

**The Minison Project & Moss Puppy Magazine
Present**



Volume 1

*Pride
Pop-Up*

**The Minison Project
&
Moss Puppy Magazine Present**

**Pride Pop-Up
Volume 1**



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The Minison Project
Moss Puppy Magazine
& each piece's respective author/artist

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Letter From The Editor



Dear readers, contributors, and miscellaneous moss puppies,

First, I'd like to thank you all for supporting and reading this beautiful collection. I hope you enjoy each of these pieces as much as we did. The pieces chosen for this pop-up issue are stunning depictions of the queer experience.

Thank you to our contributors, as well, for creating these pieces and trusting us with them. As a queer creator myself, I know they come from an incredibly vulnerable and honest place. I am so honored to have been a part of creating this pop-up issue.

I spent just over a decade in the closet, using my writing to explore my identity. The characters I crafted for short stories to submit to workshop were always questioning their sexualities in undergrad, but once I was in grad school, my characters started explicitly identifying as queer.

And that's when I was finally asked by a friend who'd read most, if not all, of my fiction up until that point: "Melissa, are you gay?"

It was the first time I'd ever been asked. It did, eventually, lead to me coming out. I took my time with it, told people slowly, and began embracing and accepting my identity. It was so freeing, like I could finally breathe.

I am grateful that my writing allowed me to explore and figure out a side of myself I'd struggled to face for so long. Queer art is beautiful, queer art is important, and queer art matters. I'm very excited to share this pop-up issue with you all, because the arts are such a unique and special way to express our Pride.

Keep being queer, weird, mossy, messy, & whatever else. I love you.

Melissa Martini, EIC MPM

Letter From The Editor



Dear peers, queers, and minisonneteers,

To continue my mossy counterpart's sentiment, I appreciate the time you've chosen to spend reading this incredible collection. While sifting through submissions, I found myself tearing up at how strongly I resonated with some of these stories.

Discovering my queer identity a bit later in life was difficult and terrifying for me, but also extremely freeing. Instead of coming out, I let people discover who I was naturally and gradually by just becoming my authentic self. It felt as if something that had been squeezing me tightly for years had finally let go.

When I founded The Minison Project in 2020, I knew an anthology like this was eventually going to happen. Finding Melissa Martini and becoming best friends with a person who was like me in so many ways was just a wonderful happenstance!

Melissa would never take credit for it, but she is my perfect counterbalance. She is my anchor and my hot air balloon when I need her most, and I'm very excited to be on this publishing adventure with her.

We've had a lot of discussions about queer identity and what it means to be part of this community, and we've come to the conclusion that, unless you're putting others in danger, there really isn't a "right" or "wrong" way to be your identity. This collection of writings and art pieces is a perfect representation of what it is to have Pride.

Enjoy and be kind to one another.

With immense love and gratitude,

Melissa Ashley Hernandez, EIC TMP

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Animal Death
Anxiety
Being in the Closet
Biphobia
Capitalism
Death
Fascism
Homophobia
Kidnapping
Lesbophobia
Marijuana Usage
Mild Gore
Misgendering
Moths
Pregnancy Loss
Queerphobia
Religious References
School Shooting
Shame
Sexual Content
Slur (Reclamation)
Suicidality
Therapy
Transphobia

Rabbits Might Smell Like Rain

by Olive Ann

The rabbit was still alive.

Alice stared at the animal lying on her doorstep, unsure of what to do. Her cat, Nivens McTwisp, stared up at her with wide emerald eyes, his slit pupils contracted with ecstasy from the hunt. The rabbit twitched periodically, its back foot kicking out as its whole body quivered with fear and pain. How it was still alive with the deep gouge in its neck, she wasn't sure. She just hoped it would die soon, or at the very least, that a hawk or a coyote would come to finish the job.

Damn her cat's inability to kill what he caught. She scooped Nivens up and marched inside, closing the door behind them.

Nivens had originally been Diana's cat, but as much as she loved him, he didn't want to leave Alice. In the end, she'd made the heartbreaking decision to leave her cat with the person that he loved most. Despite being a purebred Siberian forest cat, he behaved like a stray, hissing and spitting at any guests that Alice brought over. Surprisingly, Nivens adored Alice, and started purring whenever she walked into their small, shared home. He was the last thing Alice had left of Diana, and while she appreciated his fluffy comfort, even his kitten meows made her ears ache. When she lay in bed with Nivens curled up on her chest, making it difficult to breathe, she thought about dropping him off at the shelter, but every time she woke up in the morning, she was unable to push him off. The cat was a monster, but he loved her, inexplicably and unconditionally. She couldn't help but empathize with him, and so he remained a fixed part of her transitory life.

When she was a kid, Alice moved fifteen times in fifteen years to the same place in the middle of nowhere. The benefit of moving to the

middle of nowhere was that she always knew the layout of the town, even if they were halfway across the country; they all had the same rickety school, same downtown filled with a bar, a gas station, and a post office, and the same cracked and pothole ridden roads. The downside was everything else. The locals thought she was weird—she wore black from head to toe and a pair of goggles were permanently affixed to her head—and none of the kids wanted to play with her. They must have known that she would be gone again before the next school year. No point in making friends with someone who wouldn't be there for two birthdays in a row.

Alice learned early on that it was better to have fun outside of town. She enjoyed the years that they lived by the woods—full of trees to climb and animals to watch—and she enjoyed the years by the ocean even more, even when the water was so cold that her lips turned blue in minutes. Her favorite year, however, had been when they moved to the desert, where her skin became sunburned and remained red and peeling; forever after, her cheeks were studded with an ocean of freckles.

Every day after school, she wandered into the desert to watch the sun set over the endless stretch of sand. She added a miner's light to her already odd outfit and made a hobby of going out into dust storms to find and pick up jackrabbits by their ears. Once she deposited them back into the ground, they ran—closed eyed and wild with panic—into tumbleweeds. The sight of their massive back legs kicking out in vain always made her double over with laughter. She looked for interesting rocks and identified them in a book that she checked out from the library and never returned. She found where the desert birds liked to nest and went to watch the chicks mature. One day, she found Diana.

~

“One day, I won't be important to you like this anymore.”

They were sitting cross-legged on the floor. Alice's hand was extended, and Diana was painting her nails. Nights like this were Alice's favorite. The small moments of domestic intimacy were more tender than any kiss or touch. She loved running her hands over Diana's shoulders, gently rubbing the soreness from her muscles, or when Diana would hand her a glass of iced tea on a hot summer night when all they did was lie under the sunset and listen to music. Moments like this were perfect, if not for the nagging feeling that they were mere seconds from sliding out of her hands like water.

Diana looked at her when she spoke, a frown creasing her brow. "What do you mean? You'll always be important to me."

Alice didn't respond. How could she explain to Diana—eternally hopeful—that nothing was permanent? That every person Alice had ever been close with inevitably abandoned her, like sand blown across a desert? That she was afraid of the change that would overtake their relationship after she explained her suspicions?

"Sometimes," Alice said, "my chest feels like it's going to burst when I talk to you."

Diana smiled, as if she knew exactly what she did to make Alice feel that way.

"I love you" burned into Alice's tongue, but she knew that once she said it, she wouldn't be able to stop herself from crying.

~

Alice scowled as she searched through the cassettes that Diana abandoned; she was searching for a distraction, not a reminder.

This is temporary, she tried to tell herself, I'm just settling into new expectations, a new world order. I always suspected that it would

happen. She just never expected it to be so hard. These days, she counted time by the number of tissue boxes she went through.

Sighing, she grabbed a brightly colored cassette at random and fitted it into the cassette player. After a moment, the grainy, uplifting sound filled the empty crevices of her home. Lyrics that would usually pass through her ears without any comprehension caught her mind while her breath caught in her chest. She put a hand onto the wall to steady herself and she shut her eyes to keep the world from spinning. She'd always hated how every song was a love song.

What went wrong? She remembered and replayed the memory so much that the images had greyed out and the audio had become distorted from too many rewinds. It never gave her any closure or clarity, and all she was left with was a house and a cat that were as unlovable as she was. The cramped quarters of her home suddenly seemed so much further away from her now that they were brimming with sound. The ceiling was taller than the tops of the redwoods that surrounded the house, and the kitchen—only a few paces away—might as well have been separated from the living room by a chasm as wide as the ocean. It was damn near agoraphobic.

She managed to wedge herself into a dusty corner full of cat hair and flaking paint before she started crying.

~

The jackrabbit hammer of her heart made her want to scream. Her chest always felt too tight, too full of love for Diana, and now the comforting weight was being weaponized against her.

“What are you saying?”

All her fantasies of their future together were melting away. She tried to

grasp at them, but the once hopeful dreams now burned to the touch. Her mind was a forest fire, the life that she thought she was destined to live out was now burning alive in front of her. She felt like someone was pulling out her teeth and forcing her to swallow them.

She always knew their relationship had an expiration date.

~

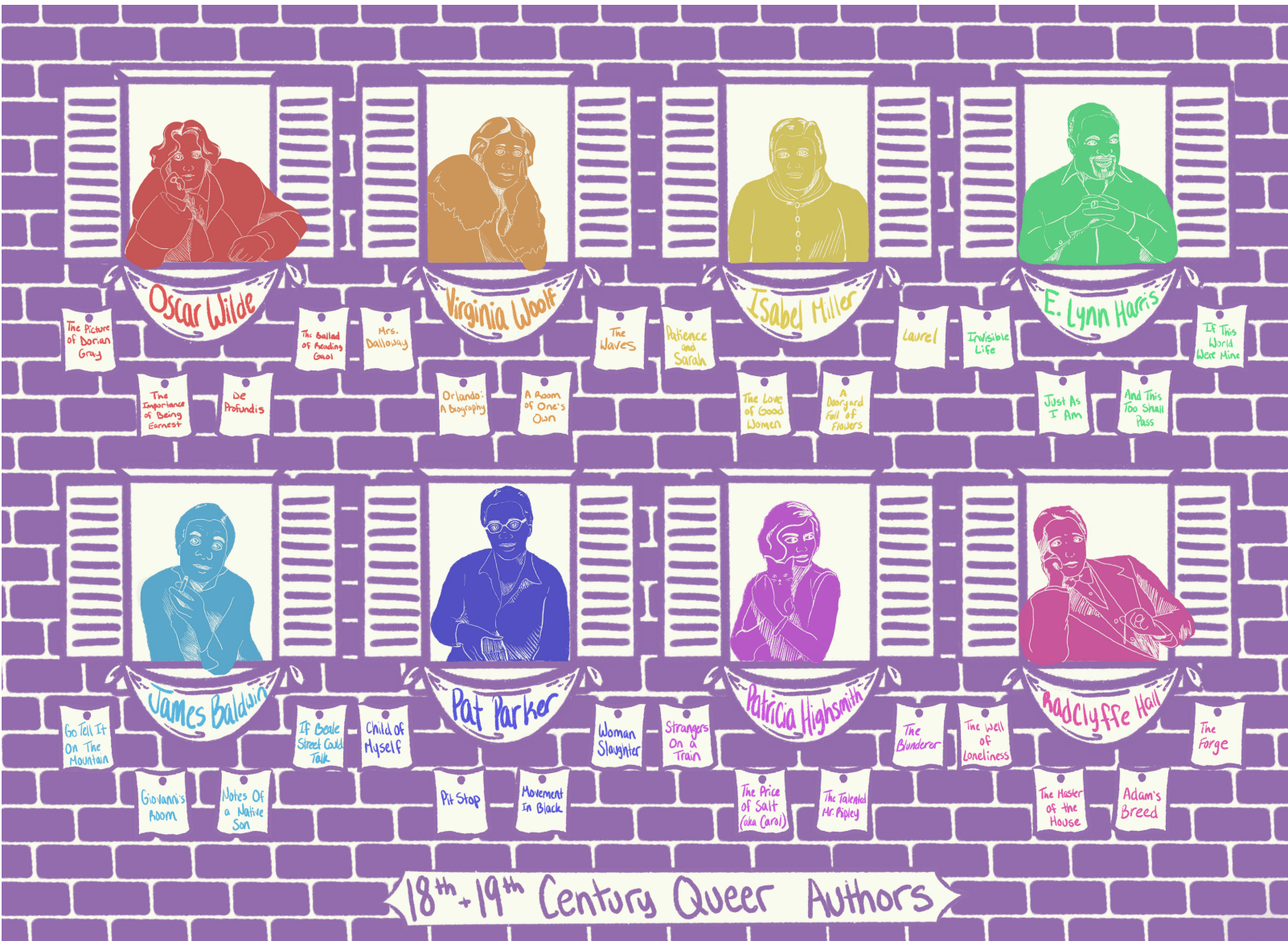
The rabbit was still alive.

How, Alice wondered, how was this stupid animal still alive? Weren't rabbits supposed to die from being scared? Yet here was this rabbit, lying on Alice's porch with its throat slit, still breathing after three days of no food and no water. She crouched down so that her weight was resting on the balls of her feet and stared at the pitiful creature that miraculously, tragically, clung to life. It should have died days ago, killed by her cat or by another opportunistic predator, but instead, Alice was left to finish the job. Leaning to the side, she picked up one of the bricks that lay by her doorstep. It was heavy in her hand and surprisingly hot. A sick, queasy feeling settled in her stomach as she locked eyes with the rabbit. Its hind feet kicked out, as if it sensed Alice's intentions, and she almost gave up. Instead, she gripped the brick tight and raised it above her head, mouthing an apology.

The rock thudded on the ground with finality. Stillness settled over her, though she suspected that something should have felt different. It didn't. Her heart pounded, the sound echoed in her ears, and she stared at the puddle of gore that had splattered on her porch and on her hands. It was disgustingly warm on her skin.

Queer Authors

by Daphne Fauber



everlasting

by linda m. crate

sometimes you still
drift upon my focus,

my love for you
is baby's breath: everlasting;
and you fall over me in
pink sunsets and when i gaze
at white roses and even
the flowers of magnolia trees—

sometimes i see you in
my favorite characters,
in my favorite shows,
and in any story with vampires
or faeries;

sometimes i dream of us
in another world in another time
where we are wives—

& it is glorious to know
somewhere i exist in an universe
where my love for you is
not unrequited but returned with
interest.

The First Time I Loved You But Did Not Say It

by Val West

Sat in a circle on the bone-dry concrete floor for hours,
weaving bracelets by the glow of a flashlight.

Trees looming, encompassing, birds of prey standing by.

April came and went like an act of violence—
or like an act of grace, bound by twine.
It was a cold that lingered for its fear of warmth.

Frigid sunlight, wisps of grass and dandelions;
The air had sharp teeth.

Your hair tasted like peanut butter and jelly.

We inhaled nutmeg and bumped our heads on the ceiling.
That night, you told me you were scared of a stranger God.

Thorny laughter, twigs wrapped around my bones,
worn sneakers hitting frost-stained dirt,

meeting the dawn, whispered secrets, bonfires,
hand-me-down guitars, pretty girls we saved coffee for.

There was no wi-fi, but you had a cassette player from your father,
so we shared a crinkled plastic mattress, pressed together for
warmth.

You wore an obnoxiously bright orange sweater,
and I loved you terribly.

Erato

by Laura Bibby

It starts soft and slow
little tastes and shifting weights
with fingers intertwined
white-knuckled and strong
I pull back to look at you
lashes fluttering against full, flushed cheeks
so vulnerable and perfect
Gentle, unhurried movements
Brush over the places you know
make my elbows give way every time
Your crooked, mischievous smile
Tooth enamel to collarbone
Your hands behind my neck
pulling me down
It becomes fierce and fast
breathless and desperate
Wrists pinned and curved spines
You leave a hundred marks
like love letters against my skin
which I repay in kind
Fingertips rake across quivering muscles
and hurried heartbeats punching against my tongue
Our kisses are at once
conquerors and soothers
and when I watch you unravel
Warm and delicate as a rosebud
I can't help but marvel at how
I get to be the one to love you like this.

Pass Me A Light

by Mason Martinez

Neti shouts from the sixth-floor fire escape. The once steady stream of smoke has dissipated into the humid air down below where taxi drivers honk impatiently, a semi-truck tumbles down the block, and Mrs. Santiago tries to jaywalk across four wide lanes after her hip replacement surgery.

Dan and I are down on the third floor, curled up in the corner of our rusty little box, even though it's 93 degrees and climbing. A thin layer of sweat coats my body and I feel its slickness when Dan shifts to pull the lighter out of her back pocket.

"Here." She holds a citrus-smelling jay rolled in kief out to me.

"I got it," I say, plucking the yellow lighter out of her freshly polished nails instead. I make sure not to graze an already smudged index finger, a half-painted *all oar nothing* orange cream pinky. Dan watches me through the smoke as she inhales; her dark pink lipstick staining the filter. I say nothing, only smile and stand when the lighter is in my grasp.

I can already hear the sucking of teeth above me, Neti impatiently shifting his feet, shouting to no one in particular, "I know one of y'all gotta light, stop playin'!"

"Bro, I passed it down. I don't know who got it now."

"I could touch tips with you."

"Ayo!" The boys above us laugh, falling back into a comfortable hum of smoking, light laughter, and muffled reggaeton from

somewhere in the distance. The whole baseball team is out, not a single fire escape sits unoccupied.

“Neti!” I shout, arching my back gently over the railing at the same time he leans over. His dark eyes meet mine and for a fraction of a second he’s confused like he’s forgotten what he asked for, or forgot that I was here, or forgot why I was here. But just as quickly as his confusion comes, it goes, and a smirk sprawls over his lips at the same moment mine does. “Catch!”

Neti pops the joint between his teeth, a light clamp to keep it in place. He squats slightly, getting into a catcher’s position as I reel my arm back and loosen the tightness in my wrist, biting back the slight tremor of pain that comes with it. I flick, gently yet firmly, giving it enough power that it sails smoothly to him three flights up and just a little past so when gravity takes hold it lands right between his cupped palms.

Below us, Carlos and Luis cheer loudly. Above us, Adam and Kevin stomp their feet against the open steel gratings, above them, Leo and Emilo pump their fists in the air while all the way at the top of the hierarchy, Chris cups his hands over the tip of Neti’s joint.

“You still got it Nicky!” Adam crams his arm between the grates for a fist bump. A small bubble of laughter leaves my lips as I reach on the tips of my toes to bump him, but when I do, the bite is sharp and quick—pulsing through muscle into the small spot at the base of my palm, where the doctor peeled back layers of flesh to fix me.

Adam doesn’t notice my wince, doesn’t notice my arm trembling because he’s reeling back to his place above me, against the bars of the fire escape where his attention fixates on the second baseman who smokes too much.

“Yo! It’s two pulls then pass!” Adam smacks Kevin’s leg.

“My bad, my bad!”

I make small, careful semi-circles with my wrist in the shadow of their bodies as I let out a soft laugh. Dan twirls the half-smoked joint between the tips of her slim fingers and I see the tightness of her jaw before I even sit down.

“That was stupid.” She says quietly, holding the joint out towards me once I’m settled. Our bodies press and I can smell the aroma of coconut oil off the curls of her heavy brown hair, the sharp scent of cherry blossoms and its glitter stains her collar bones.

I breathe it all in as I take the joint with my other hand and pull.

“I know.”

I could have, I suppose, taken the narrow flights up to the sixth floor, but that meant risking the fifth where Emilo sat, smoking his jay, circling it between his chubby fingers like a fine glass of wine. He’d slap me on the ass like last time and I’d have to punch him again, solid and swift, one shot to the gut. He’d whine, call me a puta, and, *“Hey, haven’t you heard of respecting your elders?”* even though he’s only three months older than me. He’d do all that while simultaneously straightening up, sucking in his stomach like it makes him stronger because there ain’t no way he’s gonna let a girl hit him like that.

I could, I suppose, say all that to Dan and she’d understand, but when I look at her I know she sees right through my bullshit.

The truth is, I wanted to. I wanted to know that I could still throw. That I was still good. After six weeks of not being able to play, six

weeks of being a prisoner to the white cast, forced to kick it back on the sidelines while Neti pitched, Adam swung, and Chris took another homerun. I got my hair braided by Dan and the other girls in their short tennis skirts, popping takis' in each other's mouths, talking shit about so-and-so getting fucked beneath the auditorium stage again, veiling their envy with chisme.

The pain should have been gone by now, but it's not and the rage inside me burns alongside with the sweltering heat of New York City summers and I pull and pull until my lungs are filled with enough smoke to feel the slight trickle in my brain where some science-y shit happens and my body convinces me the pain isn't there—at least for a little while.

"Nicky," Dan sees the dip in my brow and nudges me with her bare foot. "It's going to be okay."

I could tell her, *no it's not, nothing is ever going to be the same again*, but that's a long-winded conversation that I don't feel like having anymore. That always ends with, *don't be so pessimistic, Nicky, believe in yourself*. I don't want to hear that I'm special, that I'm talented, that there's more to life than playing baseball. *You're a good student, Nicky, you're so smart. SO smart. You can do anything you want. We can do anything.*

I clench and unclench my jaw, letting out a steady stream of smoke through my nose and take my third pull because I can feel Dan's eyes burning against my cheeks, I can feel her picking away at my brain like she knows I'm already arguing with her in my head.

When I exhale again, she takes her turn.

"We're going to the movies tomorrow," Dan says through an inhale. It takes everything in me to fight against the eye roll that comes with

the collective we—because that’s how things always are with her and the other girls. *We were thinking, Nicky*, Dan will say to me when there’s something bothering her about us. *We want you to come, Nicky*, Dan will say to me, even though she’s the only one that cares if I show or not. Six weeks on the bench braiding hair, eating takis, passing chisme like currency didn’t change that, no matter how hard they pushed. “We want you to come.”

“I told Neti I’d practice throwing with him tomorrow.”

“You don’t even know what time we’re going.”

“It’s an all day practice, I have a lot to catch up on.”

“You shouldn’t even be throwing or hitting or—”

“I have a brace, the doctor said I’m all good now. Can I have the joint now?”

Dan blinks at me, once, twice, three times, confused by what I’m asking. The smoke curls by the side of her face, getting all mixed in with her coconut-cherry-blossom scent.

“I’ll take you to the movies on Saturday, just you and me,” I hold out my hand. “Promise.”

Dan sighs, handing over the joint that’s nearly down to the filter. As I take it in again, in the golden hour light, I think she’s so beautiful when she sighs. The downward turn of her plump lips, the dark pink lipstick worn off now against the filter, lightly rubbing between mine.

The glitter on her brown skin turns orange, yellow, and white as her shoulders drop ever so slightly.

“Okay, fine.” She whispers, not meeting my gaze but down at our legs that touch. My shorts are frayed at the edges and Dan likes to pass the time by folding half-inch braids that I’ll comb out with my growing fingernails.

I lean my head back against the bars, the bun atop my head is enough of a cushion that I don’t feel the twisted iron against my skull. Dan shifts, spreading my legs and a cool breeze sweeps by and I could moan from pleasure, but soon it’s replaced with a new heat—the feeling of Dan’s body laying against the floor, her head resting in my lap, her hair pooled around us. She lets out a soft hum and I think I’d like to hear her make noises like that my whole life—or until the high wears off.

“Is this what you want?” Dan asks after what feels like a lifetime of silence, of a slow sinking sun, of the rancid smell of bad weed that Carlos lights below us. “To spend your days out here, getting high all day, kicking it out with boys who only care if you can help them win?”

I sigh, stamping out the ash against the grated steel. I take a piece of her hair, there’s small bits of gold in it just like her hazel eyes. Everything about her is honey and rich and honest and I want to soak it all in, but how can I want her, need her, when I no longer want or need her?

I take a moment, looking at the places our bodies touch. The way her elbow sits comfortably inside my knee. The way we can melt into each other anywhere and everywhere.

I can’t say that I know what I want, that this is what I want—the team, the collective, us—but it’s what I have, what I’m good at. We, the lucky twelve that hang out on fire escapes smoking weed while our parents work late-nights or overnights or both, are given one opportunity to achieve more and I won’t waste it. Even if that means

losing Dan and her soft sighs, her clique of hair-braiding girls, her collective we. I have to choose mine. Me.

I lean forward to leave light kisses on the top of her forehead. Her eyes flutter open when she reaches a soft palm to cup my cheek.

We lock eyes and I am lost in them like the first time I realized I loved her—after my first game, after everyone found out The Ravens let the first girl on the team, and she was better, better than anyone, the best the team had ever seen. In a crowd of screaming fans, of Mami and Papi crying, there was Dan holding mismatched construction paper taped together, the corner sun faded, with my name in blocky letters and the biggest heart I've ever seen. I remember thinking, no, that girl right there, *she's* the best.

I can't remember the last time we were like that, connected, together, just Dan and Nicky.

"Can't we stay like this?" Dan whispers, brushing her lips against mine.

"Of course," I lie. "Always."

When I kiss her, she hums, a simple soft melody that leaves goosebumps down my arms, fills me with want that washes away as soon as we break.

Down below, taxis honk, trucks tumble, children dart across four wide open lanes. Above me, the lighter *flicks, flicks, flicks* before Neti calls, "Yo! Pass me a light!"

The hatching of the hummingbird

by Marisca Pichette

Yes—wind, weather, and time are the main culprits.

But the sun does not escape blame. Her due is ever
to banish dew, reap moisture,
wrest color from the spines of weary books.

And where? Colors extracted from books caught
in the sun's scything rays find themselves
borne aloft on hummingbird wings.

Relocated to milkweed blooms,
adopted by monarch chrysalises to linger awhile
before being whisked south—book cover colors fill
poppy fields, clutter bougainvilleas
and add the multi-spirited fragrance
to jasmine blossoms.

A bird's wings were once a title, an author's name
embossed in bold. The seeds ushered in
by slanting autumn sunshine once formed
pictures of castles, lovers,
chemical formulae and ducks.
Mallards found their colors in the dawn horizon,
lifted from Audubon's illustrations
that even a dust jacket could not contain.

Each day
she shows her face, her sunbeam fingers
reaching, grasping, on the hunt
for violet and crimson,
indigo and persimmon.
She yearns for romances, crime novels cracked
by suspenseful hands. She worms her way
into libraries and peers over the shoulders
of weary students.

Who's next?

For a hummingbird is due to hatch today,
and it cannot wing without feathers
colored with every hue
that ink imprisoned.

Evidence of attraction

by Heather Ann Pulido

1. I asked what your favorite flower was. I began calling you “Kalachuchi.”
2. I asked my friend for a kalachuchi from her backyard garden in San Fernando, La Union. She sent it to Baguio City the following week.
3. I carried the potted kalachuchi from the peak of Session Road to my house at Hilltop Street. It took fifteen minutes of trudging up and down.
4. The next day, I carried the plant from the first to the fifth floor of the cram school we attended to prepare for our board examinations.
5. I gave you your favorite flower in a pot. Alive and thriving. You said, “Salamat.”
6. After classes, I went home by foot to save money. You tagged along “to make sure I was safe.” Never mind that you were as small as I was. You’d walk 30 minutes to my house and 30 minutes to your apartment.
7. You listened to me whine about my ex-boyfriend without rolling your eyes. Not even once in those one hundred times.
8. I held your hand while we were walking. But I think you held my hand first.
9. I confessed that I would rather be a journalist than a teacher. But I needed a job and I needed it fast. You said you didn’t know what you wanted.
10. One night, when our fingers brushed, my heart fluttered.

11. I dreaded the day you'd go back to your hometown more than I dreaded the board exams.
12. I was happy that we passed. I would have been happier if you stayed.
13. When I told you I got back with my ex, you didn't smile. You didn't even open your mouth.
14. When you told me, two years later, that you were in the city to visit, I smiled. You asked me to bring our friends. Same bar, same time.
15. You introduced me to your girlfriend. I felt my heart twist so hard, I turned away from you the whole night. I only opened my mouth to drink.
16. Today, I was telling a newfound friend about you.
17. I was seething when she said, "I don't think you loved her. You only felt close to her because she was there for you at a difficult time."
18. Instead of committing crimes, I am writing about you.
19. Instead of you, all I have is this list.
20. I am sober enough to admit that I was crazy to let you go.
21. The next time somebody asks what I have to show for it, I'll shove this list in their face.

Before the War

by Phoebe Rodriguez

When I think of our days in the powderkeg,
sending poems in waved silk handkerchiefs
across the city fit to rupture
in revolution or Reich,
in jackboot or jungle—

When I think of us reposed on your couch,
my eyes dark-havened like Conrad Veidt,
your curls afloat like Lili Elbe,
the smoke of lavender dangling over the burner—

I think, will we ever know
what we have or what we had?
Will they remember us in another age,
not like Sappho but like Berlin,
straining for air under the chloroform clouds?

Christmas in Sleepy Hollow

by Jude Deluca

January 6, 1995

"Is that...? No way, it couldn't be."

"Couldn't be what?"

"HA! I knew it! I knew this was real!"

Watson looked over at Fletcher, wondering what got him so excited. Fletcher eagerly pointed towards a poster on a nearby brick wall.

"I knew I hadn't made it up!" Fletcher cried as he grabbed Watson's arm. "Come on, Watts! You're not gonna believe this!"

"Well I-hey!" Watson was suddenly dragged across the street by Fletcher towards the old movie theater. There weren't many people milling about outside the building. The recently opened multiplex in the shopping mall across town essentially stole a lot of the theater's business.

The theater lights shone on posters for several holiday-themed films. Some of them were old, others more recent. A banner read "BEAT THE JANUARY BLUES. THE HOLIDAYS CAN LAST JUST A BIT LONGER TIL VALENTINE'S DAY."

Watson assessed Fletcher's excitement. The brawny redhead seemed more like a little kid, practically grinning ear to ear as he shoved Watson in front of the poster which caught his attention.

"I didn't think I'd ever see this again, but here it is!" Fletcher

enthusiastically announced as he gestured towards the movie poster. "And the schedule says it's about to start playing tonight!"

"I still don't get what the big deal is about..." Watson stopped as began to read the title on the poster out loud, "Christmas in Sleepy Hollow? What?"

"I know, right?" Fletcher asked. "Doesn't it sound weird?"

Watson took in the artwork displayed on the theater wall. It featured a snowy landscape underneath a full moon in a black sky. A figure dressed in dark clothes, riding atop a black horse. The dark colors of the rider's outfit heavily contrasted with the bright red sack perched upon his back.

And it especially contrasted with the reader's grinning pumpkin for a head.

"Weird's right," Watson finally said, still not exactly picking up on Fletcher's giddiness. This wasn't exactly how he saw this evening going. It'd been nice for Watson to finally get together with Fletcher. Both were freshmen at Ivy Falls University. They'd met a month prior at a party in Watson's dorm. Their hands touched while reaching for the last gingerbread man on a platter.

Watson took in Fletcher's torn jeans and flannel shirt and assumed he played in a garage band. Fletcher took in Watson's sweater – homemade by his grandmother – and couldn't believe how tacky it seemed. Both were tall, scruffy faced, big-bellied redheads. Fletcher had about him a natural sense of rugged handsomeness and charisma, while Watson portrayed a strange sense of warmth and beauty in his appearance.

“Watson, huh?” Fletcher smirked after they introduced themselves upon splitting the last cookie in half. “Mind if I call you ‘Watts?’”

“You’re already giving me a nickname when we just met?” Watson wondered before he quickly asked, “Do I get to call you ‘Fletch?’” Chuckling, Fletcher replied “If you want.”

They didn’t share any courses or live in the same building. Watson was studying agriculture and chemistry, which matched up rather well with his beefy, farm boy appearance. Fletcher studied child development and psychology. He wandered into Watson's dorm party when he saw there was free food.

After leaving the dorm party, the two had nothing else to do and simply wandered around town. It was a cold, crisp night. No snow yet, but the weather forecast predicted a blizzard was on the way. They talked about whatever came to mind for hours that night for no reason but to enjoy each other’s company. The following day, Fletcher and Watson left campus to spend the holidays with their families.

Campus in January was just like January anywhere else. Cold, dark, dreary. December’s pristine snowfall had melted down into sludge and slush. The holiday decorations displayed in the various school buildings were gone by the time Watson returned for winter courses. The bleakness of his first day of class threatened to color the rest of the semester, until he ran into Fletcher again in the cafeteria.

“Oh, hey it’s you!” The two said at the same time, causing them to laugh. They discussed their class schedules and made plans to meet up later that evening to see whatever was playing at the local theater. Both left the cafeteria feeling good despite the barrenness of their surroundings.

“Here, lemme try to explain,” Fletcher began. “You know how, sometimes when you’re a kid and you’re up really late even though you shouldn’t be, you find yourself flicking through TV channels hoping to find something to watch and you stumble upon something weird?”

“Not really but go on,” Watson replied. He hadn’t been much for TV growing up.

“Well, one Christmas Eve, I was staying up late hoping to see Santa Claus,” Fletcher explained and gestured with his hands while he did so. “I wanted to make sure he brought me this toy bow and arrow set I asked for that I really, really wanted. It was the only thing I was deadest on getting.”

Watson chuckled before asking “A bow and arrow?”

“I had a Robin Hood phase,” Fletcher shrugged before continuing with “Anyway, it was late and I figured if I was careful I could watch some TV without waking up my parents. I remember watching this old cartoon where it looked like the Headless Horseman was delivering presents. I think Santa busted his leg or something and his sleigh crashed in Sleepy Hollow.”

“You think?” Watson wondered.

“I only saw this once,” Fletcher emphasized, “or, I thought I did. That one Christmas Eve. I never saw it again. This drove me nuts not being able to remember all the details. I knew it wasn’t a Disney movie. Hell, it was better than Disney in my opinion. My parents thought I dreamed the movie up. Nobody I knew heard of it either. I reached a point where I thought I really did imagine it, but there it is!”

Watson leaned forward to read the information under the title on the poster. It was dated 1943, but he didn't recognize any of the actors' names or the production company.

"Can we see this?" Fletcher asked.

"You really want to? I mean it's a kid's movie."

"You have no idea how wild this movie can get. And I've always wanted to see it with someone else if I ever found it again." Fletcher clasped his hands together and tried to look adorable, saying "Please?"

Watson couldn't believe how easily Fletcher could make an expression like a puppy dog. It completely contrasted with the devil-may-care body language he felt from Fletcher the moment they met. Yet at the same time it didn't seem forced, either. It was cute.

And the poster did seem intriguing.

Smiling, Watson said "Sure."

Cheering, Fletcher grabbed Watson again and dragged him inside the lobby. He offered to pay for both tickets AND snacks. Which, incidentally, were all Christmas-themed as well.

"My treat," Fletcher said as he shooed away Watson's attempt to pay for his popcorn, soda, and locally made peppermint bark. "You've no idea what this means to me."

"I mean, it's just a movie," Watson said as they entered the screening room.

"It's more than that," Fletcher explained as they took their seats. "This bugged me for years. Especially the Christmas after when I couldn't find it on any channels. Or THE Christmas after that. If I hadn't made plans with you, I wouldn't have found out about this. So, thank you."

Watson felt genuinely touched by Fletcher's honesty but wasn't sure what to say, so he just smiled and said, "No problem."

As the lights dimmed, Fletcher had a hard time restraining his excitement from crying out as the words "CHRISTMAS IN SLEEPY HOLLOW" appeared on the screen.

It was indeed a weird movie. Weird and beautifully animated. Fletcher correctly remembered that it told the story of Santa Claus's sleigh crashing in Sleepy Hollow on Christmas Eve. When the Headless Horseman appeared, Santa's elves begged the Horseman to help them finish the rounds while they repaired the sleigh.

Watson couldn't take his eyes off how fluidly the Horseman was drawn leaping from house to house, delivering presents. He didn't notice Fletcher looking at him, wanting to know if he was enjoying the movie too. He felt eternally grateful by how Watson was letting him indulge in his desire to experience a moment of childhood nostalgia people told him probably never happened.

An hour and a half later, the two were heading back into the January gloom.

"Can we see it again?" Watson asked as they left the theater.

"Huh?"

"I checked the schedule and the movie's playing again tomorrow," Watson told Fletcher. "But we can catch one of the earlier showings after say, getting dinner?"

“Yeah. Yeah!” Fletcher agreed.

“Cool,” Watson smiled. “You were right. That was indeed an experience. I loved how the Horseman would drop his pumpkin head down the chimneys to make sure everyone was asleep before delivering the gifts.”

“I know, and that chase sequence at the end when they had to get Santa’s presents back, I totally forgot about that part.”

The two discussed the movie before it segued into their plans for dinner.

Despite the lateness of the hour and the low temperature, that night didn’t seem very cold.

From that moment, whenever Watson and Fletcher weren’t in class, they spent time together. Learning things about each other. Fletcher enjoyed spicy food and played the drums but wasn’t in a band. Watson couldn’t start the day without a blueberry muffin and had an uncanny ability to understand maps with a single glance. Fletcher’s grandpa almost died in a forest fire. Watson was almost struck by lightning as a kid. They learned everything about each other. Though neither of them said it outright, it was clear to their friends that the two were dating.

They made it a challenge to see every Christmas movie the theater offered at least once while they were still available. Santa Claus Meets Bigfoot was a step down in terms of quality compared to Christmas In Sleepy Hollow. Christmas In The Galleria, an 80s comedy about teens stuck in a shopping mall during a blizzard, was funny because it wasn’t funny. They didn’t realize at the time that Peppermint was a slasher movie, and a gory one at that. Watson found it hilarious when Fletcher screamed so shrilly as the store Santa got gutted open by

the killer's peppermint hook. After attending a late night, adults only showing of *A Zandalee Christmas* they came out agreeing the lead actress deserved a better script and better co-actors.

Fletcher complained, "I mean she's playing the title character and her name's the third to appear in the opening credits."

Watson mentioned "I heard she's gonna be playing Lois Lane in the new Superman movie."

That suddenly led to their first real kiss, which also happened to be Watson's first kiss ever.

The week before February, Watson was still thinking about how he felt during that kiss. He didn't notice Fletcher seemed uncharacteristically apprehensive about something.

"Hey," Fletcher cleared his throat, shaking Watson out of his thoughts.

"What's up?" Watson asked during lunch.

"So, I wanna see *Christmas In Sleepy Hollow* one last time before it stops showing."

Chuckling, Watson stated "You sure love that movie, don't you?"

"Yeah," Fletcher cleared his throat, "which is why I want to go see it with my daughter."

Fletcher braced for impact when Watson casually asked, "You have a daughter?"

The ease of the reply and his friend's body language weren't what Fletcher expected at all.

"You're not weirded out?"

"I mean, I'm surprised," Watson shrugged, "you never said anything about her. What's her name?"

"Alice." Fletcher took out his wallet and showed a photo of a smiling, happy girl opening a Christmas present. "Her mom and I, as you can tell, it didn't work. We were both figuring stuff out and we weren't right for each other. Once I started attending Ivy Falls, my parents looked after Alice at their place so I could go to class. Her arrival kinda put a hold on things for me, not that I'm complaining."

"She's adorable," was Watson's only response. "How old is she?"

"Three. She'll be four next month. I," Fletcher scratched the back of his head, "I'm sorry I didn't say anything sooner."

"You don't have to apologize- "

"No, listen," Fletcher held up his hands. "I'm not ashamed of Alice or of being a dad. I didn't mention her until now because people sometimes get weird when they learn I have a kid. I've known you for a month, Watts, and it took me a while to feel comfortable enough to tell you. You're just," Fletcher tried to find the words, "you have this way of really putting me at ease. You let me talk about stuff I don't talk about with anyone else. That's why I'd like you to meet my kid."

A month. Huh. Watson knew it'd been a month, but it hadn't felt that way. A few days later as Watson waited at the theater entrance for Fletcher and little Alice, he kept going over that day in the cafeteria. He had to admit, even he was surprised by how he took Fletcher's

words in such stride. He had a kid. He was a single dad. Watson was in love with a man who had-

In love?

Love.

Was that what this was?

Watson wasn't sure if he'd ever been in love with someone. He wasn't even sure if he was gay, or bisexual, or something. He'd never felt that from anyone now that he thought about it. Until now. He knew he cared about Fletcher. Was attracted to him. Had fun with him. Enjoyed talking with him. Was love really the reason why?

Watson was stirred from his thoughts when he heard laughter. Down the block, he could see Fletcher carrying a tiny figure on his shoulders. They were talking about something, and it got a big laugh out of both. Fletcher stopped and reached up, holding his daughter in his hands as he helped her off his shoulders. Watson couldn't believe it. She just seemed so small compared to her daddy, but the way he spoke to her made Alice's eyes light up.

"You ready to see that movie Daddy kept telling you about?" Fletcher asked.

"Not a scary one, right?" Alice asked. "You promised."

"Of course, I'd never do anything to scare you. But if you do get scared, we can leave whenever you want, okay?"

"Kay."

"Love you, sweets," Fletcher kissed her forehead. "Forever and ever."

Alice giggled and wrapped her arms around her dad's neck.

Watson could feel his heart pounding in his chest when Fletcher and Alice approached him.

It didn't seem cold anymore.

Just a Girl Who Loves a Girl

by Skyler Rutkowski

I've never felt as holy
 than here
 in your arms
your hands, blessing
your touch, communion.

I will not pray
 I will kiss your freckled
 eyelids
 your gentle
 mouth

This life does not ache
 with the sermon of your
 longing, passion
your mortal body
gives without commandment.

They say sinner,
 I say believer.
 Is it not righteous
to sanctify our skin as puzzle
to our kindred spirits,

to give ourselves in kindness
in grace?

Where we love
 and love
 and love, without the promise
 of eternity.

Leather and Lace

by Phoebe Rodriguez

The cracked gloves
and dusty boots
of the cub scout
crested a wooded trail,
gazing at the gravity
carved below,
and wondering why
the fall tastes so enticing.

The white ruffle
trim of the socks
above shiny church shoes,
which the little girl scuffs
on the craggy branches,
hoping she will never
again have to face
the rigid earth.

The shame as he reaches,
pulled into orbit
by a skirt,
and clutches lace
between his fingers,
wishing to be buried
in it.

The deep sigh
through her body,
as she enters
a room scented
with belts and slick jackets,
but only ever to look
and dream.

Capricious time somehow brought a mercy of rain,
precious words dripped into dry and waiting mouths,
and with it, bark grew at last verdant and moss-robed
over raw, broken, palpitating heartwood.

A tie that was yours
hangs around my neck.

I twine your hair
in braids my sister taught me.

Slough off the numb
and toughened skin
they noosed round you.

I will drape you
in what was too delicate
for my tumbling ways.

I'll stride in sturdy boots, in stalwart gloves and a leather jacket.
And when you come home,
I'll undo pearl buttons, unstrap your heels, and lay you out in lace.
How lucky we are to know each other
as we are, as we will be.

Lipstick

by Alison Bainbridge

The day you told me that I was the one,
we sat on a bench in a park.
There were ducks at our feet
and I worried about how my lipstick
looked too red.

You said you loved me. You took
my hand and told me that
it was the end.
You cried, I think; I don't remember.

Instead, I remember the ducks. I remember
loving you so much that my brain
was like static. I remember my lipstick
was far too red.

Lake House Lesbian

by J.M. Knight

i think if I were braver / i'd be a lake house gay
with shorter hair / and more tattoos / and an accent like 'eh'
flamboyant attitude / and machismo harlot ways
and enough strength in my arms / to play with her all day

i think if i were braver / "her" would actually exist
and i would take her to a lake house / to make out and maybe kiss
and we would roll ourselves up / in corny Target kitsch
and i'd profess my love straight-faced / while thinking of our future kids

i didn't know my heart was made of glow sticks

by Emdash AKA Emily Lu Gao

until i met her.

she cracked me up,

java hair sways by stir, dimples bolster

holy her; foot traces, aces mine

under the pew,

bends me into somebody,

cleavage lull, morning dew thrall,

cardamom eyes on sandal soles. is this real or
fantasy? her hand on his bean sprout knee.
ripe head shoulder, knees, and toes aglow,
my love telepathic:

let my left ventricle be a lighthouse

for you,

so even when the night holds Earth

in her mouth for too long,

or when the stars snatch

your bioluminescence,

say my name: come for me.

recoup our serotonin, the kind only our tulips know.

Made With Science And Love

by Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

I woke with the dawn, the soft lemon light seeping into our bedroom through the blinds. A chorus of a Wiggles song from our toddler's impromptu dance party the night before repeated over and over in my head. Great, I thought, I can't even escape the infectious music while I sleep!

Those dear to me were still deep asleep, producing a cacophony of slumbering sounds from peaceful breathing to monotonous snoring. Our toddler laid between myself and my partner, and our loyal dog laid at the end of the bed preventing me from stretching my legs as I stirred.

I loved the stillness of the early morning and hearing the birds waking the world with their warbling, melodious songs or raucous calling. It was my time to read, write or do yoga before the intense rush to get ready for work and daycare. But today I was content to lie in bed and be one with my thoughts.

Although I had resisted the temptation to assume the procedure had worked, my mind began playing scenarios in my head. Were the symptoms I felt genuine or due to the medication? Had it worked or was it another failure? The only thing I knew for certain was that today we would find out whether our family was growing by one.

~~~~~

Almost six years ago we had started on the journey to becoming parents, a journey we knew was not going to be easy. We were and are queer, and navigating baby-making can be complex for queer people.

By the time we made the decision to have a child we had left it too late for me. I was approaching forty and my egg supply had dwindled. We tried, but that only ended in heartache with two miscarriages. We mulled over our options for almost a year and a half. As our plans finally coalesced, and financial opportunities arose, we found a way to make it happen.

We did IVF - in-vitro fertilisation - through a fertility clinic. Our specialist was one in a million, a doctor who had both empathy and a “tell it how it is” manner, both essential qualities in the fertility field. We decided to use my partner’s eggs. The blessing of an alternative egg source was not lost on us. Straight couples with infertility problems didn’t have this option and had to use donor eggs.

But using my partner’s eggs meant my partner would have to stop taking hormones, testosterone. You see my partner is a man who was born female. He had transitioned from female to male when he was 33. But he gracefully stopped taking testosterone, took female hormones (the irony was not lost on us), endured self-injections and surgery to provide the eggs that would make our embryos that would hopefully give us a much dreamt of baby.

Then the lab did the rest - they added the donor sperm we had chosen to my partner’s eggs. We waited with anticipation for daily updates on whether the eggs had fertilised, how many embryos had formed, how many embryos had survived. We got eleven embryos which were expertly grown by the embryologists, then one was selected to be transferred into me and the others frozen in liquid nitrogen.

On the day of the transfer procedure we were given a photo of the embryo. It was both magical and mind blowing to see a photo of your child to be as an embryo, a mass of cells, something that had only existed on this planet for five days! We saw the flash of liquid on the

ultrasound screen as the embryo was injected through a catheter into my uterus.

Our specialist had worn her lucky red shoes that day and this indeed bought us luck because two weeks later we found out that I was pregnant. Eight months later we welcomed our son into our lives. It had been a joint effort, we had both contributed to making our family. Our child shared my partner's genetics and I carried and birthed him.

As our son reached 18 months old we underwent another embryo transfer, but it was unfortunately unsuccessful. As time and disappointment passed we tried yet again and it was the results of this most recent transfer that we waited with anticipation to receive.

~~~~~

Work was busy, an impending deadline for a media release for one of our top researchers gave me a welcome distraction. I was concentrating on the final paragraph of the release when I heard my phone vibrating. The butterflies in my stomach came on instantly as did the pounding of my heart.

I looked at the locked screen of my phone, it was the clinic. I picked it up and walked out of the office to find somewhere private. I took a deep breath and swiped right to answer the call.

The nurse said the usual pleasantries and asked me to confirm my name and date of birth. The seconds that passed between my last word and when she spoke next seemed to drag on.

"We have the results from the blood test you had done this morning...."

Oh God! This was it! I thought. I should have breathed in again, but I didn't. I just felt my pounding heart.

"....and it's positive."

The relief! The butterflies in my stomach vanished instantly and excitement filled my whole being.

"Oh wow....." I replied, trying to gather my words, "that's great news....."

I tried to focus on the details the nurse was giving me about what to do next - continue taking the medication, don't hesitate to call them if I have any concerns, book in for an early ultrasound scan in the next week and a half, but my mind was distracted. I couldn't wait to tell my partner. He would be over the moon.

She wears a trans flag

by Rae White

Julia the peacock is
trans
in Animal Crossing. She's
feminine
her
bright blue
feathers and colorful tail
she wears a
trans flag.

Papi is a horse
an okapi
styled like
Papi does not possess
horns, he uses masculine pronouns.

Animal Crossing
is supportive of trans rights,
genders in Animal Crossing:
are canonically
symbolic of gender transitioning.

This is a black out poem using text from the article 'Some Animal Crossing Characters Are Believed to be Trans' by Brittini Finley at [gamerant.com](https://www.gamerant.com) (Jan 2022)

On having certain feelings witnessing the glorious transformation of Elliot Page

by JP Seabright

What is it about him? The strong handsome jaw, the piercing gaze, the reluctance to smile for anyone but himself, especially not the judging eyes of cameras and column inches obsessed with what lies beneath. The checked shirt or hoodie, those bum-hugging jeans, the cap fits, worn jauntily low, that six pack, the chest scar. Why am I attracted to this male body? Is it because I have always seen what laid beneath. Visible to those who know yet to others out of reach. The shy awkward actor in Juno, who charmed the world with their smile. The quiet clever dreamer in Inception. I always saw myself in their characters. His discomfort in dresses at premieres, always going casual at Comic Con. Coming out as gay on Valentine's Day. How we swooned at such high-profile representation. Finally one of us in the spotlight. Another Ellen to add to our collection. But one we could actually identify with. And to those who claim they have lost one of their own, I say shame, you have missed the point. Forgive the deadname, Elliot was always his own self-made man. He's got nothing to prove but love for himself. But I cannot deny that I too am obsessed with genitals. I want to see and touch all those trans bodies with their rebirthing scars. I want to kiss them delicately, tell them how beautiful they are.

fourteen dreams

by D.W. Baker

brokeback
caterwaul
grass pipe
east wind
blowhole
fight club
dead heat
cinnamon
full tongue
doorstep
letting go
raindrop
backtrack
never stop

Love Song for an Adjacent Sign

by Alison Lubar

Because I married a Gemini I will always come home
to many wives. I love this duality in its binary unbound,
their expansive facets. I can see the electron cloud buzzing
like a grey halo of who you are today or right now or
who you could become. Always in chrysalis. You've solved
the problem of identity persistence: it's an aggregate,
all time-slices follow you here like a stack of funhouse mirrors.
And I am also always keeping my past selves with me: instead,
they rattle in a breathmint tin I want to drop
into the ocean. Dear kaleidoscope bride
please keep me in your spontaneity! Let's shapeshift
into the next dawn, the next day, together, with all of
our selves, ourselves.

Eating out

by Rae White

I'm paying a therapist to talk
to me about my anxieties
surrounding the spending
and earning of money.
I'm aware of the irony.
He tells me to treat myself.
I make some progress –
buy a really nice plant, like,
a really nice wholesome-
looking peace plant. And I take
a girl out. We eat curry
and naan and lick greased
garlic off each other's fingers.
My banking app tells me
I've 'eaten out' a lot lately.
Me, a huge queer,
is overjoyed.

I paid to see a doctor
tell me about the frustration
of spending and earning money.
I know how to laugh. He told me
to heal myself. I have progressed –
I buy good trees, see trees as peaceful.
The girl went out with me. We ate curry
and licked the fingers of others.
The banking app tells me
I've been 'eating out' lately.
I am old, I am very happy.

Note: This poem was written during Holly Isemonger's workshop 'Eliminating inspiration' (2022) and uses Google Translate to scramble the second stanza's text.

survival as tonya harding

After I, Tonya (2017)

by nat raum

you might ask yourself what a queer poet has in common
with tonya harding and i'll tell you i know what it's like to be

told you're doing *woman* wrong. i know what it's like to stand
out like a homesewn costume or an upbeat rock anthem

scattering its soundwaves across freshly smoothed ice.
i might tell you the ways i was torn down for all to see,

a monument to the antifeminine. my shame and tonya's
may not share a source, but their outcomes run parallel:

we rebuilt. we found new ways of shaping pleasure out
of our circumstances. we said *fuck you, i can do it.*

When You're Called

By DS Oswald

My best friend, when I was a kid, had a super power.

His name was Anthony, and when he called, the person addressed would come.

Hey, I see the look on your face. I get it. I wouldn't believe me either. But it was real, and it was... supernatural, in some way.

The first time he told me about it, I didn't take it seriously. That was just the kind of friendship we had. We would get off the bus going home and stand around in my front yard, pretending we were pirates or cowboys or mystical fairies who'd been cursed with vampirism or whatever, and we would just say things at each other, both accepting that was the fiction for the day. When he said, "People come when I call them," I snorted.

"Well, yeah. That's the point of calling people." Then, after a pause: "That's kind of a lame power. I want telekinesis."

"No, I mean, for real," he said. He screwed up his pudgy face in concentration. "Watch." He turned to face the round concrete circle of our cul-de-sac and called for his dad.

And sure enough, his dad emerged from their house seconds later, came trotting over when he saw his son waving, grinning down at us. "Hey, Anthony!"

"Hi, daddy." Anthony turned towards me and raised his eyebrows, and then he wrapped his arms around his father's waist.

Anthony's dad patted Anthony on the head. "Do you two need anything? I was just running out to get the mail, but I can grab you some juice or something from the house."

Anthony released his dad and shook his head. I followed suit. His dad shrugged and wandered off and Anthony turned to me, victorious.

I didn't like being wrong. "So what?!" I snapped. "Of course your dad came. That's, like, the whole point of having a dad."

"But he was in the house! He didn't hear me or anything."

"How do you know?" I replied quickly. "If you could really just make anyone come, why not ask for the President? Or—" I struggled from a moment to think of someone cool enough— "or the guy who made Spider-man?"

"I have to know them first," he said, sighing, like this should have been obvious.

"I think you're just a liar," I replied, and he scowled and said he didn't want to play anymore, and I had to pretend that I was fine with that until the next day when I said I was sorry and that I didn't mean it.

The subject didn't come up again until later—much later, when the kids started going missing.

None of the adults would really tell us anything, including my adults, which I found insulting. I'd been told I was mature for my age, so what was with the sudden wall of silence?

I wasn't too concerned for myself, because it was only little boys going missing. I was safe. But I worried for Anthony, and in my own way, I tried to keep him safe—I insisted on walking him everywhere, and as the rumors about the child-snatcher got worse, I made him hold my hand whenever we were together. We had some stranger danger people come in and talk to us. I made my mom take me to martial arts lessons. I had decided that if someone ever came to get Anthony, I'd fight them off. It would be just like a movie.

Police came through and talked to everyone, but despite everything, there was little progress in their investigation.

One day, Anthony had to leave school early. He went to the office without me.

Apparently, someone had called pretending to be his father. Nobody had any idea what had happened to him.

My parents tried to talk to me about it, but I didn't want to talk. I wanted Anthony back. I wanted him to tell me about the comics my parents wouldn't buy me and the movies my parents had deemed it in poor taste for me to watch and I wanted to get into a full brawl with him because he never held back on me even though I was a girl. I was so angry, but I was angrier when people tried to get me to talk about it. Couldn't they tell? I thought, stomping through the hallways. Couldn't they tell that I was in greater pain than anybody else on Earth? Why bother asking what was wrong? If they had half a brain, they would know.

And then something very strange happened.

I was being sent to the principal's office for being a troublemaker. The teacher was escorting me. I remember the firm grip on my shoulder, and I remember the flow of words, always coming back to the same refrain: I know it's tough for you right now, but...

And then I heard something. Faintly, but surely: I heard my name. I stopped short and whipped my head around.

The only thing nearby was the library. The teacher's hand was on my back, trying to push me forward, but I ducked under her arm and ran full tilt into the library.

I heard my name again.

The teacher was behind me. I ran again, towards the back, towards the voice, and for the first time in my life I hoped that, if anyone in the world had a super power, it wasn't me. I hoped it would be him.

There was a little librarians-only office in the back, which really was just the office of the one librarian who had tended this place since I was little. She was a pleasant-faced woman, who'd always been kind to me; imagine my surprise, then, when I burst into the office and yanked open the door to the closet in the back where I'd heard shuffling and uncovered a wide-eyed and sallow Anthony, who was still, with the last of his breath, calling my name through the spit-soaked piece of duct tape over his mouth.

I threw myself on him. Behind us both I heard the surprised shout of the teacher.

The adults, when all was said and done, still didn't tell me very much at the time. The librarian was a bad lady, they said. She's gone now. We're finding someone else to take care of the books. I pieced together much more later, with uglier words: woman pedophile, groomer. A criminal who'd upped her victim-taking as the investigation drew closer to her, who hadn't been able to get her final victim out of the school thanks to the tightened security.

That security stayed tightened. The school was never the same again. And Anthony's family, saying they needed a fresh start, moved across town; mine, deciding Anthony's parents had the right idea, moved across the country.

I went to middle school, to high school, to college after a couple years earning the money for an associate's degree. My old man decided I should pay rent about two weeks after I came out as a lesbian, and I decided if I was gonna pay rent I might as well have my own place.

Bounced around a bit after that. Worked at a gay bar, at a prisoners' rights nonprofit, at a restaurant bussing tables. I switched cities every few years—liked the traveling—until I settled down, more or less, in Virginia. But I still took a trip every now and then.

The last time I saw Anthony, I'd been visiting San Francisco. Walking around one drizzly evening, looking for a place to hide out while I booked an Uber back to my hotel, I thought I heard someone call my name from the dive bar across the street.

I shrugged and walked in, figuring it would be as good a place as any, and heard my name called again. I jerked my head in the direction of someone I didn't recognize, who saw me turn and grinned.

“It’s me!” He said. “Anthony! You remember me?”

I blinked. Anthony had grown from a pudgy, pasty boy into a pudgy, pasty man, though it was hard for me to connect the two. I’d never pictured Anthony bald as a kid. And there were other things, too—the bulky square-framed glasses, the wrinkled white button-up with the untied tie. But there was enough there for me to see who he’d been.

“Hey,” I said hesitantly.

“Lemme buy you a drink.” He turned towards the bartender, then stopped and turned back. “What do you want?”

“Beer’s fine.”

He nodded.

A minute later, I was standing awkwardly next to his stool, nursing my drink and wondering how the hell this had happened.

“Sorry if this is weird,” he said, after the silence had stretched just long enough to be awkward. “I just wanted to see you, so—”

“So you called,” I finished.

“You came.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to work, isn’t it?”

He shrugged next to me. “Some people will ignore me.” He smiled sadly into his own drink. “Been happening a lot lately.” He paused. “I’m getting divorced—people don’t want to hang around me much. Kind of dampens the mood.”

“And you want me for—what?” I leaned back from the bar. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to leave or not, but I could make the decision easy if he answered my questions wrong. “Therapy? One-night stand? Hate to tell you, Anthony, but I’m not a good listener and I don’t like men.”

He laughed. Only then did I start to really feel at ease; Anthony’s laugh hadn’t changed since he was a kid—this big burbling staccato that started in his chest and made his eyes squish into slits. He never half-assed his laughter and he’d never been able to fake it.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I didn’t want either of those things.” He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, grinning. “You’re as blunt as ever.” “Like a big rubber mallet,” I said. Then, “So, why me?”

His eyes slid away from me. Around us, the bar swelled with chatter. My hair hung in front of my face, dripping cold water onto my nose. I pushed it impatiently back.

Eventually, Anthony replied, “Well, to be honest, I didn’t think much about it. I just wanted someone who wasn’t involved in all this silliness.” He sighed. “You know, all of our friends think they have to pick sides. I am, frankly, tired of trying to be gracious towards them, well-intentioned as they are.” He stopped to take another long drink—some sort of whiskey thing I’d never had the patience to try. He drained the glass and set it down, staring moodily into the ice. “No more for me tonight, I guess,” he murmured at it. “Or else I’ll do something much more stupid.”

“You look like you could benefit from some stupidity,” I said. He looked up at me, and I smirked. “You look like Dilbert.”

“You look like a trucker.”

“That’s a compliment where I’m from.”

“There’s another reason, now that you’ve asked, that I think I called you,” he said abruptly, and we were looking straight at each other now; his brown eyes were watery but huge behind his glasses, and he was holding them wide open, his face displaying an earnestness that I recognized well from also having been drunk and sad and confiding in someone.

“You’ve always heard me from the furthest distances,” he said. “I’ll never forget the way you looked charging into that closet—sweaty, scared but so determined. You said you’d been on the other side of the library and in the hall when you heard me. Do you remember?”

“I remember.”

“I had been whimpering your name around that gag. I still don’t know how you heard me all that ways away.”

“I don’t know either.” I frowned into my drink. “I always thought that was part of it. Wherever they are, they hear you. Why didn’t you call your parents?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking straight. I was scared.” He had set his hands down on the bar, perfectly still except for a twitch in his ring finger, which bore the pale tan line of a ring recently removed. “And—no. Usually, I call someone, and they happen to be within earshot. I’ve never been able to explain what it was with you. I could whisper your name, and on the other side of the classroom, you would turn your head. It made me feel safe.” He cleared his throat, looking vaguely embarrassed.

I thought for a moment. Finally, I just said— “Good.”

“I think so, too.” He paused again. The chatter of the people around us was slowing; one of the larger groups had begun to peel away from the bar, and we both watched as they broke apart at the exit, waving and smiling and promising to see each other soon. “I wanted to believe that there was someone still out there like that, for me. Someone who would answer the call without hesitation. Someone who would show up, and—stay.”

I drummed my fingers against my beer bottle. “Lot of pressure to put on me.”

“I apologize.”

I rolled the apology over my tongue, like it was a fine wine I was savoring. Finally, I decided, “It’s alright. I don’t really have much else to do this evening.”

“No girlfriend?”

I shook my head.

“We’re in the same boat, then.”

“Maybe so.”

We sat in silence for a while. Anthony seemed to be ruminating on something, and I wasn’t in a hurry to distract him. I waited while he paid his tab and tipped the bartender extra—which earned him more of my respect.

“Thanks for coming,” he said, getting off his bar stool.

I stood up too—he’d paid for my beer, so I had no tab to settle—and wandered off after him. He turned around and seemed surprised that I’d done so.

“Oh, you were serious?”

“Huh?” I said.

“About having nothing else to do.”

“Don’t see why I’d lie.”

“Hm.” He looked a little confused. “Well, I’d kind of thought I would very coolly and mysteriously leave you in the bar.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It would’ve worked,” he protested, and then crossed his arms. “What now, then?”

“What now—c’mon, chief,” I replied. “You can’t just say that you’re getting divorced like it’s the only thing that’s happened to you. I haven’t seen you since we were kids—you seem like you’re not the worst person in the world—let’s catch up. Talk about other shit.”

Another group was trying to filter out of the bar, parting around us while they complained about the weather and the hangovers they were going to have the next morning. Anthony looked at me. His mouth hung slightly open. He closed it, blinked a few times, glanced around.

“I’ll give you something about me for free,” I said, “here: I went to three different high schools. My parents started moving after you got taken, and they didn’t stop.” He didn’t respond, so I kept going. “I kept moving, too. I’ve lived in—fuck, must be ten different states now.”

“I stayed put,” he said eventually, quietly, as though it were being pulled out of him, as though he weren’t quite aware of what he was doing. “Moved here for college and settled down as soon as I could.”

“I hated librarians since the day I found you.”

“I can’t stand being around that silver duct tape anymore. Makes me throw up.”

“My new school sucked. None of the boys would let me play with them and the girls called me a freak.”

“I tried to write you letters, but I got the address wrong, and they kept coming back to our house.”

“My mom still thinks I’m gonna get a husband one day.”

“My parents got divorced when I hit college.”

“I stopped liking Spider-man, but I still have that action figure you lent me.”

“I missed you,” he said, and that seemed to break the spell of our little back-and-forth. “I thought you were the best friend I’d ever have, and I missed you for years.”

“I missed you, too,” I said, and it was true, even though I hadn’t thought about him in years, except to bring him up as the damsel I heroically rescued once to impress girls. Anthony was a building-block, in a way, for the rest of my life; I didn’t think about him all the time, and I will probably go another few years without seeing him again, but he left a mark on me, and I him.

We spent the rest of the night talking—exchanged phone numbers at the end of it all. I went to my hotel and he went to his apartment, and we didn’t get the chance to see each other again because my flight was the next day. And when I got home, I padded through my little house in Virginia and found, in my bedroom, the old chewed-up Spider-man figure I kept on my bookshelf, sitting next to a couple romance paperbacks, and I set him down on my bedside table next to my water glass.

He and I have texted a little. Our lives are so different it strikes me as absurd—like we’re mirroring each other. I don’t know if they’ll ever truly line up, but I don’t worry too much about never seeing him again. I mean, he can always call me.

First Baby Photo

by Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

We gazed lovingly at the image
A blastocyst, only 5 days in existence
Shot into my uterus
Our future child

Long Distance

by Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

Hearts separated
Time, space, 10,000 miles
Video call sex

Touch

by Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

Fervent caresses
Of slick folds and wanton slit
Brings ecstatic moans

I think I was the gayest person

by SG Huerta

at the post office
mailing out copies
of my new and tiny
and dykey zine;
sitting on an IKEA
couch watching Girls
and trying not to
cringe at the whiteness
of it all; hiking
in Central Texas,
my cherry red Doc
Martens keeping me
from slipping off
the rocks; at my dad's
funeral last fall in my new
men's button up,
scuffed women's shoes,
saying goodbye to him
through the closed
casket and saying
goodbye as SG;
in this poem
because it's my
poem and being gay
is fucking lonely a veces;
catching my annual tan
at the café while
writing and drinking
a can of Lone Star,
el sol fueling
my rage and dykery.

la mia bocca della verità

by Christiana Smith

keep my pronouns in your mouth, or keep my name out.

it is easy to tell when you avoid two simple words, words that roll off
your tongue for anyone else.

you only use my name with malice in your veins, repeating it
instead of the words i've given you freely.

there is more contempt in your omissions; you put more effort
into making me feel subhuman, energy you could put
to paper with that sword of a pen you hold.

keep my pronouns in your mouth, or cut your tongue out.

i will stare as the blood fills your mouth, spilling out the corners.

let yourself savor the spice of your sins as it slides down your gullet.

choke on all the words you should've said.

feel that pressure in your esophagus i felt when you called my name.

feel helpless as everyone speaks over you, with nothing you can say.

gag as i did when you stuck your hand past my locked jaw.

keep my pronouns in your mouth, or burn yourself alive.

i handed you two words on a silver platter and you spat

them out onto my corpse, crushing my decaying body as you fled,

leaving a trail of your gasoline footprints to your house,

your house of lies you've built, believing you are pure instead of red.

watch as the words you should've said seep out of your every step
into the wood, waiting to be set ablaze. watch it burn to the ground.

i will light a match and your lies will burn into charcoal black

and you will finally know what it feels like to live in hell,

with all the other people like you, who you refuse to believe

you are.

keep my pronouns in your mouth, or die as i shove them in.

Sitting on the fence.

by SK Meenakshi

Compartments: dingy and dust-filled, clinical and obligatory, tucked under our pulse and heartbeats.

The outcry of prior voices smashed to smithereens against these blanched walls,

Crouching shadows and supine bodies; hair's breath away from crackling into flames,

Sweaty upper lips, frenzied eyes and twig-like hands reaching out to yank me in: "belong! fit in! be a woman!"

Pastel sarees with gold embroidering; pearl earrings and bangles dusted in glitter and silver,

Red nail polish and artificial wigs; high heels and silver anklets,

"Don't you look beautiful? You must wear more feminine clothes! You look pretty."

Black ribbons braided into my long hair, painted face and lipstick smudges on the rims of glasses.

Wherever I go, I smear it with my womanliness.

I bind my chest and don a black shirt, how does it feel like to be a man? Masculine?

Chestless; long-limbed and square-shouldered with panache a garland around their necks,

I toss out my tight kurthis and skinny jeans, slick back my hair and slip into ironed suits and leather shoes.

I cut my hair and wipe off my lipstick; relishing briefly in this veneer of manliness,
But oh! This doesn't feel right as well! I side-eye girls and fumble with my shirts,
I borrow my father's coats and zip-up pants and button shirts and tie shoes and yet-
Nothing feels right! Nothing sits well with me! I do not seem to fit in either of these binary worlds!

Oh, but where shall I go? What other alternative is there for me?
Where do we end up in history's textbook?
Where are all the 'uncategorized', 'undefined', and 'non-conforming' people? Where do they go?
Can they guide me? Can they take me with them? Whichever covert haven they're concealed in!
Broken mirrors and forked roads, who dares to indulge me? Who dares to accommodate me?

Womanless, manless, sitting on the fences, the grey area of our societies.
Who dares to approach me? Who dares to use my pronouns correctly?
Who dares to acknowledge my gender? Who dares to build gender-neutral restrooms? Who dares indeed?
Who dares to stand up for us? Do we dare to stand up for ourselves? Do we dare to face the onrush of the tsunami?

'It's not right! You're either a man or a woman!'
'You have breasts and female reproductive organs! You're a girl! It's unquestionable!'
"You're sick! Spouting nonsense! People of this 'modern' age! They've lost their minds!"
"Man, woman or OTHER." The implicit bitterness and revulsion in our OTHERNESS.

Clothes- they're either for a man or a woman. What clothes are for me?

Should I wear bras or banyans? Society's gendered clothes flung into my face.

Men's section, women's section, child's section. Where's my section?

Where's my androgynous section? Where's my unisex section?

Genderless, I walk out of the mall.

Heels or shoes? Pink or blue? Skirts or pants? Barbies or cars?

Makeup or no makeup?

What if I like neither? What if I forged my own gender? What if I rejected these ready-made genders?

What if I walked away from these mass-produced, factory-produced genders?

What if I carved my own gender in forms and surveys?

In gardens with poetry and marginalised voices to keep me company,
With my own hands shaping and moulding the pots and vases like I shape my gender,

Trimming the bushes like I trim out the stereotypes and toxicity in my gender,

What if I forgot all this societal nonsense and reclined on the swings?

What if I learnt to be a child again?

What if I restarted this whole fiasco? What if I relearned and remade my gender-fluid childhood?

This time I'd be armed with more flowers, compassion and patience to unlearn my heritage of confinement.

This time I'd openly gape at the flutters of yellow butterflies and dew-studded petals of a rose.

This time I wouldn't let my body define my existence.

Maybe this time I can find peace within myself. Just a tiny fragment of the moon.

Surely you can spare us that? I rewind the clock, cradle my head in my arms and lull myself back to a dreamt-up childhood.

I remember crowds, huddling and broiling - waves of mayhem.

In the gaps between men and women, there was always a wailing child.

Every woman I know ended up married and shackled to domesticity.

Must I end up like that?

Every man I know has never learnt how to express his heart, his love, his gentleness. Must I end up like that?

What if everything I saw around me is false? A pretence upheld at the cost of human life?

Am I brave enough to break the chains? To break away from this muddle of binaries?

Sitting on the fence, April mornings and koels warbling in almond trees.

What if I yanked up the duvets of soft grass and slumbered under it?

Elemental and natural.

What if I slumped into the humid soil and shot up as Calla Lilies? No one would dare to categorise me then.

What if, what if,you accepted me one day?

What if, what if,you wouldn't question me if I wore a blazer over my kurthi?

What if, what if,you wouldn't judge me if I wore my father's checkered shirt over my skirt?

What if, what if,....one day I'd come out as non-binary and finally feel RIGHT."

The Dark Recesses of My Closet

by L. Redd

At home,
I am me, and he
is him, and we
are life and love incarnate.

At home,
I don't need to worry
about presentation
or the act of being invalidated
at every turn.

When I am out(side),
I find that I prefer
the dark recesses of my closet,
if only for the serenity

of existing as I am,
in the comfort of my home,
seen and loved
by him.

When I am out(side),
people see man and woman,
Adam and Eve,
me only as an extension
of him;
it comes from both sides.

Loving him doesn't alter
my queerness, doesn't mean
I've caved into heteronormativity.
I will never belong there.

I never did.

At home,
we are simply us,
and I am so full
and free,

but out(side), I
am nothing more
than what you presume me
to be.

At home,
I am safe and swaddled.
How can I explain
that while the closet restricts
me, it also grants me
my fullest self?

I wish you could see me then,
in the dark,
just living.

Trans Pride

after Left at London

by Mikey May

We're walking the streets in 30-degree heat.
Summer has saved us her very last breaths,
knows we deserve nothing less than her best.
After so many centuries of silence as death,
now all we have left is to scream.

Whose streets?
Our streets!
Whose streets?
Our streets!

I have come to meet you all in a place we might be safe.
We are howling our hearts out and burning our lungs,
their tongues cannot touch this many of us,
their spit cannot smother the flames in our stomachs,
their eyes will grow wide as we glow oh so bright.

When trans lives are under attack,
what do we do?
We fight back!
When trans lives are under attack,
what do we do?
We fight back!

When the night comes,
we are powerful in numbers,
we are beautiful in moonlight,
we are radiating pride.

We watch summer fade
from atop smouldering pyres,
unpeel winter's fingers
from 'round brittle bones.

We will keep the fire burning
as long as it goes.
We will bathe in the heat,
and we'll sing in the light,

and we'll be alright,
revolution lover.

We'll be alright.

Part of This Pride Too, or “Bye Erasure”

by L. Redd

I remember at age ten
I was told to watch out for my friend for
one reason only:
“She’s a lesbian,” my other
fourth grade friends told me.
I didn’t know what a lesbian was,
not even when at my summer babysitter’s house, when
I sat down as the younger children slept,
and I watched two women kiss in *John Tucker Must Die*.
My chest thumped even then.

On the bus, first day of sixth grade,
Gabrielle told me I was a lesbian
because I wore a jogging suit
and sneakers.
She called me other things, but being a “lesbian”
convinced me this was why my
neighborhood friend Allie
never sat with me again.
My parents tried to comfort me,
my dad told me, “Don’t listen to her. You’re not
whatever she said you are.”
He also was the one who called his boss a slur
—I overheard him on the phone—
the one who turned off the movie *Dodgeball*
because the word “lesbian” was uttered,
like it was a curse instead of life.

When I was twelve,
I accidentally saw an erotic

movie on late-night TV.
“Accidentally” turned into me enthralled
with the image of the woman
enjoying herself
with a cis man. Both
intrigued me, but the woman
held my attention more than
I thought she would.

I liked only boys.
That’s what I told myself, especially
with my middle school friend group.
Only boys. That’s it.

So then why, in eighth grade,
did I get a chest thump and a stomach
swing at the sight of one of *them*?
My friend group did not like bisexuality.
“Well, I think ____ is bi. I mean,
she’s always flirting with ____.
It’s gross.”
Push it down, girl, push it down—
you imagined everything. That’s all.
Smile when she says, “I have a new gay
friend!” Apparently, to her,
it’s better to be a gay boy
than to be a bi girl.

My first boyfriend was gay.
Now he’s one of my best friends, but that’s
not the point of this stanza.
I did have a crush on him, I think, before
I knew. I told myself, one year after our
break-up, when he confided in me about his true self,

that I would join our school's Gay-Straight Alliance for him. Solidarity. Allyship.
I'm a straight ally, I typed on Facebook during Pride Month in the early 2010s.
Alien words.

At sixteen, seventeen, I'm not sure which age, but I do remember it was chemistry class and the cliché chemistry I felt when she talked to me.

The cliché chemistry of my mind marking her plaid skirt against her full thighs and her silver chains tight against her neck.

I just want to be like her, I told myself.
That's it.

I never spent time alone with her, even though I wanted to, even though I wouldn't admit it to myself.

Instead, I chased after a boy who told me, "No thanks."

Anyway, I wrote a character in my novel like him instead of one like her.

I liked hanging out with the theatre crowd during my senior year because within my body I felt more comfort as I learned what it was like to have queer friends ~~when I am queer myself.~~

At eighteen, I was invited to a three-way with the young man I was

madly in love with the previous year
(~~despite dating his best friend the year before,~~
~~I'm not perfect~~)
and his girlfriend, who found me hot.
We don't offer this to just anyone, he told me in
the car as we took hits on his bong.
This was the same boy who just last spring
gave me uncomfortable
details of his escapades with *her*,
that he "can't physically be with" me
even though "we have intellectual chemistry,"
because "we missed our shot."
I declined. I didn't want to lose my virginity
in a three-way,
virginity I didn't yet realize
I had already lost.

A few months later, there was *him*.
Months and years after that, there was him.
Seven years now, and he's been by my side.
We have learned
so much
about each other in every way.
He is the meaning of love for me.
He is not the first person I tell; I do
tell him, though. But to the outside,
I am in a heterosexual relationship.
I am "straight-passing."
When I hear this,
it makes me shrink further into
the closet I'm always told to escape.
But I am not all out of it.
These voices often demand, "How can you know you are bi
if you have never *been with* a woman?"

Well, I have never *been*
with women, trans men,
nonbinary people, or anyone else,
but I know I would like anyone. Any body.
Still, my relationship with my love is queer.
Even though he is straight,
I am not. I never was. I never
will be.

Now, I have kissed some femme people.
My first roommate for fun, college friends
for fun, and my dear friend from Nanjing,
and also I kissed a nonbinary friend
for a theatre project.
All for fun, for art, a small peck, no tongue.
For fun and for art
is not always for real.
I still feel I have one foot
in this dark closet.
I cannot deny my privilege in
being in a “straight-passing relationship,”
even though the thought of being called “straight”
brings pinprick tears to my eyes.

At least the world has these confessions
so that maybe one day
~~soon, please, soon,~~
I can walk out of it, close the door
behind me, permanently,
and finally feel ready to know myself.
Until the world is ready,
I am still here, quietly walking
down the street, wishing
to be seen, to always be considered

part of this pride too,
especially when he—who I love most—
is by my side.

For Queer Kids in Hostile Spaces

by Cassandra Whitaker

You are just in the world
the way you are, a body
being a body for its own joy,
green as a park, transitioning
into wild despite zoning, despite
eager hands that clip
and restrain, that clip and tear
out the rough plots
that don't fall straight, grass,
pathway gravel, flower bed mulch,
playground rubber, as if to say I am
the question to all answers,
I will not be contained,
I will not be mastered.

Scattered

by Alison Bainbridge

I have torn away parts of myself:
plucked them free
and scattered them
- love you,
love you not -
to the wind.
How far will they go to escape
the people we became
when we were together?

I dream of the places they've seen,
those loosened pieces of my heart:
bloodied, shared, and picked over
by strangers in dim-lit bars.
- love you,
love you not -
Will a person in a distant place
find part of me twisted off,
caught in high branches
or floating in a stream?

Will they keep me pressed
between pages of their favourite novel
or in a cabinet of curiosities, tucked
between snake skins and
sea shells?
Preserved, to remind them of pieces
they too have lost
- love you,
love you not -
to time.

Self-Portrait as the Google Search Results of “how do you preserve a polaroid photo”

by Jessica

A Polaroid photo fades over time. On the day a friend takes a picture of me, I turn to Google for answers. The only real way, real meaning not-fake real meaning permanent-as-in-forever real meaning of-course-you-wanted-to-be-in-this-photo is to store it online. I once found a photo online of a happy family, the one with the woman happy with the straight hair & the silicone oven-mitt, the one with the girl with the fork & the knife & the Happy Meal spoon laid out on the dinner table, the one with the man with the happy beard trimmed, the one with the little brother with the grin as white as the happy paper towel. Have I said the word *happy* too many times? The photo found online is boxed by four lines, the borders of my computer screen. The photo asks questions to me.

Who do you like? I like cake, I like bagels, I like whipped cream on bread. I guess I like the casserole in the photo. *Maybe you haven't found the right person?* Everyone is a photo to me right now. *Really, everyone?* I heard there's a thing called a spork. It's like a mix of a spoon and a fork. *What are you saying?* Salt contains sodium. I'll take the sodium metal out from the salt in the saltshaker on the dinner table. I'll make the metal into a spork. The spork can light on fire. *That's dangerous.* Most of the time I'm not flammable. *Okay, so sometimes you're like everyone else.* Whatever you think. *Which person would you be in this photo?* I'm the paper towel, the shreds people crumple up but forget to throw away. Not the tall white roll. *That's not my question.* I don't really care. *Which person would you be with in this photo?* That's weird of you. I don't know. *So who are you?* I don't know. A polaroid photo. I don't know. *What is love to you?*

I tell the photo to be quiet. I right-click on the photo. Online there is no option for *delete*.

The Way of Fruit

by Sritama Sen

"There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. A peach, for one, creature of texture and smell, sings like a siren.... Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. A fig is one hundred percent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth". - Amruta Patil

So much is bitter, such ruination
The blight on our walls, for one
Black spores creeping in like sleep on a full stomach.
Scrubbing till four hands are raw,
We build our home of sandpaper, lavender,
And throw out all the dying plants.
At twilight, we may turn down the news
What is there that hasn't been said before,
Let us draw the curtains early,
And spread a feast upon the floor
Each orange slice you push between my lips
In remembrance, of every time they wanted us dead.
In the grand scheme of things, we are just two fleshly beings
A blip in time, sharing apple cores,
Yet I cannot seem to look away
Your fingers in the peach pit, soft and bloody,
Thus depraved, I could cut you open,
Drink you whole, sweet summer fruit in my throat.
Perhaps, that shall not change a thing.
After all, the world outside awaits
Soon, they shall come for us, raining bullets at our door.
But for now we are still hungry,
Give in darling, eat your fill. Such ruination,
Such sweetness too. Death at your hands, the perfect meal.



Dear Jani

by You Lin

She writes them letters, watching them disappear along with the murder of crows that take off every day at dawn. *Dear Jani*, she would write, chewing the edges of her pencil, pausing and scribbling at regular intervals, the tolling of the school bell the perfect harmony to her inconsistent thoughts. *I don't know what happened to you*, her letter reads. *You just disappeared. Without trace, without word.* And finally, scrawled in the minuscule margins: *please come back to me.*

The crows bent to her will easily; she was a timeless being with an eternal well of patience. She could wait for them to outgrow their mortalities, tormenting them every second of their lives. She could do anything. And so, they listened, carrying her letters into the great beyond without complaint apart from the occasional mournful caws saturating the fresh skies. Sometimes, she found it ironic how she chose crows to do her bidding; not pigeons, not magpies. Crows. Perhaps it was that unique name they had: murder. A murder of crows. It always made her feel closer to death than anything else.

Then, the dreams came. Vaguely at first before becoming crystal clear, as if someone had tuned the dial on a very old TV crackling with static. Suddenly, fresh colors burst across the screen, every pixel painfully obvious against the phantasmagoria of colors splashed in her vision. She blinked, adjusting to the brightness, and there they were: their pinafore clinging to their petite figure, eyes as black as onyx, waving from the distance.

Jani, she called out, scrambling to run after them. Jani, Jani, Jani, Jani.

She wanted to ask them if they remembered those days they spent pressed against each other in the closet, stealing illicit kisses

whenever they could. She wanted to ask what happened, why did they run, how long had it been since they last saw each other. She wanted to ask them the reason she was stuck in this endless time loop in her motherfucking high school, watching from afar as generation after generation of students flooded the crumbling building, aqueous pinafores flapping in the wind and laughing footsteps echoing down the hallways.

Most of all, she wanted to ask if they still loved her, and why they never replied to any of her letters.

She supposed they couldn't; Jani wouldn't have left her alone, questioning her sanity at every turn. The Jani she knew would always come back for her, tomorrow or hundreds of years later. She believed that.

"Jani," she whispered, eyes darting around her dreamscape in search for even an inkling of her lover's presence.

Their shadowy frame appeared, disjointed at first, lips parted soundlessly. Xie Jia, they mouthed, wading against the current that pushed them apart. Wait for me, they seemed to say. Stay there. Wait for me. I will come back for you. I promise.

She shook her head, fingers slipping out of reach every time she fought to get close. "But where are you?" she cried out. "What happened? Why are you the only person I can remember? Why..."

Their expression was sad as they raised their arms, cupping the air in front of them. This far away, she could almost feel the warmth of their touch again, infusing her with strength.

It's been so long, they sighed. Too long.

“But why?” she asked, that familiar fog returning as she tried to grasp at those stolen memories she could barely access. “I remember... I remember...”

Think harder, Xie Jia, they encouraged. Why do you write? Why crows? Why this place?

She fell to her knees, her head pounding, the sheer force of agony nearly splitting her head into half. She was close. She knew she was. But close to what? The lonely spaces between bookshelves gleamed under the dim light, and how she wanted to wedge herself between those books, to feel the knowledge of her ancestors seep into her every pore. And then, memory struck, as distant as the school bell signalling the end of first period.

*

They were skipping class again; not that it was the first time they’d done it. This time seemed more real, more thrilling. She pressed close to their warmth, inhaling that fresh scent of citrus they seemed to carry with them everywhere.

“Jani,” she breathed out, ducking into the space between bookshelves just like she’d done so many times before; only, she’d been alone then. Now, she had them. Jani. The light to her dark, the fire to her water.

Her Jani.

They chuckled, pressing a close-lipped kiss to her forehead, fingers toying at the hem of her pinafore. “Nervous?” they teased, as if they could feel the erratic thumping of her heart beneath the layers of fabric. She suppressed a groan, panting every word in sync with the circling of their fingers around her waist.

“Yeah, it is, kind of, nerve-racking.”

They laughed, and how she longed to bottle that sound and replay it every second of her life. “Is this how it’s going to be now?” she asked softly. “Hidden between shelves? Snuggling in the dark? Never safe enough to hold hands or kiss in public? Never being seen?”

Jani stroked her hair, tilting her head to meet their eyes. “Hey,” they whispered. “I see you. I love you. One day, we’ll run away to someplace safe and marry the hell out of each other.”

She smiled, bridging the distance between their lips. “Marry the hell out of each other?” she repeated, lips tugging upwards.

“Yeah,” they shrugged. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” she replied.

“Everything,” the demon inside her answered.

*

“I come here a lot,” she admitted, watching as Jani’s frame flicker on and off as she walked down memory lane. “Came here a lot.”

They nodded, unsmiling.

“Something happened here,” she continued, albeit tentatively. She was making it all up now, but again, they nodded, as unsmiling as before.

“We made a promise to each other that day. You and me: we would always be each other’s, here or there, are we not? You wanted two kids and a cat, I wanted three. We were going to buy a lodge high up

in the mountains and have hot chocolate for breakfast and s'mores for dinner." For the third time, they nodded, inclining their head to watch the sun traverse across the sky. Finally, she asked.

"Do you still love me, Jani?"

They averted their eyes, never responding, the question just hanging in the air, still as a dead weight.

She stood, the bitter taste of realization deep in her chest. Somewhere behind her, she thought she heard their voice for just a microsecond.

I'm sorry.

It was enough.

But it also wasn't.

Perhaps nothing would ever be enough.

*

Time was an inconsequential concept for a being that lived beyond human years; so was love. And yet, she kept on writing. Letters to Jani. Poems to Jani. Dear Jani. Jani, Jani, Jani.

Sometimes, she would see a flash of their memory imprinted in the cement walls of the school: their name scribbled around wreaths of hearts, a scratch of their handwriting, their initials, carved with a penknife when they were in eighth grade.

They were everywhere. She was nowhere.

She'd tried searching for clues of her past, riffling through newspaper archives late at night when the students had returned, leaving all but one oil-lamp burning through the night. She'd visited the library time and time again, always stopping at the same shelf where she'd been in her dream before. But like everything else that came before, her searches parted into fogginess, dissolving into the abyss that consumed everything but her.

Was it so bad to hang onto a single memory, a single person who had long left her?

Was it so bad to wish for something more?

Or was it even worse to wish to go back to that moment when everything was alright, when they promised each other their forevers?

Either way, they never appeared in her dreams after that. Not even a trace.

She was beginning to think that they'd finally left.

*

The wind blew and years passed. Today, she sat on the edge of the roof, legs swinging as the latest batch of graduates posed for pictures below her, fresh blossoms pinned to their lapels. It was unfair, she thought as she watched them wiping inconspicuously at the tears glistening in their eyes. It was unfair how they had a whole life in front of them to look forward to and memories to fall back upon years later in front of a crackling log. It was unfair that they could leave this place and come back at any time.

It was unfair that they could love and laugh and live without restraint.

She hooked her legs over the railing, gliding down three stories of air before catching sight of a girl lurking at the edge of the crowd. She swooped down, eyes never leaving the figure as she hurried towards the library, the flower on her pinafore bobbing up and down furtively.

She was supposed to be in the hall, she mused as the great double doors closed behind her, the familiar shelves crowding her vision for what seemed like the millionth time.

She tucked herself between the shelves, running her fingers lightly through the dusty spines, the girl long forgotten. Was this what it felt like to be able to break rules, to skip events? Was this what it felt like to be alive and human?

Beside her, the girl jumped, the heavy volume in her hands dropping onto the ground with an earth-shattering bang. She was caught. And she was in big trouble.

But she was too preoccupied to care. Slowly but surely, a final memory unfurled, and she hugged her knees closed to her chest as she sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed.

*

They were in the library before the gunshots had even begun, limbs tangled in each other and eyes bright. She smiled, gathering them close in her arms. "I love you," she murmured, placing a tender kiss at the top of their head.

"I love you too," they responded, threading their fingers through her hair, as if she were the most precious thing they'd ever touched.

Slowly, they broke apart, gazing into each other's eyes, silent save for the sound of their breathing and their steady heartbeats beating

together in sync. Everything was so surreal—nothing could possibly go wrong, not with Jani by her side and her by theirs. They belonged together, and nothing—not even the scariest apocalypse—would ever separate them.

That was before they heard the first shot.

*

They realized the wrongness that hung in the air well before she did.

“Should we...” they whispered urgently just as the first bang shattered the silence.

“Jani!” she screamed as they mouthed her name, lips parched and crimson trickling down the front of their pinafore. “No!” she cried out, reaching, and reaching, and reaching for them as the shooter dragged their body away from her, sneering at her pleas.

“Jani,” she whimpered, limbs shaking. “Why them? Why?” Her hysterical sobs rippled in the air, no longer caring whether they came back to kill her. Jani was gone; her Jani, her love, her everything. Gone, obliterated. Dead.

The cold hilt of a gun pressed into the back of her neck and her panic intensified yet again. “Why did you... kill them? Why here?”

The masked man chuckled lowly, dragging a finger down her cheek. “No reason.”

Anger boiled deep in the pit of her stomach, but more of it was fear. Fear of death. Of being shot. Of bleeding to death. One bullet: that was all it took to end her life. What happens next, she wondered. What would it feel like to feel the sharp metal piercing her organs,

tearing them to shreds? Slowly, she swallowed.

“Are you going to kill me too?” The man nodded, clicking his lips almost as if he pitied her.

“Do you want to die, little girl?” he asked. His breath smelled of cigarettes and pizza, she noted. He smelled sour, like something rotten, something that ought not be allowed to exist. And yet, here he was, the last person she would see before she died.

“N—no,” she shivered, pressing her eyes closed. “I—I don’t want to die.”

“But you have to,” he cooed. “You have to.” And without waiting for her response, he fired.

Once.

Twice.

Until she slumped against him, limp as a rag doll.

*

Death was painful.

Dark.

Scary.

She fought against the inky currents that threatened to drag her down, feeling her limbs fail and her chest constrict. Poisonous, oily water filled her lungs and she screamed soundlessly, praying to every god out there to save her, to spare her.

But what about Jani? Part of her consciousness asked. What about the one person you loved above everything else?

She was selfish, she knew as much. Who wasn't? It was her or them, either she lived or she died for someone who might be too far gone to save.

Could she really bring herself to choose the person she loves? The person she loved?

She should've known earlier that love wasn't this ethereal, gentle being that danced amongst roses, should've known earlier that love wasn't as powerful as people liked to think it was.

Love, just like death, was dark.

Painful.

Scary.

And so, when the voice came, she chose to save herself.

She chose to live.

She just didn't know there was a price she had to pay, and that the price would haunt her—forever.

*

Jani found her on the ground, curled into a fetal position, streaks of dried tears smeared on her face.

"I can't die," she said, her voice hoarse.

They nodded once.

"I can't tell if being trapped here is worse or saving you and subjecting you to this fate," she laughed bitterly, shaking her head.

They held out a hand, and this time, she could touch them, as if they were physically there instead of a mirage etched in her mind.

"Jani—"

They held up a pile of letters, the letters she'd been writing over the years. Letters to Jani. Poems to Jani. Jani. She accepted them, caressing the yellowed pages she once scribbled upon. "You got them?"

They nodded again.

"So, what now?"

They gestured to the abyss swirling behind them, and suddenly, she understood. They were offering her another chance, another choice.

"What would happen to me?" she whispered. "What if I go?"

They smiled sadly, shaking their head.

"This is it, then? The end? What is the point of life if you end up disappearing into nothingness, your memories gone and every silver of emotion you've ever experienced scattered into the void?" she demanded, angry now. "What if I just want this? An eternity of nostalgia, never living but also never dying. Just... being. What if I don't want—what if I refuse to disappear?"

They took a step closer to the abyss. To their destruction.

“Jani, no—” she started, but they were not hers to hold onto anymore, just like she was no longer theirs.

Xie Jia, they mouthed for the last time, dangerously close to the edge. Come with me, they begged.

“Jani...”

She didn’t need to say it; they knew her too well to see her choice reflected clearly in her eyes.

“I love you,” she whispered, tears falling freely. “I love you.”

They smiled, as if to say that they knew, and that they had waited all this while for her. But they never said it back. Never said another word, other than to tumble backwards, and then down, down, down into eternal destruction.

*

She still wrote them letters. Dear Jani, I miss you. I love you. I stayed because I can’t stand the thought of forgetting you.

Sometimes, she wandered between the aisles of the library, circling the place where they’d disappeared, as if they might appear again, her letters in their arms, miraculously whole.

It was a fool’s dream, a stupid wish. But it was also what kept her going.

It was the only thing she thought of when she wrote their name again and again on spare bits of parchment.

Jani, Jani, Jani, Jani. Dear Jani. I love you, Jani.

She knew they would never get them now; not even her crows could deliver her letters to them.

They were gone.

Obliterated.

Dead, just like they should be a long time ago.

And her? She was stuck between living and dying. She was nothing and everything all at once.



M E E T T H E



Melissa Ashley Hernandez The Minison Project

Melissa Ashley Hernandez is a Latinx writer, editor, and performer from the South Jersey/Philadelphia area. She is the author of *The Love in Between* (2021), and you can find more of her poetry in *Fahmidan Journal*, *The Daily Drunk Magazine*, and *Bandit Fiction*. Her short story, “The Rum Keg Girl,” can be found in *Paranormal Contact: A Quiet Horror Confessional* (2021) published by Cemetery Gates Media, and her short story, “Lady Killer,” can be found in *Don’t Break the Oath: Women of Horror Anthology Volume 4* (2021) published by Kandisha Press.

The Minison Project is technically an independent literary *organization*, but you will see us refer to ourselves on our platforms as a literary magazine! Founded in 2020 by Melissa Ashley Hernandez, we have always considered ourselves a literary hub that gives marginalized voices equal opportunity to showcase their creativity. Under the TMP umbrella, we run four projects throughout the year — *the minison zine*: our zine dedicated to publishing the “minison” poetry form, *TMP Magazine*: our traditional literary magazine dedicated to publishing all kinds of work (outside of minisons) from literary pieces to visual art, *MiniPress*: our publishing press that publishes print issues and anthologies, and our *blog* where we publish articles, essays, and interviews about various topics.

E D I T O R S :



Melissa Martini Moss Puppy Magazine

Melissa Martini (she/her) is the Founder & Editor-in-Chief of Moss Puppy Magazine. A Capricorn from New Jersey, Melissa received her Master's in English with a focus in Creative Writing from Seton Hall University. She has served as an editor for multiple literary magazines and has published both poetry and prose online and in print. Her debut chapbook, *Faded Fur & Stripped Skin*, was published by Bottlecap Press. Her micro-chapbook, *Eating Pomegranates in Front of the Fireplace*, was published as a part of the Growing Pains Microchap Volume I by ELJ Editions.

Moss Puppy Magazine is an independent literary magazine founded in July 2021 by Melissa Martini. Our goal as a literary magazine is to feature and share literature that defies norms, challenges conventions, and embraces the unsettlingly beautiful and oddly innovative. We are a platform for emerging writers and artists to share their unique perspectives and voices, with a commitment to embracing and supporting diverse voices. Our core values guide everything we do, shaping our vision and ensuring that we provide a literary haven that nurtures creativity, fosters community, and amplifies marginalized voices.



Contributor Bios

Alisa Lindfield-Pratt is an aspiring writer of queer romantic and historic short fiction. Her first published work appeared in an anthology published by Tim Saunders Publications. By day, Alisa works as a research administrator. She is a former burlesque student, Trekkie and film noir fan. She lives in Australia with her partner, dog and rambunctious toddler.

Alison Bainbridge is a poet and author living in Newcastle, UK. Her poetry has been published in Glitchwords, Wormwood Press Magazine, The Minison Project, Brave Voices Magazine and Off Menu Press, while her short stories have appeared in Daughters of Darkness (2019) ed. Blair Daniels, Mirror Dance Fantasy, and Revenant Journal. She was nominated for Rhysling Awards in short poetry in 2020 and 2021.

Alison Lubar teaches high school English by day and yoga by night. They are a queer, nonbinary, mixed-race femme whose life work (aside from wordsmithing) has evolved into bringing mindfulness practices, and sometimes even poetry, to young people. Their work has been nominated for both the Pushcart & Best of the Net, and they're the author four chapbooks: *Philosophers Know Nothing About Love* (Thirty West Publishing House, 2022), *queer feast* (Bottlecap Press, 2022), *sweet euphemism* (CLASH!, 2023), and *It Skips a Generation* (Stanchion, 2023). You can find out more at <http://www.alisonlubar.com/> or on Twitter @theoriginalison.

Cassandra Whitaker (she/they) is a trans writer from Virginia whose work has been published in Michigan Quarterly Review, Beestung, The Mississippi Review, Conjunctions, and other places. They are a member of the National Book Critics Circle and an educator.

Christiana Smith (they/them) is a non-binary sapphic poet from the San Francisco Bay Area. They are Vietnamese and White. On free days, they can be found listening to music and playing video games with intricate stories. Their favorite group from the mobile game Project Sekai is Nightcord at 25:00. Smith has previously been published in Milvia Street Journal, The Talon Review, and Gypsophila. They can be found on Twitter and Instagram @lavenderpressed.

D.W. Baker (he/him) is a poet and teacher from St. Petersburg, Florida. His work appears in Snowflake Magazine, hedgerow: a journal of small poems, Modern Haiku, Moss Puppy Magazine, and elsewhere. He is a poetry reader for Hearth & Coffin. Read more of his work at linktr.ee/dwbaker, or find him on twitter & spoutible: @lowermelody

Daphne Fauber (she/her) is a queer writer, artist, and microbiologist based out of West Lafayette, Indiana. She can be found on Instagram at @daphne.writes, Chill Subs at Daphne Fauber, or at her website www.dank.pizza.

DS Oswald is a nonbinary lesbian writer, illustrator, and animator. They decided they wanted to be an author in the third grade, and their extraordinary stubbornness has kept that dream fixed in their head ever since. They have been an obsessive creator since the age of twelve—books, short stories, audio dramas, video games, comics, illustrations, short films, and terrible songs that nobody should listen to—and they intend to go on this way forever.

Emdash AKA Emily Lu Gao is a bipolar poet, writer, educator, host and daughter of Chinese immigrants. She is also a queer Southern Californian who endured the suburbs (lol). Her poetry has been performed at San Diego Art Institute, New York Public Library - Hudson Park Branch and Historic Filipinotown LA; her words have been published in Kissing Dynamite, Queer Rain & The Good Life Review, The Bellingham Review, sine theta & poetry.onl. Her work aims to heal, grow and decolonize. This May, she graduated Rutgers-University with an MFA in Poetry. When not writing, she is likely telling one too many jokes, hosting/producing her monthly open mic at WORD Bookstore or watching drag. Find her on Twitter & IG @emdashsays! All pronouns welcome when used respectfully.

Heather Ann Pulido is an indigenous writer from Baguio City, Philippines. She writes to grow both roots and wings. She aims to center more of her experiences as an SA survivor and bisexual woman in her work. Her poems appear in Moss Puppy Magazine, Hot Pot Magazine, and underscore_magazine. When she's supposed to be writing, she's on Twitter (@heather_tries). She also loves making children's books and taking long walks.

J.M. Knight (she/they) is a small time writer from a small town place. There is not much to know about small town people except that they are from small towns.

Jessica is an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, where her poems have won Hopwood awards. Their writing has been published or is forthcoming in VIBE, Star 82 Review, HAD, and others.

JP Seabright (she/they) is a queer disabled writer living in London. They have three solo pamphlets published and two collaborations, encompassing poetry, prose and experimental work. More info at <https://jpseabright.com> and via Twitter @errormessage.

Jude Deluca is a nonbinary aegosexual Capricorn, pronouns he/him/they/them. Areas of interest include YA horror, slasher fiction, magical girls, superhero dads, and big beautiful men. Their dream is to professionally write about Arsenal and the Legion of Super-Heroes for DC Comics. They enjoy writing about the ways in which people interact with media, and how media can influence us. They're still figuring out who they are and finding ways to insert or discuss aegosexuality and asexuality in their writing because it's not as often talked about. Expect heavy doses of 90s nostalgia and talk of fictional properties that never existed.

L. Redd (she/they) is a queer speculative fiction writer currently residing in a valley between mountain passes under a different name. She is currently at work on a YA witch novel and also a nonbinary vampire coming-of-age/romance novel. You can find more on them at reddwritinghood.carrd.co

Laura Bibby (she/her) writes poetry and stories that weave her love of nature with the strange, fantastical and ominous. Her work has found homes in Nymphs, Little Death Lit and Selenite Press, among others, and her debut poetry chapbook *A KNIFE IN THE DARK* was published by Bottlecap Press in 2022

Laurie Byrd (all pronouns) is a late diagnosed autistic writer and artist on some kind of journey. They are engaging with the world for what feels like the first time, learning to find joy in the everyday. You can find more of their work on their website, <https://lauriebyrd.art>.

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has eleven published chapbooks: *A Mermaid Crashing Into Dawn* (Fowlpox Press - June 2013), *Less Than A Man* (The Camel Saloon - January 2014), *If Tomorrow Never Comes* (Scars Publications, August 2016), *My Wings Were Made to Fly* (Flutter Press, September 2017), *splintered with terror* (Scars Publications, January 2018), *More Than Bone Music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, March 2019), *the samurai* (Yellow Arrowing Publishing, October 2020), *Follow the Black Raven* (Alien Buddha Publishing, July 2021), *Unleashing the Archers* (Guerilla Genesis Press, August 2021), *Hecate's Child* (Alien Buddha Publishing, November 2021) and *fat & pretty* (Dancing Girl Press, June 2022), and three micro-chapbooks *Heaven Instead* (Origami Poems Project, May 2018), *moon mother* (Origami Poems Project, March 2020), and *& so I believe* (Origami Poems Project, April 2021). She is also the author of the novella *Mates* (Alien Buddha Publishing, March 2022).

Marisca Pichette is a queer author based in Western Massachusetts, on Pocumtuck and Abenaki land. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Room Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *Plenitude Magazine*, among others. Her debut poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is out now from Android Press. Find her on Twitter as @MariscaPichette and Instagram as @marisca_write.

Mason Martinez (they/them) is a Latin, queer writer and traveler from nyc. When they're not writing, they're spending time getting lost in the woods and spending countless hours on the road. Their work has been awarded the Ginny Wray Senior Prize for Fiction and featured in *Gandy Dancer*, *The Institutionalized Review*, *Yuzu Press*, and more. You can find them on Twitter: @masonnatj

Mikey May (he/fae/xe) is a happy little degenerate living and loving in Birmingham, UK. Xyr debut chapbook, *would you like to hold?*, is forthcoming with Full House. Find out more about fae and faer work at mikeymay.carrd.co.

nat raum (b. 1996) is a disabled artist, writer, and genderless disaster from Baltimore, MD. They're a current MFA candidate and also the editor-in-chief of fifth wheel press. Past publishers of their work include Delicate Friend, Corporeal Lit, and ANMLY. Find them online: natraum.com/links.

Olive Ann (she/he/they) grew up on the West Coast and now lives in Boulder. Her writings are a blend of surreal horror and magical realism. She is published in The Magnolia Review, California Quarterly, and Black Poppy Review. Her hobbies include writing in third person and breaking the fourth wall.

Phoebe Rodriguez is a neurodivergent Jewish nonbinary lesbian writer and artist based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They spend their nights working in technical theatre and their days in political canvassing, and time in-between listening to punk rock and reading sci-fi. Their work has been featured in Snowflake Magazine, Messy Misfits Zine, oranges journal, and elsewhere. Phoebe's debut poetry chapbook, "Fatherland, Motherland," comes out July 18th from Kith Books.

Rae White is a non-binary transgender writer, educator and zine maker. Their poetry collection *Milk Teeth* (UQP 2018) won the 2017 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize, was shortlisted for the 2019 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and commended in the 2018 Anne Elder Award. Rae's second poetry collection *Exactly As I Am* was published by UQP in 2022. In 2022, Rae's Bitsy poem-game 'stand up' won the Woollahra Digital Literary Award for Digital Innovation. They have two poems published in *Nothing to Hide – Voices of Trans and Gender-Diverse Australia* (Allen & Unwin, 2022). Rae is the editor of *#EnbyLife*, a journal for non-binary and gender diverse creatives. They are the Events and Marketing Manager at Queensland Poetry.

SG Huerta is a queer Xicanx writer from Dallas. They are the poetry editor of Abode Press and author of the chapbooks *The Things We Bring with Us* (Headmistress Press 2021) and *Last Stop* (Defunkt Magazine 2023). Their work has appeared in *The Offing*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Infrarrealista Review*, and elsewhere. SG lives in Texas with their partner and two cats. Find them at sghuertawriting.com or on Twitter @sg_poetry

SK Meenakshi (She/He/They) is an undergraduate student pursuing her degree in BA English Honours at Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore, India. She has published a poetry collection titled, "Shades of Solitude." They are an avid reader and an aspiring writer.

Skyler Jaye Rutkowski (she/they) is a writer from Buffalo, NY. Their work often discusses queerness, politics, tragedy, travel, and most recently they've been experimenting with joy. She is the non-fiction editor of Variety Pack and the author of *A Mountain of Past-Lives and Things I've Learned* (Blazevox, 2019). Their work has been widely published online and in-print. You can find her on twitter @skylerjaye23 or more likely, at a dog park hanging out with her puppy.

Sritama, Alo to her friends, is a trans sapphic poet who grew up in Kolkata, West Bengal. She completed her undergraduate and master's at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and has had her work published in various international zines. Her poetry explores themes of trans identity and queerness in a Bengali context.

Val West (they/them/she/her) is a queer poet who is currently studying English, film, and LGBTQ+ culture at Arizona State University. In 2023, they were the third place finalist for Undergraduate Poetry in the 61st Glendon and Kathryn Swarthout Awards in Writing. They have previously been featured in publications such as Fifth Wheel Press and Penumbra Online. Aside from poetry, they enjoy screenwriting, music, puppetry, and cuddling with their cats.

You Lin is a Malaysian Chinese writer whose pieces tend to embody the darker fragments of her identity. You can find her work published or forthcoming in Archer Magazine and The B'K, among others.

