage is largely invisible.

People usually don't know about it unless you tell them. I told some because I didn't see another way to get through. I couldn't continue acting fine because I had never felt so unfine in my life. Many would-be parents go through it. Some more than once.

At the next doctor's appointment, I finally met my ob-gyn, and I liked her a lot. I went in to make sure all the dead tissue had been expelled. The scan looked clean. She told me: *I know this is hard. I've been through it myself. Next year, at this time, you'll be holding a baby in your arms.*

I had to wait two months before trying again. I didn't know if I was ready. Pregnancy is painful, miserable, and joyous. Miscarriage, on the other hand, is just miserable, both physically and emotionally painful. You recover, but you never forget.

By July of the following year, I did have a baby. My new ob-gyn delivered him. But that didn't erase the child not born. On medical forms, in doctor's offices, when I look at my two bright, beautiful boys, I know, I remember: three pregnancies,

two children. Two boys and a question mark, a never going to be – but that's not the same as never was.

Maybe all parenting is a series of gains and losses, but the potential parents who don't get to bear their children are still givers of life nonetheless, though their journey isn't celebrated with cards and cakes and birthdays. They still felt the love, the ache, the willingness, the longing. Their loss is an inevitable part of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and it, too, deserves to be acknowledged and honored.

Lori D'Angelo (she/her) is a writer living in Virginia. Find her on Twitter and Bluesky @scly21 or on Instagram and Threads @lori.dangelo1. Tip her on PayPal at scly21@gmail.com.

Market Day

by: **Oluchi Okafor**

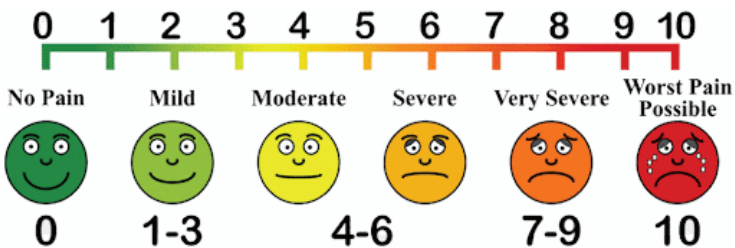
I should've sampled the Agege
small hands preached to me with
generational grit, utopian eyes.
Condensed ambition sitting on
brown, creased forehead.
Etched on rich cheekbone,
to hold the hustle then.
'Cause now, my ears itch,
then ring as my ancestors
find me on paved road
with no vendors. Anchored by
signs that constantly remind me
to not stand too firmly on this land.

Oluchi Okafor (they/them) is a lesbian poet and creative from Lagos, Nigeria. Oluchi's literary approach explores self-identity, re-birth, and their experiences within the black diaspora. Their published work has appeared in Stone of Madness Press. Find them on Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok at luchigotthat. Tip them on Venmo @Oluchi-Okafor.

Please Rate Your Pain on A Scale from One to Ten

by: Rose Dallimore

I. Rate your pain today on a scale of 1-10. Look at this chart for reference.



A. I don't make that face when I suffer. Nurse. I look like a 2 but feel like a 7 or maybe it is a 7 for other people but a 4 for me and a 2 for you. I don't think I've ever been a 0. I'll never feel important enough to declare myself a 10.

II. Alternative methods of assessing pain:

A. How heartbroken is your body?

1. It weeps.

B. Can you feel the outlines of your organs?

1. I can feel the outlines of my organs.

- C. Can you tell me about it in a simile?
1. My ilia and sacrum are like aluminum panels scraping asphalt. The nerve bundles at the base of my spine rise out of my vertebrae like bee stings, like chewed gum.
- D. Where do you carry your trauma?
1. Here, here, and here.
- E. Can you be the kind of person you want to be with this pain?
1. Sometimes I worry I cannot.
- F. What makes you terrified?
1. Hearing my own heartbeat rising on the monitor. And my pulse sings and screams and I remained tightlipped and I didn't cry so that people thought I was mature and believable and they told me to breathe as some flat haired young doctor stabbed me in the wrong nerve bundle, feeling pure fire in the back of my leg and an icy nothing up my spine. Just breathe. And I'm lying on a table half naked, in restraints, in a room of ten people listening to my own heartbeat rise and rise and feeling the right side of my body shatter under taut sinews, pulsing veins.
 2. And everyone says no complications and no one is too worried that my girlfriend has to wheel me to the curb and load me into an Uber and no one wants to say what might have caused that strange incident where I couldn't walk for a week. The difference between pudendal and sciatic lives in my neurons. And some say pain is made to be forgotten but I still feel it in my right side, fire up my nerves.

a. And I will not forget the face of the young med student with the colorful scrubs who was watching the heart monitor, who held my hands. I could see the panic in her eyes.

G. How can you have hope?

1. Because you are here, asking after me.

H. What do you dream about?

1. I dream of plane crashes, hurricanes, and the birth of my daughter.

Rose Dallimore (she/her) is a queer, disabled poet, playwright, and advocate living in Washington, DC. Find her on instagram @rosethingies and @dose.rallimore.



Reeling In

by: **Jacelyn**

Jacelyn (she/her) recently started focusing on her art proper, having persevered through an engineering major and a short stint as a civil servant. She can be found at <https://jacelyn.myportfolio.com/> and on Instagram at @jacelyn.makes.stuff. Tip through Paypal at jacelyn_yp@yahoo.com.sg