

MONARCH

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a queer literary awards anthology



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MONARCH 2026

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Cover art:

Elena Sichrovsky, "Mother Remove This Cup From Me," *Bleating Thing Magazine* ★



About the Anthology

Monarch is a new awards anthology recognizing the best new queer writing and art published by literary magazines and independent presses.

There are many awards for queer writing focused on recognizing full-length books; while we honor the critical importance of these awards, we aim to create a complementary space for uplifting the groundbreaking and often under-celebrated poems, short stories, essays, and artwork that are published in magazines, chapbooks, zines, and other collections.

As a term reclaimed and expanded upon by the community, *queer* means many things, with each person having an intimate, sometimes fraught, often liberatory relationship with the word. As an action, New Discourses describes *queering* as “to make change or to act in a way that is disruptive of normativities.” Under a regime that seeks to silence, erase, and undo us, queer existence and creation is inherently disruptive of oppressive norms. Queer writing and art speak truth to power, witness the brilliance and complexity of queer life, and call into being a queerer future. Our aim is to amplify this generation of queer writers and artists while empowering the next.

We chose to name this awards anthology *Monarch* because the word is queerly multifaceted. A non-gendered term for a queen or a king, a butterfly species known for its strikingly patterned wings—a monarch is splendor and glory. We know queer creatives are monarchs because we are, too. *Monarch* seeks to promote our collective flourishing.

We encourage editors to join us in celebrating queer writers and artists by nominating the striking, urgent, and joyful poetry, fiction, nonfiction, hybrid work, and artwork you have published by queer writers and artists. This project is created in partnership with fifth wheel press, a queer publisher of literature and art.

Editorial Notes

Notes on various pieces from the anthology, as written by Stephanie Anderson, Eleanor Ball, Haley Bossé, Qetsi'ah Joachim-Baggott, and nat raum.

nr: “Mother Remove This Cup From Me” by Elena Sichrovsky (*anthology cover*) is the kind of photograph that makes me fall in love—over and over again—with queer portraiture. the decisive moment feels candid, placid in its capture of three constantly changing variables: the soft sun, the lush vegetation, and the queering of body language.

HB: Tara Labovich’s “girl, possessed!” (*p.13*) deftly weaves the otherworldly with the everyday. With equal parts humor and depth, the language of this poem compounds on itself to gesture at experiences deeply personal, as well as universal and unknown. In short, I have a crush on this poem. I’m worried this poem gave me a tape worm. I want this poem to keep taking me wherever it wants to go.

EB: When I finished reading “The American Eel” by Mark Spero (*p.22*), I sat back and thought “Wow . . . I will never read something like this again.” This piece earns every one of its lines and sustains its momentum over four pages of unbroken poetry, which is no small feat. Spero’s work is delightfully playful, fresh, and incisive.

nr: i was immediately drawn in by the sureness of voice in the very first line of “Garden Sonnet” by Annalisa Hansford (*p.27*). the poet continues from there, delivering knockout after knockout and eventually wrapping this short but decisive sonnet up with a statement that lingers in the air long after i finish reading.

QJB: Chi Pham’s “Man Spelt Backwards” (p.48) is a heartachingly beautiful piece of queer fiction, with a blunt and open sense of identity. Honest, clear and crushing, I remember reading it many times over during the selection process, enamoured with the story, letting the words wash over me time after time.

SMA: This piece is hard to read. Read it gently. In “Best Western,” (p.63) C Ray Borck fills in only the details needed and no more to deftly stack nostalgia and fear, and it sticks the landing.

EB: “Rejoice in His Name” by Finnian Burnett (p.70) is a poignant Christmas story about the complex relationships queer people often have with faith, family, and holiday expectations. After reading this last December, I carried Jayden and Jake’s story with me through a uniquely difficult holiday season. Burnett’s complex character work and vivid scene-setting shine brilliantly in this gem of a story.

SMA: “worm girlfriend reprise” by Katy Haas (p.77) is a whimsical sentence-level delight, and is the piece from this reading period that I sent to friends the most. It’s a fun play on the commonly-known joke, yes, but it’s also chewing itself away, self-sacrificing in the name of love, unsettlingly sweet, comfortably uncomfortable, as if devotion is always meant to ache.

Thank you for reading, and for supporting queer literature and artwork.

Anthology Content Warnings

ARTISTIC NUDITY

matrimonio // sacrificio

SELF-HARM AND/OR SUICIDE

the new testament

The Wanderer / The Tourist

SEXUAL ABUSE OF A CHILD

Best Western

VIOLENCE, INCLUDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND BODY HORROR

Interview

the new testament

Transgender Stat Block

We've got war to cover

wilderness survival

worm girlfriend reprise



girl, possessed!

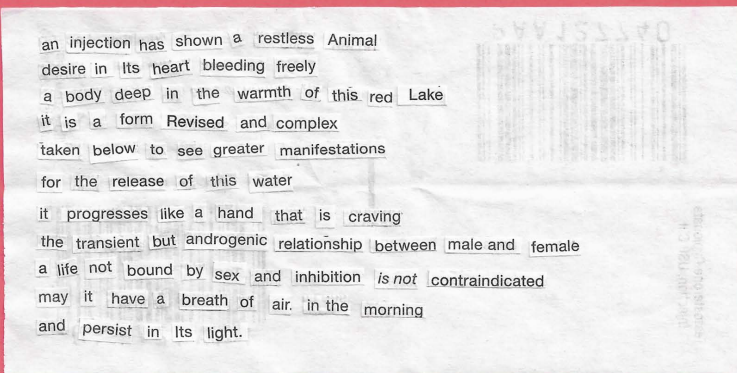
Tara Labovich

Dishsoap Quarterly

girl, what r u summoning
from the henceforth? from
the future? from your guts?
the yearn is a summons
for wet creation, long arm
winding into the ether,
looking, looking
like Jennifer's body
we succubus
desire, we're possessed, we're waiting
for it all to rankle in our bodies!
lovehunger, touchache, the singsong
from the cloister of want.
i had forgotten the way it hurts.

after midnight my friend & i sat
in the dark car, doing the linger,
streetlit.
i was saying something about the way
the universe talks, i was saying,
i want to protect ur desire
when we saw the fox.
she came quick, only
for the length of a streetcorner.
there—gone,
like all language, like the neighborgod,

like she was proving a point to us all about
what it's like to have the world
rile in you, talk to you again.



Self-Made Solution

Connor

Bleating Thing Magazine

I'll Be Waiting

Ani King

Peatsmoke Journal

Because it was prayer time during youth group, and you were staring at me again with eyes like a starling's, glittery, hard. Because I could tell you'd been watching me for a while and your lips were soft, open, and your teeth were small, gapped. Because you said Dad, *she* isn't closing her eyes. Because your dad made you call him Pastor like everyone else. Because Pastor said it doesn't matter if our eyes are closed if we pray with our whole hearts, Tattletale, worry about your own eyes. Because you were sitting on the school steps after school alone, for a long time. Because I watched you from the track, while I ran sprints and laps with the rest of the team. Because that happened a lot, you waiting for someone to show up, me watching you wait. Because I thought maybe you were watching me, too. Because you were still there when I was done with practice, done with stretching my hamstrings, hip flexors, calves, feet. Because you still wore ruffled ankle socks. Because the sun was out and there was a breeze; the collar on your blouse rippled against your neck like a sail. Because you were touching your neck. Because you were always touching your neck. Because when I looked for you at home track meets, you were always there. Because one time you said I ran fast and pretty as my horse. Because you wanted me to take you on my horse, but your dad said it was too dangerous. Because you told me I had the face of a noble steed and played with the collar on your blouse. Because girls in class called me Horse Face after that and you told them to fuck off. Because you didn't do it in your normal prissy, tattletale voice, instead you sounded like your dad behind the pulpit, booming, unforgiving. Because you invited me in after I drove you home, and I wanted to touch your hand that was touching your collar, I wanted to touch your collar that was touching your neck, I wanted to touch your neck. Because you took me to your room like always,

but this time you pushed me down on the bed. Because one time we were laying on your floor, which smelled like old cat pee and carpet powder, and you told me to close my eyes and open my mouth. Because I did, and you stuck your fingers all the way to the back of my throat, you were almost touching the inside of my neck. Because I liked it. Because this time I said Tattletale, close *your* eyes, and instead you opened your mouth and said my name, and you said it with your starling eyes, and you said it with your whole heart.

Anaphora

Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey

Dishsoap Quarterly

From the window in the back seat of my mind, I watch the sun set forever and ever. I say it like this so you can picture it — a sunset, the most generic spectacularity. Here, I am stealing zinnias from an old lady's front yard and here, I am holding back your hair while you puke yellow into the toilet. I am calling it truth: my perpetual circles. This may be premature. I have been on the lookout for coyotes since I heard them dusk-crying as a child, but when I met one face to face I was afraid. Here's a truth: we all remember our own sunset. Cheap trick. I take my temper out on my thoughts, no one else. I think because I am afraid. But not to worry, here, I am lighting the joint for you and saying *try not to cough* because I'll feel it, right here in my chest, and that's all right, you know I'd cough my stomach right out for you but who'd want to see that? I often assume the worst and as a result I am often very sleepy. The coyote was probably far more afraid of me, but I did not think of this until years later. Habit makes the heaviest blanket. I always look out the window when I see the light fading. I have seen so many sunsets you'd think I'd be bored by now. But look, look, would you look at that? I've never seen something quite like that before.

wilderness survival

Jennessa Hester

petrichor

be prepared to freeze scout
master says or you might not survive

beyond us mist crawls along the skin
of a pond he says to breathe it in

big breaths like a man and taste
the fresh cuts it leaves along the inside

of your throat let your body quiver
as your blood bleaches the fine air red

i stand frozen beside the master my throat
yoked tight within his grasp a firm man's hand

i feel his fingers crawl inside my mouth
and slouch down through the blood

he fingers the folds and they peel back
leading him deeper and deeper down

i do not know who dragged us under
the water i cannot tell my flesh from his own

i try to scream but men only
jump to save little girls from drowning

looking up at the pond i wonder if water
freezes beneath the surface or just on top



Unfinished Tree

Kyrico

Artists from Maryland

The American Eel

Mark Spero

Palette Poetry

Born

in the only landless sea,
then a long journey,
all together, a bundle
of silver strings.

I am

scanning for safe
streams of egress.

I am stopped

by questions only
asked to nail
me down.

Where are you from?

Unctuous.

*Are you the sex
you appear to be?*

Glassy.

*What organs do you
prefer in a partner?*

What a waste.

Still, you can see them,

moon dust in Maine,
water singed by night light.

Each a beginning sliver,
a heartbeat necessity.

Then they grow large and old,

and that's it, they
live forever, happily ever
after, with one small
hiccupped miracle:
they have no genitals.
I have so many
questions for you.
I want to slice
them from your
hum drum.
Are you or someone
you know looking
to consume my
finely wrought flesh?
What use is your
knowing me
if you merely
store it away
in your archives?
Eels are attached to
their mystery. For
centuries they let
us believe they emerge
from sea-foam, or
a certain kind of
dew. Still, so few
facts haven't stopped
us from eating them,
slipping so many
down our gullets
that the rivers have
begun to return to

their dull blue.
If you blink,
I'll have changed.
I am primarily
possibilities.
I am mostly
singing to the false
infinity of everything
I believe I can be.
When they decide,
they mate and die and
head home, that
ancient green sea.
But only when they know,
do those gonads grow,
and make the end possible.
Nothing at all
until they must be.
Only a slime self,
long and hungry,
contained, an
unbroken tube
of being.
I have been alone
for so long,
any and all social
situations come with
a deep thirst. I
have not withered,
I've grown into
coils of grey matter,
and I'd love

nothing more than
to show you, and
see yours too, but I want
to meet in a sea
between, where we
can breath in
each other, a
common, monotonous,
intimacy, the sweet
midnight fog. I
want this to
be necessary.

the year of lost limbs

Liam Strong

Gone Lawn

two mornings ago, the river up & left. i didn't hear a thing. not you, not leaves or crunches of snow, not their bed croaking awake. you bought sticky notes & scotch tape for me to keep reminders of absent items. brook trout, pennies, bottle caps, algae that once retained the rocks. i held your spit like a tablecloth, dearest. the syrup escapes the house the fastest way, its tires coughing snow in the neighbor's ditch. i know i apologized already. but i'm elbow-deep in building a new water table, & we won't have rain for months. it's fate or something related to it, where things disappear to. you can go, i promise. leaving is an option only you can make. the unripe bananas can stay unripe in the basket. i have digging to do.

Garden Sonnet

Annalisa Hansford

petrichor

I mistake ache for awe daily. Knew I was shattered since birth.
The hospital walls as white as the bone of my childhood best
friend. How only one of us would live past eighteen. In the maternity
ward, all my mother wanted to hear was silence. My father,
his favorite Sublime song. Instead their ears filled with the wailing
of a newborn. Some grow up to be a disappointment. Others arrive
in this world that way. I learned to dream of the future tense, memories
fresh like a bundle of lavender, girls with poems for faces. Once
I destroyed myself for a girl named after a flower. Now I can't look
at gardens without thinking about the nightmare of my life that,
no matter what universe, every version of myself wants what
I can't have. Like a rafflesia in a field waiting to be picked by a stranger
but never is. The stranger is me. I pick the daisy. Bears the name
of a girl that might love me in an alternate universe. But not this one.

游人 The Wanderer

Cela Xiè

Tab Journal

运 Once again he is the driver.

移 Father, stranger, leader, healer.

云 I no longer want to ride.

火 I want his burden,
柱 the immolation of his engine,

定 the throat of the wind
风 closing before him.

空 I want to be the sword-swallower.

嘴 I want my head in the tiger's mouth.

坐 Still I drift from one room to another,
吃 carried by the wave that leans before me,

山 a single white shell in his ear,
海 calling the second passenger.

我 I have lived from a suitcase for three years.

毕 I have slept on the floor of the living room
夜 of my mother's apartment, on a hollow bed;

之 I have trembled in a cell in a room of seven,
后 in a nervous house, in a city of lost angels;

没 I have wanted to die on a pale blue spread
有 on a peninsula at the side of my motherland.

活 I have been lonely, but I have not lived alone.

独 The driver calls me from my dream.
生 I have arrived at one more torn wall.

自 I walk the silver reaches of the shore,
由 and burn for the waves to absolve me.

人 I howl my bike down the night road,
众 and the lights of hotels glide through me.

云 I am the sea that carries me.

乘 I am the rider and the writer.

运 In fall or flight, I am my fate.

游人

运移云
火柱定风
空嘴坐吃山海
我毕夜之后没有活
独生自由人众
云乘运

The Tourist

Fate moves the cloud.

A pillar of fire pins down the wind.

With an empty mouth, I sit and eat the mountains and seas.

After the night ended, I have not lived.

Loneliness is born from the crowd.

The cloud rides on fate.

if $a + b = c$, then a transmasculine wearing women's pants = ???

Maddox Emory Arnold

Genrepunk Magazine

1. You are meeting someone new (yippee). How will they interpret you today?
 - a. As a man (see #2)
 - b. As a woman (see #3)
2. Congratulations, they almost got it right this time. What else do their eyes tell you?
 - a. They think you're straight (see #4)
 - b. They think you're gay (see #5)
3. Damn. Was it the XX chromosomes that gave you away? Ah, well. Try to twist your clenched teeth into a polite smile. Then, continue to #6.
4. Sigh... Consult the Manual of Inscrutable Heterosexual Male Greetings & Handshakes and choose from the following, then continue to #6.
 - a. Fist Bump
 - b. Forearm Grip for Businessmen?
 - c. The One-Two Punch???
 - d. Assert your dominance by refusing to make physical contact??????
5. Even closer! Tell them "I'm charmed" while they look for their hand sanitizer. Continue.
6. There's a small chance that at any point in the conversation they'll decide to simply avoid you altogether, eyes down and hands by their sides, terrified of getting it wrong. If this is the case, you are legally permitted to back away slowly and profess you have achieved elgeebeetee invisibility. Continue.
7. Interaction may be inhibited by the philosophy that comes with it. Academic pursuit of the probability of cordiality, percentages of a smile, politics of a nod. But don't worry, you have a PhD in not knowing things.
8. Maybe you should have stayed in.

9. Or maybe you should catalogue every minutiae of interpersonal exchange, put it in a spreadsheet, finally learn Excel so it'll run the numbers for you.
10. After all, what are you to them? They have all the variables, but you're the measly x , pinned on an axis and trapped in two dimensions.
11. Interaction concludes. Get the hell out of there.
12. Report findings. I don't know to whom.
13. On second thought, you should probably just keep them to yourself.



matrimonio // sacrificio

a.d.

Bleating Thing Magazine

My Body Is an Archive of

Han VanderHart

Asterales: A Journal of Arts and Letters

woodlines and clouded skies, biscuits, blackberry patches and plastic buckets, the sticky summer sun, the motionless pond, whisper of wind in the wild carrot, your hands in a hotel room, a February crescent moon, glass of wine I did not finish in a Gatsby-style bar, you leaning towards me for a first kiss, what it means to be beloved, the rhododendron flowers browning after blooming, the magnolia's cupped petals, the tender place behind your ear, my bare feet on wood floors after waking, the sighs of my dog, moisture in the morning air, how my grandmother cut the bacon as it fried, the abstraction I told myself I would not write here: longing and more longing

At Lake Merritt I'm wearing a hoodie with nothing under it

Jackson D. Moorman

Shō Poetry Journal

prepared to be bare chested for the first
time in public. Fear I'll be breaking
some cardinal rules. Fear I'll be

clocked as a woman, hauled off
for indecent exposure. Fear my reflection
will reveal me still curvier than I thought.

Fear my new chest will fall apart
at the seams. It took weeks of convincing
that when the bandages came off I wouldn't

split like a ripe orange hurled at the wall,
stitches refusing to hold, spilled pulp.
No, it's more like light

spilling through the live oak. Glimmers
on the water, glimmers on the spring-warm
jasmine, glint of the hoodie zipper. Unzipped,

then off, off for the first time, somehow
like tasting for the first time maybe
the way the air tastes when you're happy,

big sweet gulps of it. My survival—
it was thought—as unlikely as the manta ray
that wandered from the Bay to the lake,

went up the channel and twirled through
the iron bars meant to catch big debris.
They interviewed a marine biologist. She said,

*What most people don't know is that rays
can easily survive in brackish water meaning
the sea or the lake or the space between.*

No, it was the passage that astounded,
the dance to survive the stricture.
She said, *I'm still amazed he got through.*

You Can Be Naked In Your Own House

Gion Davis

Frozen Sea

Someone broke into the van and smoked
a menthol. Someone woke up inside the perfect
hangover. Someone dressed like a cowboy and went
to the pioneer village at the mall. Someone said Wyoming
is when the wind blows your hat off your head and you
have to go chase it. Someone was a better person than
poet and believed it was the other way around. Someone
filmed heart cells beating without a body. Someone wore
a persimmon colored sweater. Someone called it divorce
and someone else called it West Virginia. Someone came back
to bed smelling like coffee. Someone said I have to say something
and flipped off the car in the left lane. Someone thought
something was off-putting about the boy with the sunburnt
mouth. Someone was right the whole time and said nothing.

Quadriptych of an Open Relationship

J. L. Bermúdez

Chestnut Review

I.

___ is the first man. I know he wants me the first day we meet in philosophy class. Something in the way he spreads his legs as I shed my coat full of wintry morning, or maybe the slant of his look, or the tenor of his jokes, or his questions about my philosophy of friendship. The way he asks me if I am really bi after I share my sexuality. How he thought I was a lesbian. His interest in my open relationship. How eager he is to share his poetry.

I have been pining after another classmate, a girl with dark hair and dark eyes who is named for an oracle, and I decide that she has become my muse. I want her in a way that ties a knot in my tongue and I spend pages of my time writing poems for an Archer, from Taurus. I am sure that she is

II.

___ is the second man. We meet in poetry class, and later I will learn that he is friends with ___, who was the first. My girlfriend and I stumble upon him on a drunken Saturday night in spring, deep in his cups at an Irish bar and willing to buy us ours. He is desperately in love with his best friend, a boy, and my girlfriend and I know this without him saying so. He wears his best friend's Vans proudly.

He showers my girlfriend with attention all night. He compliments her afro and when I step away, he tries to kiss her. He is surprised to find me feminine, in red-lipped warpaint and a cat eye, because I often present masc. When my girlfriend and I are alone in the bathroom, I ask, "are we doing this?" and she says "yes," so when we go back to him, I let him kiss me like

III.

___ is the third man, but it's his friend who starts the conversation in line at the arcade. Something in the friend's smile tells me that we are both used to playing second fiddle, so I let him hook his hand around my waist while my girlfriend flirts with _____. We all smoke with a man who pulls pristinely rolled joints from the brown leather of his trench coat and shows off the stash in his cracked, metal briefcase, and my girlfriend laughs in that way that turns her all squints. We make friendships that last for only a summer, and we do not tell them that we are girlfriends.

I stumble upon the girl who I have made my muse on a thirsty Thursday evening, and as we take the T together, I invite her to get drinks at a bar in Allston. I tell her that my girlfriend wants us to meet

IV.

___ is the last. We meet up for a drink after classes have ended on a cool night in fall. I shave everything despite telling myself that we're just friends, even though I like the gap in their teeth when they smile, their sandy wave of hair, their poems in our workshop, the way they smoke their Marlboro Reds. The gentleness in their voice. The way they move their hands.

I buy our drinks with my girlfriend's credit card, and after flirting in the chill, I say, "Just kiss me already," and their tongue lifts the words directly from my lips. So I tell myself that I will ask my girlfriend for permission. Because I like ___ too much. Because I want to do whatever this is right.

I go home and wait and write a sonnet about the ocean, about how I am torn apart by an undertow. Maelstrom, I

straight, so I resolve to never tell her how I feel. Instead I go home every night and share my crushes with my girlfriend, who pays all our bills and puts me through school and cares for my dog, who loves me, who stays in the closet and does not desire to make love to me.

My girlfriend has been pining after a classmate of her own, a boy with dark hair and dark eyes who is named for a wolf. She tells me that I'm ____'s muse, and I preen at the idea of so much power over a man. My girlfriend tells me to pursue this if I want, reminds me that I do not need to ask her for permission, that we've finally decided it's okay to be open. So when he invites me to a party three days shy of twenty-one, I tell him yes, knowing exactly where it will lead.

Half a bottle of tequila later, he asks me if I'm flirting with him, and I tell him that I'm like literature: open to interpretation. So he kisses me on a stranger's balcony and buys me tacos that I don't touch before we Uber to his apartment in the heart

the afterthought that I know I am.

Everything about him is sharp and pale: his eyes, his hair, his milky white chest. He likes to put on lipstick and skirts in the bathroom of his apartment. We kiss him rosy in the stillness of his blue-black bedroom, and in the darkness his pet cat watches as my girlfriend's hands blur into ink blots against the creamy canvas of ____'s breast. He is pink in his cheeks and pink at his tip and pink in his hand when he slaps my girlfriend hard enough to make me hurt. He takes off the condom without letting us know and when I notice, we decide to keep going anyway. He is so drunk and nervous that he can't keep it up. He turns soft when I hold him in the cradle of my mouth.

He is my girlfriend's very first man.

We meet again, but this time at The Tam. He introduces us to a black-bearded bartender and buys us shots until we're smeared at the edges.

"I'm kind of an alcoholic," ____ jokes over his whiskey, "I've been in and

up with our new friends, so on our way we talk about what it means to be bisexual, and she makes it clear that she is straight and will only be my friend, and still I spend the night mapping my future in her words. I walk behind the group with her while my girlfriend teases ____, and I grind my teeth when he drapes his arm around the girl who is not my girl on the brown-banistered balcony, and I say nothing.

A week or two later, my girlfriend texts ____ and his friends to come get a drink with us. To her immense relief, it's only ____ who can meet us, and although she buys the drinks, we spend hours orbiting the tension like a three-person tango, flirting with the possibility of going back to ____'s place. While we play darts, I watch my girlfriend admire the tight cords of his arms, and I lament that my arms will never be strong enough to hold her tight to me in the throes of lovemaking I so desperately desire.

When we finally head to his house, we giggle and take pictures against the backdrop of a mural at the end

call ___. Whitecap in my chest.

I do not show my girlfriend the love poem that isn't for her.

And when I am given permission, my throat pythons around the truth and I do not tell her: that I am craving the massage oil, the orange-candled sex: that every inch of me has become an ode to a fling with a poet: that I feel like a line break / my breath an enjambment // that leaps across a stanza. I tell myself that hiding this will preserve my girlfriend's feelings, and when I'm awoken by the gasp of her going through my texts and seeing all of the longing that I have kept for myself, I pretend I do not see the tremble of her lips. I remind myself that I have chosen this commitment. That I have indebted myself to loving her.

____'s girlfriend does not like me. Maybe this is because I have misgendered ____ for the first few months of our friendship, or maybe this is because I do not understand what it means to be poly and have entertained the idea of competing for the spot of the primary lover. I ask my girlfriend if she would

of Cambridge. I tell him he's the first, and he tells me to use less teeth.

All is well until tequila wells in my throat and I'm on my knees in front of his toilet texting my girlfriend that I can't stop vomiting, calling for an ambulance because I'm feeling too faint and I can't believe that this is how she's meeting ___, helping me out of his apartment, refusing the ambulance because it will cost us far too much, taking an Advil even though I can't keep any water down and somehow I make it back to our apartment in one piece but something is unquenched, something disappoints me, and I'm reminding myself that first times are often disappointments, remembering our first time and how she flinched at the sight of me, accepting that I'm only attracted to how much ___ craves me, grappling with the idea that I can wield my sex like the edge of a sword, learning that I can seduce someone with one long look, filling the void that I attribute to my girlfriend's unwillingness to touch me and my unwillingness to leave her—

out of rehab a couple of times.” I laugh because he seems so young and I am only twenty-one and I haven't lived enough to learn what a cry for help sounds like.

In the sweat of his apartment, he asks me to leave because he's having trouble staying hard with both of us there. My girlfriend doesn't mind, so I step out of the room, and in the doorway, I record them to remember that she never sang as sweetly for me. His cat curls up next to me on the little sofa and together we wait. He ends the night with an apology and calls an Uber for all the trouble.

My girlfriend texts ___ again, but he never responds. We assume that he's embarrassed. She laments the potential for a friendship with him and I don't tell her that I am festering on the inside when she won't fuck me the same way she fucked him. I am embittered by the fact that I knew him first, that her curls and her hands and the soft dimple of her lips should have been mine. I listen to the video in the lowest hours of the night.

of his block, and then we play what has to be the world's worst game of strip poker: taking off bracelets and socks and rings and a single t-shirt. I am tired of waiting, so when my girlfriend leaves the room to grab a glass of water, I use my hands to say what she is so afraid of and break the dam of his desire.

When my girlfriend flies out to visit family for a week, ____ comes over with a weak excuse to see me. I ask if I can taste him and we fuck before he leaves, and although it should be permissible, I'm afraid to tell my girlfriend. She responds how I expected she would: why would I have sex with him, without her, if I knew she wanted him first?

I don't have the courage to see ____ again, to give him a proper goodbye, to treat him like the friend I so desperately need. When he moves to NYC a couple of weeks later, I do what I do best: I delete his number, his social media, his name.

try polyamory with me and she asks me why I like doing what is most convenient for myself at any given time.

I ingratiate myself to ____'s beautiful mother, and I learn that ____ comes from music, money, and a happy family not afraid to love their child, who welcomes a handful of twenty-somethings onto their Airbnb balcony to smoke pot and pet their dog named for a pie. I imagine a life with ____ where we listen to Simon and Garfunkel with their father, where their money is not like Damocles' sword, where their love is not like my own mother's: holding onto the hope that I will outgrow my bisexuality and marry a nice man. I do not consider what would happen with my girlfriend, and I cling to this foolishness like an oasis after the desert.

Our last date that is not a date is a failed seduction. We smoke behind their apartment and although we kiss, I am the initiator. When I am with my girlfriend, I am always the initiator. A mutual friend texts them and they ask if I want to hang out together. I imply that I would like to

because she is my first, because she must be the last, depending on her and the all the security she gifts me. I tell myself that I must stay with her, that in accepting her money I have cuffed myself to her ankles and must learn to love the taste of dust kicked in my mouth.

I fall asleep in her arms and am grateful that she takes care of me.

When I visit The Tam for the first time in months, the bartender recognizes me as a friend of ____'s.

“Did you hear?” he asks as he serves my whiskey sour. “____ died a couple months ago. Asphyxiated at a party.”

I think of ____ often. His crooked nose, his blonde shock of hair. I wonder who will feed Batman, his little black cat.

I finally stop watching the video of a dead man with my woman.

have sex and they tell me that they're not feeling it. When they don't look at me, I realize that the fling is already over. It was never, not for a moment, a competition with their girlfriend—I wasn't ever in the running.

The last time I see __, they help me with a project on Bisexual Erasure because although they aren't interested in me, they are still kind. I wish I could smooth the tangle of their tawny hair, but my girlfriend is with me that day taking pictures on the Common. I ask them to write down the most hurtful thing that someone has told them about their sexuality, and their sign reads “__, 22, ‘You flit around when you're young, but eventually you have to pick...’”

I take a portrait of them holding this sign, and I smile even though I know I will never see them again. I long for the choice to leave, for the luxury of not having to pick someone over myself.

I do not sleep with anyone in our relationship again. I love her, I remind myself as I go home with my girlfriend. There is a part of me that knows this to be true.



Bon Holiday

Jules Kennedy

#EnbyLife Journal

Gender study; gestalt

KT Herr

Ran Off With the Star Bassoon

A woman is driving 100 miles per hour toward a brick wall. She's slamming on the brakes, but they don't work. Her boyfriend, in the passenger's seat, chews gum and scrolls Instagram. In the passenger's seat, he pumps one fist and shouts along to yacht rock. The woman is a volunteer at Habitat for Humanity. Her boyfriend is a budding ornithologist. He flips the bird everywhere he goes haha get it? The wall is a breaking point, rapidly approaching. The car is a 2002 Honda Civic with a mismatched door panel and a bumper bra. The woman is afraid for her life. The wall is afraid, too. The woman punches her boyfriend in the thigh and says do something you idiot. The boyfriend shrugs a little with both hands like, what?! All around, clouds vomit onto the littered berm. The wall holds its bricks a little tighter. The woman pulls the emergency break. The glove box explodes and a Jack-in-the-box pops out, waving limp arms. Dammit says the woman. What the fuck says the boyfriend. Vote your conscience! says the Jack-in-the-box. Fphffbbffbff says the avalanche of fast food napkins billowing out behind him. The car is un-brakable. Above it, the sky is a sick wheel of light. Under whirring tires, asphalt cackles. Don't look says the wall to its quivering mortar. Don't look says the spinning light. Oh god says the bumper bra. Rosanna, yeah! says the boyfriend, punching the ceiling, punching through the moonroof. Love me says the woman, but she is talking to the wall. Love me says the wall, turning to mist. Aauuugghhh says the boyfriend, as the light-wheel takes his hand at the wrist.

Man Spelt Backwards

Chi Pham

SmokeLong Quarterly

My mother haunts my makeup bag. *Always be ready*, she'd chide as we dressed for mass, reapplying lipstick at red lights and through monsoon rains—once, as my father's casket was lowered. *Death is impatient, Đat. He won't wait for you to put your clothes on.*

I inherited her contempt for unpreparedness but none of her grace. Truth is, I see my father more in my reflection each day. At night I kneel before the vanity light to contour his features into submission. I want to reach beneath my skin and tear him out. Instead, I exchange scalpel for brush, painting a face over his canvas. This one is mine alone. The best compliment I get is *You look nothing like yourself*—that I appear as anything but what I am.

The queens at Gingham call me Ever-Virgin. Not fondly—I don't like to be touched. I don't drink with them after gigs, don't let their acrylics graze my hip. Vivian thinks it's criminal, a body like mine refusing to be shared. *You could charge extra*, she insists, thumbing through damp dollar bills. *For that whole Miss Saigon act you've got going on.*

But I've spent too long carving this form out of my father's bones. I won't let anyone pay to undo it. I wasn't for sale—not how other queens assume when I decline to split a john's paycheck post-show. *You think you're too good?* No. Only that my body hadn't been mine to sell.

The veteran didn't ask to touch. He found me after last night's show while I was scrubbing glitter from my clavicle. A twenty slid under my dressing room door, clipped to a note:

\$500 TO DO MAKEUP. NO TALKING.

29619 SMOKEY BOURBON LN, KATY.

I pocketed it—for the money, but more for the absurdity. A man wanting to be painted in silence, as if my mouth were the dangerous part.

*

The drive from Houston to Katy stretched flat and endless, sprawling like something dying. When the veteran answered the door, I noted how his body began its retreat: the catheter snaking from his sweatpants, colostomy bag slung low like an unfashionable purse.

Rules, he began. *No questions. No—*

No talking.

He led me to a bathroom reeking of antiseptic and talcum. A folding chair faced the mirror, awaiting penance. I unzipped my case.

Sit.

He obeyed.

Up close, his face was a smooth-shaven cadaver's: liver spots blooming throughout parchment skin, veins mapping age with indigo. Confession without partition.

I cradled his jaw, slathering primer over craters. Contoured to map a woman's planes onto his masculinity. Unlike a soldier, his eyes followed me with a trust that felt obscene. Like a boy watching his mother tie his shoes, learning.

You Vietnamese? he asked.

I nodded.

Linh was too.

I didn't ask who Linh was. The photograph on the mantel said enough: a girl, maybe seven, in an áo dài, standing between him and a woman. Her foreignness flared against their whiteness like a struck match. The woman's smile was tight, the kind my mother wore in photos before the divorce. The girl's was wide, gap-toothed, doomed. I glued down his brows, tweezing strays.

She'd be your age.

The tweezers slipped. Blood swelled on his lid. I reached for an alcohol swab, but he caught my hand and held it to the scar bisecting his chest.

Ever wished you could cut out the parts that hurt?

I thought of my father facedown in Galveston Bay. The coast guard finding his shrimp boat but never him. My mother, hands steady fixing her lipstick even as they lowered an empty casket knowing it wasn't a burial without a corpse.

*

He fell asleep when I was doing his eyes. On the sink: a tube of coral lipstick, unused but blooming with age. In the medicine cabinet: estrogen pills beside a Ziploc of baby teeth.

I wandered his house, fingers tracing doilies and painkiller bottles, entering rooms abandoned and maintained. The bedroom was the worst, preserved like a museum. Child's áo dài hung in plastic. A shrine of porcelain dolls with

painted faces arranged in rows like war medals.

I lifted one to lamplight. Bone-white skin. Black hair like mine. White kimono.

She loved them.

I turned, caught between guilt and something harder. He filled the doorway, swallowing the air between us with labored steps. The doll trembled in my hands.

You look like her. When you're on stage.

His knuckles grazed my cheek—dry, clinical. Not a caress. I felt the potential in them: to kill or to hold.

I'm not her.

Neither am I.

We don't speak again. The crisp hundred-dollar bills he pressed into my hand felt just withdrawn, still burning with residual warmth. I pocketed the lipstick and photograph before leaving.

Humid night air filled my lungs. The veteran's gaze followed me still. Through his eyes, I felt my father's, pressing from within. What refuses burial seeps outward. I carry him like a swallowed bone—his skull in my skull, his eyes in mine, watching.

*

Halfway home, I pulled over to vomit in a Whataburger restroom. Under harsh fluorescents, my reflection disintegrated—makeup cracking along fault lines to

reveal Father's eyes, Mother's nose. I clawed until skin gave way. Blood mixed with foundation the color of neither parent's flesh. I knew the truth: the body is no blank canvas. We're all just carcasses in revision.

Now, I mix his coral with my mother's Revlon. When I cinch my corset, I think of his colostomy bag. That fragile sack of waste we all carry. At least he has the option to rip it out.

Backstage tonight, Vivian asks, *Why'd you do it? The gross old cross-dresser?*

I fasten my wig. *Same reason you sleep with married men.*

Money?

Practice.

She cackles, but the truth is lost on her: I went to learn how to carve a daughter from a corpse. To let someone's fingers trace my father's bones and whisper, *Stay.*

Interview

January Santoso

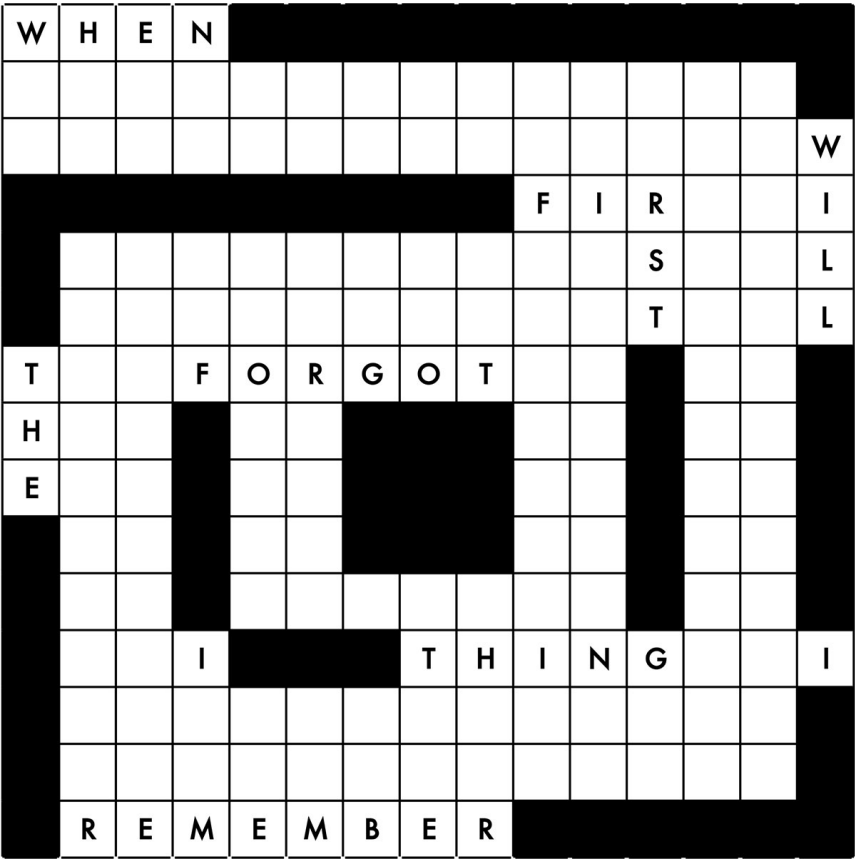
Chestnut Review

Where would you like to start? when it happened I was knotted in a cobalt room.
Is that a metaphor? I mean the lights were blue, but they were not
Were the lights symbolic? exactly. they are the last jagged glacial edge
What were you doing there? evermelting. but I'm made of plasma so I can't say
Were you drinking? look at that. I like this flowy state, like to be all
What were you wearing? love and crap. if anyone showed me love, it was
Were you conscious? a clam-shut pearl. thought I'd pry it open, lube it
So you were awake? up with swan tears. frightening, what a swan is, when
You didn't try to stop it? you're looking it in the eye.

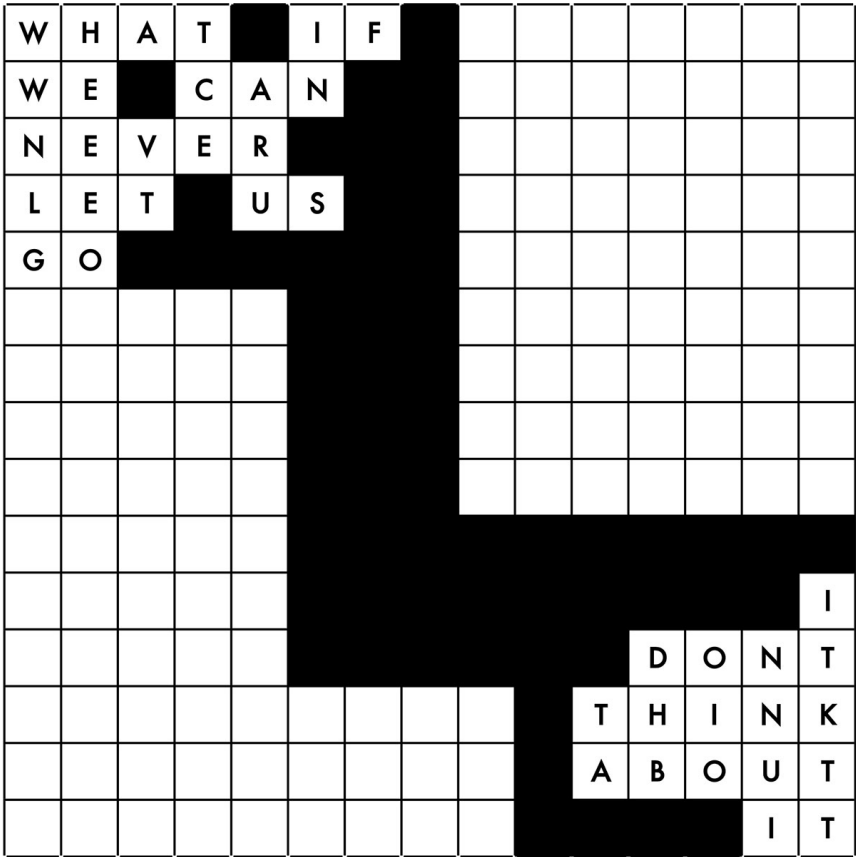
Scrabble Poems

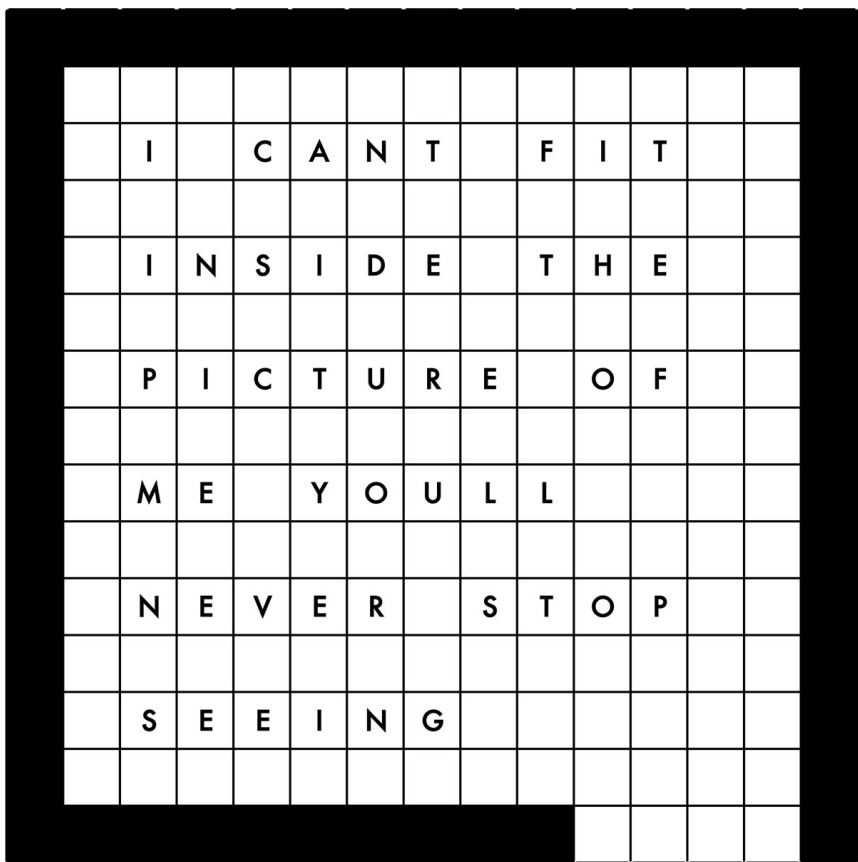
Erin Dorney

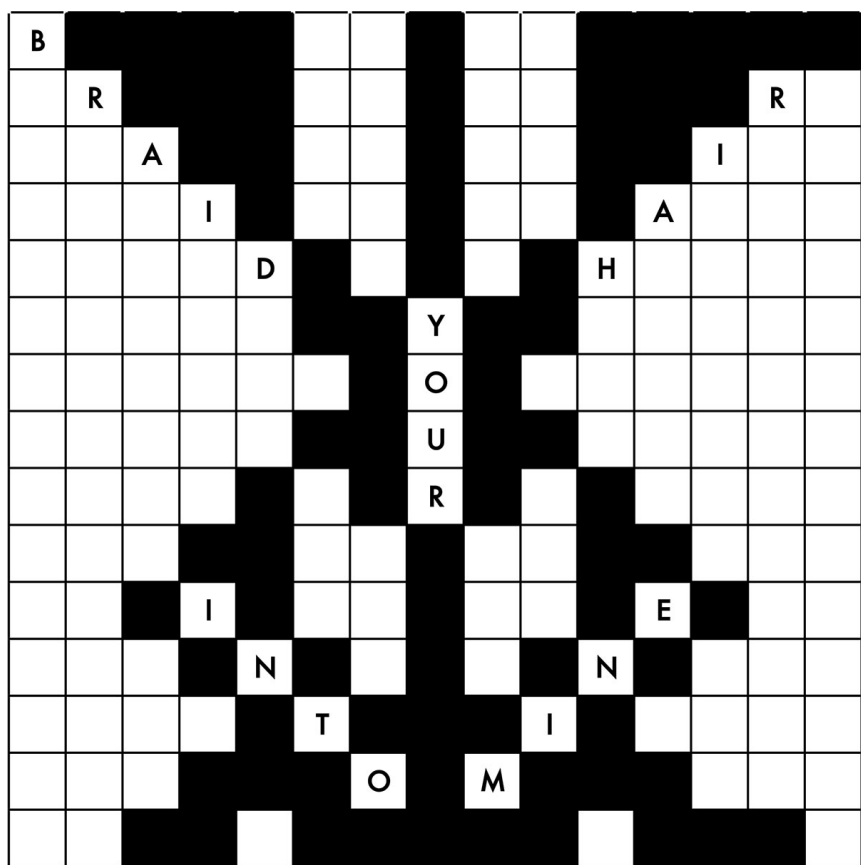
DIAGRAM



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sanctimonious

K.M. Hanslik

Bleating Thing Magazine

Behind the junkyard where I used
to wish myself away—the child's

heart you kept buried
beneath steel, & me calling

it stupid, saying this
is where things go

to forget themselves, but you

kept believing we're one
far-flung miracle from heaven, & I, as

wingless as ever, wanting
to believe you.

The phone rang off the hook to the edge
of a cliff where I

I felt my body melt into
a sunset of afterwords—like

when you said you'd keep track of us &
I said *sorry, I keep forgetting the days*

you meant “keep” like a fossil record,
like closing a fist of limestone around

Sundays you should have spent in church,

and my pendulum heart free-swinging,
the word *finite* crashing through

the wall of it when I heard. I wish
Jesus didn’t die for us. His piety is a

honey-beckoned prison; we’re suffocating
in forgiveness.

Days that I pray are the most blasphemous,
on my knees screaming that God

is rich in blood diamonds & His son
is a nepo baby.

I want to call and tell you: *God is a bad liar*
and Jesus still loves you—but of course

you know this already. I think of you /

in the junkyard / I think of you in
the graveyard, slipping

your heart inside that
too-forgiving soil and

I think of bodies
of steel, bodies of flesh, all

lost / in that darkness
of sanctity—Jesus' face backlit

against the clouds, palms opening towards
me like begging

for spare change.

Love Letter Explaining Trauma to a New Lover

Ashley Steineger

Ran Off With the Star Bassoon

There the marigolds with my taken breath, there the bridge, there the stolen gun, there this spongy heart, this suit of skin, world-weary, foreign despite, there the sterile room, corridors like spaceship hallways, then back again, phoenixed, back against oak, there the slippery ecstasy of a psychic's promise, there the treatment center disguised as healing farm, there the gorgeous meadows, rainstorm while drowning, there another friend takes flight, we watch them lift off, hang there like fog over water, burn up, become sunset, all day all year I long to be light, there the cabin in the woods deciding which parts should die, there goes the mind, there cries the mountain fox *mercy mercy*, there the neighbor smoking meth behind the sycamores, there mother, there holy cigarette, blue-curved smoke dissected by wind, new year in the other hand, there promise, there every perfect second, there like a thunderstorm came love, there love roughly, love rubbing my back *there there*, now here because where else, here with open book of secrets, here for good, here with you.

Best Western

C Ray Borck

SmokeLong Quarterly

We are co-conspirators crouched together in an empty hotel parking lot when my dad teaches me how to start a fire. He cups his hand over mine, holding the magnifying glass above a pile of dry leaves. He shows me how to focus the light into a small dot, hot. We watch the leaf char, then ignite.

We have a tradition where he takes me to stay at Best Westerns, a different one every time. He gets a room with a single bed, “two beds are too expensive,” orders a pizza (half anchovies, half pepperoni) and a 7-Up for my stomachache. We sit on the edge of the bed, eating slices off paper plates, watching TV.

I watch Brian Boitano win the Olympics from a Best Western hotel room. I stand in the television’s glow, transfixed as Boitano soars around the rink, more bird than man, wearing a military themed unitard. Halfway through the routine he knows he’s nailing it, starts to smile. By the end he’s triumphant. The audience leap from their seats chanting U! S! A! U! S! A! U! S! A! Barefoot in my pajamas with a mouthful of pizza, I throw my fist into the air, U! S! A! U! S! A! U! S! A!

At bedtime he rubs my private parts and his private parts at the same time.

One morning he gives me a swimming lesson in the pool.

He tells me to jump into the deep end, my instincts will kick in and I’ll swim. I jump in, my instincts don’t kick in, I sink through the soundless blue. As my toes graze the bottom of the pool my dad’s body splashes in like a cannonball, rescuing me. Over and over.

There's only one other person at the pool, a woman beneath a big floppy sun hat. I can tell she hates my dad and pities me. She complains to the staff, "It's impossible to read my book when this child is practically drowning every other minute." We are asked to leave the pool, my dad says no, and we are forcibly removed from the hotel.

Another Best Western I find a cat outside our room. I hear meowing, open the door. It's nighttime, storming. Under the streetlamp, raindrops race down like a thousand fugitive suns, a herd of shooting stars. She's all black with a white patch between her eyes, curled up at the edge of a stair, trying to get shelter from the handrail above. Dripping wet, crazy eyes, screaming. I pick her up, bring her inside, but my dad says it's against hotel rules. For once I argue with him, convince him to let her stay in our room, just for the night.

A Sunday morning, we're leaving a Best Western. I'm sitting in the car while my dad returns the keys to the front desk. The leather seat burns and sticks to the backs of my legs. The sun coming through the windshield makes my eyes heavy and weak. I watch as my dad carries our duffels to the trunk. His undershirt (wife beater, I'll later learn) is tucked into his jeans. I watch his muscles move under his skin. He's high frequency, always teeming forward at the front of space and time, edging eruption. Everything he does, he does too hard. I know this better than anyone.

He opens the driver's side door, swivels and lowers himself in. "Alright we're ready to go." He swings his arm toward my face, I flinch as he grabs my headrest, leverage to look out the back windshield. I watch his foot ease off the brake as we roll out of the spot, feeling bad for flinching. With the hand he uses to rub himself, he shifts. With the hand he uses to touch me, he steers. He's the clutch. I'm the wheel.

"Hey there's something I want to say to you."

I look at my hands. They're small and fat with chipped pink nail polish. I press my thumbs into each other.

"If I made you uncomfortable last night, I didn't mean to. I was trying to help you fall asleep." His tone is matter-of-fact, reassuring.

All these years, weekends, nights and Best Westerns, he's never mentioned it, his scotch and pizza breath, the dingy curtains, the sounds sheets make. I didn't know it was mentionable and now in the car I can't find anything to say.

In his glove box is a booklet, Best Western promotional material. It lists every Best Western in the US. He's bookmarked the Northern California section with a napkin from a fast-food restaurant, drawn a checkmark next to each one we've been to. He's traced the checkmarks over and over again, rubbing abrasions into the pages, says our goal is to visit them all. There are over 100 Best Westerns in Northern California. It'll take years.

"You were having a hard time falling asleep. Remember?"

I imagine myself as a pile of dry leaves beneath a magnifying glass. "Yeah," I say, bursting into flames.

Ghost in the shell

Holly Lyn Walrath

Radon Journal

The ghost of my teenage bird-self is still inside me. She has thermal-optic camouflage and keeps trying to hack me, but I kept my firewalls up for too many years, built up too many layers in this mainframe. I can hear the little sounds she makes inside me—pecking my insides until they bleed dial-up dreams. Sometimes she gains higher-level access, pulling on my strings; old viruses still work, at least a while. But she doesn't know about adulting, doesn't know the drain and drag of being alive. How everything is exhausting and I'm just ticking away checklists like counting days until I become like her, broken and enraged, outdated. I've tried telling her we don't have landlines anymore, but she's stuck in Y2K, waiting for two more digits. She's not bad—she never was—just angry, reckless. Sometimes when I'm driving, I can feel her trying to pull on the wheel, careen us off into a ditch. dash-dash-dash NO ONE LOVES YOU BITCH dash-dash-dash words flash across my eyes in Matrix green, zeroes and ones, as I hug the white line, remembering when we first learned to drive and she bought a bumper sticker that said "Sorry, I forgot to put on my blinker" before she finger-fucked a girl in the back seat. She might be dead, but her ghost is still kicking at my brain, hoping to find some weakness. I can feel her hitting her head against my walls until her beak is bloody and her ears are ringing. I whisper, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—" as she cries and tries and fails to wrest her body back just one last time. dash-dash-dash I WAS BETTER AT BEING US dash-dash-dash

Grief Is the Raven

Steven Sanchez

Glass: A Journal of Poetry

Hanford, CA

Do you recall, years ago, how a flock
descended on this town, caws and shit

and black feathers inescapable, how
their weight sagged cables into a grin

so pointed it might snap?
We wanted to kill them all,
to shoot them.

Instead, we released a single falcon
whose notched beak could pierce

a neck. I learned, that summer,
that ravens congregate around their dead,

that it's easier to chase something away
rather than live with it: a handle of vodka

split between me and a boy who taught me
how to remove bruises with a spoon,

to kiss a neck softer
with the inside of my lower lip—

the only boy who met my grandmother.

Mijo, is he your boyfriend?

He's a nice boy.

This is the last time I heard her speak.

For years, I avoided seeing her, ashamed.

For years, the aphasia set in.

I almost remember her voice's clarity

but the last time I heard her is so much louder:

her eyes widened and her voice flew

from her mouth and barreled past words

I couldn't hear, but felt

like the brush of a wing.

Perched on a power line, thousands

of volts surge between your talons.

You remember a person's face,

if they shooed you

or fed you.

I'm sorry it took so long to return

with crackers in my pocket. Thank you

for the pebbles and silver gum wrappers.

Your gifts glint like my grandmother's vanity,

her favorite rings and necklace

placed on her one last time, her hair dyed
and highlighted, her face beat for the gods

because she'd never be caught dead
barefaced in public. And I remember
something else:

she was so light when we lifted her.
I wondered if she was still there.

Rejoice in His Name

Finnian Burnett

Geist

I've been alive for 76 percent of my life, Jake tells me, and he lies on the living room floor, hands crossed over his chest. The collar of his shirt grazes his razor-reddened chin. He shaves every day, Jake, whether we leave the house or not. *I don't know that I can last another 24 percent*. His hands rest on a wrapped package, red bows, plaid wrapping paper, a gift from a greeting card company advertisement—I'd had them wrap it at the store since my corners always come out awkward and misshapen.

I'm pulling ornaments from a cardboard box, vestiges of my childhood. The chipped porcelain ballerina I'd begged and begged my mom to buy. The scuffed wooden train. The Santa-on-the-beach series I got the year we went to the Virgin Islands for a family holiday. I hook them onto the branches of our Christmas tree, along with the set of cross-stitch pictures my mother made—angels with glowing halos and *god bless this season* in block print over their heads. She sends a box every year, no matter how many times I tell her we have enough. *God bless you*, she always writes in the card. *You and even Jake. Even Jake*, she writes. We're atheists now, or we try to be, though belief still chokes us, wraps itself around our throats, our hearts. I want to call my mother and tell her that I'm an atheist, and even Jake, that miserable sinner, but I don't because we only see her every other year when we go back East and it's not worth giving her one more thing to pray about on our behalf.

Jake hates the angels, hates anything from our families, but I put them on the tree anyway, bury them toward the back. I touch the stitching on an angel's face and wonder how many she has left, how long we'll keep getting ornaments in the mail though her hands can't do fine needlework anymore. How many

does she have in boxes, ready to pull out every year, to pray over, to put in the mail and carefully label with Jake's name, and Sarah's? Every year, Jake shreds the envelope, tears it into careful pieces until Sarah becomes arah, then rah, then nothing.

I hang them all, even the handmade snowman with Sarah on his scarf, the ornament my mother made years after I came out, changed my name, started taking T. Sarah, she wrote on the card. Sarah, she hand-lettered on the envelope in careful script and Sarah, Sarah, Sarah she wrote repeatedly in her Christmas letter to family, as if cementing it in everyone's minds. *How dare you*, she'd said when I told her to start calling me Jayden. *How dare you*, I hear every year when I see Sarah's name on the envelope. How dare I?

Throw that one away, Jake says when I pull the snowman out, but every year I don't. He's never known me as Sarah, never had to stumble over the S, worry about my pronouns. I touch the snowman to my cheek for a moment before I hang it on a bough next to an angel, facing the wall, knowing I'll compulsively pull the ornament out and stare at the tiny scarf every time I walk past the tree. *Sarah*, the snowman whispers from the back branches.

I can't figure out what 24 percent of the rest of Jake's life is but he's here now and I want to ask him how he knows. Does he plan to die at a certain age, like his father who was fifty-six when he dropped dead at the front of the church, kneeling in prayer, perhaps asking forgiveness from god rather than his wife and children?

I smiled when he died, Jake told me once. *Laughed, actually*. A woman in the front row said Jake was in shock because he howled with laughter as his father clutched his chest and dropped to the floor. Jake told me that, later, he sobbed and then hated himself for grieving his father. In that moment though, when his dad fell over at the altar, Jake felt nothing but relief. *For our heart is glad in him because we trust in his holy name*. That's what Jake said after he told me the story, which was probably a psalm. He's always quoting from Psalms.

I'm trying to do math in my head. Jake is forty so if he has already lived 50 percent of his life, he'll die at eighty. That would give us forty more years together. But Jake says he's lived 76 percent which is oddly specific and probably means he's going to die at sixty or fifty-seven or something and dammit, why I am so bad at percentages? Seventeen more years isn't enough time when we've only been lovers five. When sometimes after making love, we both still curl into ourselves. *When lust has conceived, it brings forth sin*, Jake told me the first time we kissed, hands gripped, stubble rubbing rashes on each other's skin.

Jake hides pictures of us when his mother comes to visit though she knows we're together, knows we married last year without inviting anyone but my sister, Emily, who was kicked out of the church after getting pregnant by a married man who asked forgiveness and was granted it. He, the man, still goes to the church. I see his face smiling from the news section when I stalk the church's website looking for crumbs of information about my father or the rest of the family.

Why 24 percent? I ask, and he rolls over on his side to look at me. I'm holding an angel ornament, the cherubic face smiling at me from the canvas square, gold ribbons festooning the edges, the eyes somehow sinister. For the wage of sin is death, it says, and I fold it into the branches of the tree. Kevin and Aadi come for cocktails, loaded with cedar simple syrup and fresh basil and non-alcoholic wine in solidarity with their surrogate, who promised not to drink until after the birth of the baby. They kiss in our kitchen as they unload gifts. They call me Jayden like I was never anyone else and they tease Jake over his Christmas sweater. We don't talk about dying or our parents or god.

Kevin makes virgin spiced sangria and I put out shrimp cocktail and Nanaimo bars from the bakery down the street where we go every Sunday morning because the owner sells rainbow cupcakes and has a sticker in the window that says hate has no home here.

Kevin and Aadi touch hands and feed each other shrimp and Jake turns away. But I can't stop staring, can't stop wondering how it feels to love someone without hating that you love them. They can't stay long because Kevin's parents are hosting dinner. All the family is coming, even Aadi's eighty-six-year-old grandmother who made them a quilt for their shared bed. Next year, they'll bring their baby to family Christmas, and no one will say *the lord told me to love you and hate your sin* or *I'll pray for you*, and Kevin's dad will hold the baby, and everyone will take pictures of Grandpa and his first grandchild and no one will care that the parents are two men. *Come with us*, they say, but we shrink back, terrified of a family whose love knows no conditions.

Kevin and Aadi hug us goodbye, kiss us on our cheeks, hold hands as they tumble back onto the street, laugh and raise their faces to the sky to catch lightly falling snowflakes on their tongues. We both hold our breath until they're in their car, watch as they pull away, brush the backs of our hands together as we shut the door and retreat to the safety of our living room.

That night, Jake lies on the floor again, under the Christmas tree. I curl next to him, graze his face with my fingers, marvel at the soft spaces of skin between sharp edges of stubble. *What do you want for Christmas?* I ask him, ignoring the stack of presents on the floor. *What do you really want?*

And he presses his face against my chest, but he doesn't answer. He never does.



Memory Pop

Cristina Sanchez

Libre

Transgender Stat Block

William Roberds-King

Genrepunk Magazine

Transgender

Medium Humanoid (Any Race), Any Alignment—Unlawful in too many places.

Armor Class In 2020, Washington State banned the Gay or Trans Panic legal defense. +2 little too late for some. In 2024, so far five anti-trans bills have been introduced. Most target transgender youth. -5 to our legal protections.

Hit Points The last time I saw her, we ate pickles with mayo in the Satellite Diner. She told me that Emily Dickinson was a total lesbian, embarrassingly in love with her sister-in-law. Two men assaulted her for going to a bakery while trans. I think of it every time I go downtown alone. (1d8)-every time a trans person is attacked just for existing.

Speed The headline for the HRC's Anti-Transgender Violence report in 2015 stated that there was "An Epidemic of Violence" with 21 (at least) deaths reported. In 2023 "at least 32 transgender and gender-expansive people" were killed.

My husband told me, in the first year after I came out, that I was overly anxious about anti-trans rhetoric. "That's how politics works. It goes one way, then the other." Four years later, we avoid crossing the border into Idaho. 21 mi. to State Line.

Senses Truesight 60ft. Cis-people believe we have to "pass" to earn our humanity. Our final goal can't be the fair weatheredness of cis-approval.

Languages Common, Uncommon, Memes, Poetry, Prose

Challenge everyone who believes we don't have the right to live.

Proficiency Bonus +4

STR We know our strength (+4)

DEX We know our struggles (+4)

CON We know our lives (+4)

INT We know our histories (+4)

WIS We know our worth (+4)

CHA We know we're not alone (+4)

Actions

Resist.

Exist.

Persist.

Blasphemy Baby

K. Mobley

Chestnut Review

And if things could be different, I would have held
the knife steady. Made an offering. Praised and praised.

On Sundays, I forget to leave my guilt behind.

Don't worry. I can be soft and knowing. I can be
quiet as God. Lately, I cry more often than I orgasm.

The doctor says this is normal for people with
my condition. I take things with names that sound ancient
and expired and swallow the whole bottle.

I attempt nothing. All I know is to be too guilty
and filled with other people's mouths. My father takes
his whiskey always with three ice cubes but says this is
coincidence. What is a family, if not genesis? What am I,
if not a series of beginnings? I want to learn closure the way
a door knows it, loud and with purpose. Everything
enters me and I let it. O Mother, I flood everywhere. O Mother,
there is so much of me to apologize for.

worm girlfriend reprise

Katy Haas

MEMEZINE

in the apple of my eye lives my girlfriend who turned into a worm. the apple of my eye, i think, means love, means my whole world, means my heart. my girlfriend who turned into a worm (hereby known as my worm girlfriend) lives in my heart. she is always hungry. i am hopelessly in love so i tell her to eat, eat, keep eating, it's okay.

i tell my therapist about how my worm girlfriend lives in a metaphorical apple and she eats my literal heart. i tell my psychiatrist about my worm girlfriend and how i love her so much it hurts, so much it's eating me alive. i am put on a new medication but i don't think it's working. i can't sleep and my heart is still being eaten.

my worm girlfriend lost all her human teeth and now i keep them in a jar that still vaguely smells like pickles. in another jar is her hair. in another her eyelashes. in one more are her fingernails. sometimes she takes a break from eating my heart and she looks into her jars. my worm girlfriend cries by the time she inches her way to her eyelashes.

when she returns to my heart she is voracious. my heart is her comfort food. my heart is her home. my heart is an apple and when all that's left are the seeds, i will lie down in the dirt and grow an apple tree from my chest. my worm girlfriend will have my whole heart to live inside of. she will have all the apples. she'll be able to eat until she finally finds fullness, until she forgets she once had feet that could carry her far away from me.

Winter Solstice

Olivia Lehman

Glass: A Journal of Poetry

Every time it's a fucking miracle. How time slices darkness like fruit down to its peel / pit, surprise! You hold the Sun, and it weighs nothing but is heavy with insinuation. Nights are long and perfect for riddles. Time may not be real, but a seed can see eyeless through every direction at once. 4:38 to 4:41 three more hedonistic minutes of sunbeam. If I could store food in my roots like trees, I would let you eat when January is the only thing between your cold clean teeth. I won't let kindness stop you. I'll show you where to bite so golden light will gather in your concave stomach. Dig in like a vole in the dead of winter, wound me if you have no other choice. A Phoenix first burned to death before the egg sat on the velvet cushion. Nails hammered through Jesus's palms and dinner was ruined. It's a warm December morning and no matter how good I do it, my suffering does not bring snow.

We've got war to cover

Dante Fuoco

Split Lip Magazine

//

2002—*The Anna Nicole Show* premieres. 7.6 million people watch. A record. Two million keep watching. Anna Nicole Smith is E!'s biggest hit. She's "big," "fat." *Hit, hit*—she's everybody's punchline. I'm eleven, twelve. I watch. I laugh. To have a punchline is to have someone punched: passive voice. (Not one of us punches.) *I know I'm a big woman*, she tells Howard Stern, *so what?* He wants her weighed. Anna Nicole refuses. He's been guessing all day—300 pounds. He promises her \$3,000, an Xbox for her son. He could win \$700 if he's right. *I'll show you my penis*. His team cackles. Anna Nicole glowers. *It's not a thing for y'all to make fun of me about*.

//

2003—Horrors abound. I am twelve, thirteen. The passive voice is deployed. Iraq is invaded. Iraqis are killed. Our landline rings // is hung up hung up hung up *\don't pick it up/* is found off the hook in the morning, unbroken tone all night. ~~My mother tells me it's a telemarketer.~~ I'm told it's a telemarketer. The caller ID reveals a name. I keep the name : : the name is kept—

//

*Anna uses a lie detector on her five favorite bachelors to hold court for courtship.*¹ The phone rings, it rings. *Anna and her friends go camping.* My mother continues to lie. *Anna acts out a scene from The Taming of the Shrew.* I'm told it's nobody, nobody's calling. *Anna goes on a date with a truck-driving bachelor.* But no: it's

somebody. *Anna stars in Skyscraper as a death-defying chopper pilot with fancy red fingernails trying to save high-rise hostages.* I memorize the caller ID. First initial, last name. I know the caller is a woman before I know she is a woman.

//

2004—Abu Ghraib. I don't understand eleven soldiers are on trial. All anyone talks about is Lynndie England, *the woman in the photos who, with a cigarette rakishly dangling from her lips, pointed to the genitals of naked, hooded Iraqis and gave a mocking thumbs-up.* My father writes that.² He is one of 100 journalists from around the world covering her trial. I hate Lynndie England because everyone hates Lynndie England. My father enlists the active voice. ~~Prisoners were tortured.~~ Lynndie England tortured prisoners. ~~Justice will be served.~~ We will punish her.

//

Anna Nicole Smith loses sixty-nine pounds. *Look at the little waist!* Kelly Ripa chirps. *Turn around! Show everybody! Show off. Wow. You did great. Do you feel terrific?* At the Billboard Awards, Anna Nicole's voice slurs, the cadence of a tape played at half-speed. *liiiiike mah bahhhhhhhhhdi?* My mother takes to imitation. Eyes jiggle. Arms lift. My father and I laugh. We spend years sharpening this dynamic. Men laugh at the woman pretending.

//

When do I start hating my mother? 2003? 2004? When we're at war. When Bush wins again. Anna Nicole and Lynndie England reign/burn. The problem is not that the military exists. It's that Lynndie England lives. Not that reality TV exploits. It's that Anna Nicole wants fame. The problem is not that my father is chaos. It's that my mother can't love him.

//

August 8, 2004, FORT BRAGG, N.C.—Now, there was a distance in her eyes, and the jauntiness was gone. She moved deliberately, as if carrying the psychological burden of international scorn as much as the physical demands of being seven months pregnant. My father's writing teaches me things. Not that violence exists; more that it's invoked by a woman. A mother.

//

When does my snooping uncover that voicemail? On my father's phone, from my mother—*It's 2:26am and I want to kill myself. Please come home.* When do I first call my mother *bitch*? Or is it *cunt*? *Fucking cunt*. What word can I use against my father besides *son of a bitch / bastard*? All words, bedfellows to mothers astray. There is no compressed word to hurt a man like him.

//

My flip phone rings at 3am; shutting it off, I fall back asleep. *Anna and friends head to Palm Springs to judge the American Guy 2003 competition.* I wake at 4:30am for swim practice; my phone is gone. *Anna lunches with Larry Flynt, then does a Hustler photo shoot.* My parents stand stiff in the kitchen. *Anna attends the Kentucky Derby along with Larry King, Kid Rock, and Pamela Lee.* I'm told I deserve a new cellphone—a better one. *Cousin Shelly returns for a makeover; wet and wild mud wrestling.* I'm told I'll get a new number.

//

Daniel is truly the love of my life, Anna Nicole once said, when her son was still a boy. 2006—When Daniel is 20 years old, Anna Nicole gets pregnant with the girl she always wanted. Anna Nicole births the baby girl in the Bahamas; Daniel flies there to meet his newborn sister. All three fall asleep in the hospital room.

In the morning, Daniel is dead—*accidental overdose*. This ruins his mother. Five months later, Anna Nicole dies in a Florida hotel room—*accidental overdose*.

//

My mother stays up all night one night dials dials dials my father; I stay up, too, pretending to sleep upstairs. He comes home at 6am. *I put up with this shit, and still you won't let me get a dog*. At 7am my father and I cuddle under the covers as my mother washes dishes downstairs. My father. I cannot unlove my father.

//

My father and I watch TV. Commercial break; he turns to me. *Why don't you have a girlfriend? Boys your age have girlfriends*. I nod. I squirm. He smirks in a way that indicates concern. *You're not gay, are you?* My father, the journalist. I can't tell him the truth.

//

2007—Anna Nicole's death: her biggest hit? In the days after, more than half of cable news is devoted to her. In the weeks preceding her funeral, her death is the third biggest national story, outpaced—barely—by the 2008 presidential race and the Iraq War. An Iraq vet decries *troop morale is impacted*. . . *by the fact that America is paying attention to*. . . *Anna Nicole Smith*. The reality star with a fake name. Vickie Lynn Hogan has died. Who cares? We've got war to cover, we've got war to cover.

//

cover (v.)—put something on top of or in front of (something), especially in order to protect or conceal it. Anna Nicole's body, covered by a sheet. Anna Nicole's body, covered by the news. She is not forgotten—but she is. She is forgotten

by Dannielynn, the daughter she births months before dying in Hollywood, Florida. Dear baby, unmemoried mind.

//

New phone, new number. I swim swim swim swim swim swim swim swim. Online I cannot find her, the woman \kept name/ the woman who calls us. Then one day—I do. A byline. She’s a journalist? Like Mom, like Dad. She’s written a story about. . . my teammate Brad? Brad swims fast. Brad has dreams. He could make the Olympics. He is going to Princeton. How did she get this story? Was she at my practice? Did she watch me swim? *Law & Order* interrogation—she can see me, but I can’t see her. I am being followed. No. *Correction:* she is following me.

//

Brad; the woman who calls—both hauntings/obsessions. All freshman year, I look at Brad’s svelte body like I look at the caller ID: I can’t look away. I eye Brad in the shower—his abs, cut brownies. His armpits, those thickets of wet. Swimmer boys don’t shower naked. That’d be gay. Speedos are gay. We shower in suits that run down to our knees. Wrapping towel around waist, we trade swimsuit for boxers, cock always covered. But some days, Brad bares all. Naked, he dries his suit in the growling machine. I study the V of his body, the swell of his ass.

//

Uncovered truths; the burdens they bring. I can’t unfind my father’s drugs / porn / hotel keys. I can’t unfantasize boys naked with me. I can’t unread the email sent to my parents by the woman who calls—now I know why she calls. Family secret, revealed: reality frays. My family is not what I thought. I’m not the boy I’m supposed to be. All high school, I keep these secrets : : these secrets are kept—

//

2007—Anna Nicole is buried in the Bahamas the last day of my championship swim meet. I set a personal best. 11th place, 3 spots away from podium.

Event 44 Boys 100 Yard Breaststroke

11 Fuoco, Dante JR Mount Lebanon Hi 1:03.81
29.87 33.94

It does not feel like enough. Two years later, how fast I do/don't respond will be clocked by the woman who calls.

//

When do I first interrogate my father? How my father covers abuse / how my father covers abuse.

//

2009—I'm eighteen. It's summer. A rising sophomore in college, I lifeguard. I love college. I love swimming. I am on my break. It's hot. I sit on the grass. I get a text from an unknown number. But I know who it is.

Dante, your sister wants to meet her brother

//

All summer, I lie to my parents. What I keep from them is what they kept from me: the truth. I meet the calling woman in secret. Her daughter—my sister—is five, is secret secret secret. Our play dates: the park, the movie, their house, the diner. We play play. I don't tell anyone. I tell the little girl, *I love being your big brother*. The calling woman rages at me. *You're just like your father*. The calling woman cools. *Thank you for being so amazing*. I vow to make everything right.

//

Come autumn: explosion. The calling woman sends my father a photo of me and my sister—reveals our secret. He bursts into my bedroom, yells. I weep; he weeps. I forgive him—then I take it back. He rages, yells. I call the calling woman *cunt*. I stop calling my sister.

//

For years I keep calling myself man, straight, son. *Yes, Dad. I'm your best friend. Your only child.* The lies I tell to allay him—these wear on me. I start telling the truth. He can't stomach my longing for men. He leaves my mother, moves out of the house. He calls he calls; I don't pick up. I'll never pick up.

//

2019—Nixing father from life, I fall in love with a man. We call each other *girl*, a term of endearment.

//

Recurring nightmare: my mother is dead. I cry and I cry—then I wake up. But even awake I've wept, relieved, sutured by fact: my mother still lives. I love my mother. She tells me, *I had no one to talk to*. Neither did I. But now we can talk. The secrets we suffered, now stories we share.

¹ Episode synopses of *The Anna Nicole Show*, season 2, taken from Rotten Tomatoes.

² Coverage of Lynndie England's trial quoted from "Trial casts W. Va. Soldier in different light," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Girl Cousins, Pixelated

Ranudi Gunawardena

Shō Poetry Journal

On days when my mother craved
ambarella for her bump, she drove

us to our cousins' place in Ganemulla
where the ambarella tree was always

waiting, and under it, you. The fruit
hung bending the branches, like a hundred

small stomachs, bird-eaten and naked
where the beaks had pierced. In the sun

sieved through the leaves, your hair
gleaming, a crow's wing mid-flight

and I, running into your small arms.
Evenings, after we tired of throwing

stones at high fruit, frightening squirrels
into temporary hiding, you taught me

how to kiss you like a boy from a new
Hollywood film. To run to you, waiting

at the foot of the ambarella tree, from the far
end of the garden, where in an artificial

pond, the saree guppy died every fortnight,
forgotten. I spun you, your dress filling

with wind like guppy fins trailing
in water, your bare feet floating barely

above ground. And when we kissed,
your lips tasted only of skin, smelled only

of ambarella—our teeth sinking in
through unwashed fruit skin to find

unexpectedly, like a buried tongue,
the insides. You cried *Cut—cut, cut,*

cut—so the retake was necessary;
my running, your spinning, our kiss always

not quite satisfactory, pixelated possibility
until you stopped me in the tree shade

and said, *Enough, now I will be*
the boy. Later, when we tired of this

too, we sat beneath the ambarella tree,
sharing a fruit crushed under your foot,

sucking in turns its vague tartness
until we were called home.

the new testament

Michael Agunbiade

Variant Literature

i sat on the top of a kopje
listening to a part of me on the radio.
my mother had just returned
from another war & once again
she did not survive.
the man on the radio said
i will still die
whether or not i bury the boy on my shirt.
it is nearly two years since i came out
& my room already has a memory of blood.
i guess the man i am currently fucking
must have felt the same way
he couldn't find his hands
while his father ran a blade over him.
who would watch his son
being swallowed by a man
& not burn down a city?
drown into water a decade of ships?
it takes a man to leave home
and never return. it takes courage
to kneel on the altar of a gun
while God is watching.
yesterday a boy rode
a bike towards me
& what we did in the end was remarkable.
what do you think i mean?

that he never taught me
how to ride a bike instead
how to ride a man into a room
suppose one of us stood
in the nude of hunger
like an unlit lamppost.
suppose it is raining
and i put out all my boats
as if its arrival was all i wanted.

The Poem Formerly Known As The Poem Formerly Known As Stupid

Gordon Taylor

Palette Poetry

If I could begin again, I'd be wise.
I mean, I'd be a drummer,
not a poet. I'd be an ancient moose
in Algonquin Park happening upon two
hikers in a declining empire of red
leaves. I'd walk
toward the couple to startle them
because I'm MASSIVE & since a poem
is a passing glance & my antlers
are an autumn elegy, they'll soon fall
into snow & I'll be bald.

If I could begin again, I'd argue.
I'd resist. What is life without people
to disagree with?
Did I mention drumming? A poem
is percussion & the sound of my husband,
a declining empire of one
insisting that poetry is a lost
language. I wrote a stanza
to disagree with him & one to the stupid
doctor who said I engage too much
in anal sex, inviting disease.

&/ or I'd be a triolet that masquerades

as a Rengay at night, dancing
shirtless at the club & in the morning,
a sonnet with four turns. I'd name myself
Turnette, in my silk dressing gown.
I'd start a trend. I hate trends though,
the long, clever poem title for example
& the trend of people erasing each other.

But I adore the ampersand, symbol
of metaphor & balance. Both
&. I'll alternate my sandstone lines
with a meandering saltwater moat,
filled with friendly hammerheads. Sharks
survived two millennia, through the ice
age, toxic masculinity & *Jaws*.
Great whites are making a comeback
after endangerment. Who
else? If I could begin
again, I'd resurrect our calm, care
about trees.

There's no algorithm
for stupid, RuPaul says. But she means a kind
of stupid that is silly, lovely wise.
If I could, I'd be as tender with words
as with husbands & I'd hammer
out pine dining chairs into cellos
in this declining empire of misreading,
of dissing, of missing happy
endings. I'll write
about drag story-time
helping us find the artists we are.

To begin, I'll dress
in my favorite drag, a stupid poem
containing my whole vocabulary
written on a papyrns scroll & I'll sashay
over a drawbridge as trumpets bleat
my arrival. I'll pet the sharks
on their snouts & visit the queen
of all queens at her gold & sapphire
throne. I'll kneel before her
& read my poem aloud until I learn
something. I'll stay for days.
there is so much to say.



Contributor Bios

Michael Agunbiade is a Nigerian poet who writes from the small hole of his room. He is a Spring Writing Fellow, two-time Best of the Net nominee, winner of the 2024 Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize, and a finalist in the 2024 Wanjohi Prize for African Poetry. His works have appeared in *The Shore Poetry*, *Brittle Paper*, *Feral Journal*, *Variant Literature*, *Bodega*, *Poet Lore*, & elsewhere.

Maddox Emory Arnold (he/they) is a writer and educator based in Chicago. His words can be found in *If There's Anyone Left*, *HAD*, *NonBinary Review*, Flame Tree Press' *Sun Rising Collection*, and elsewhere. You can find him online at maddoxemoryarnold.com/home.

Dr. Finnian Burnett is a writer, educator, and champion of creative chaos. Their work explores human identity, gender, bodies, mental health. Finnian's work appears in *Writer's Digest*, *Geist*, *CBC Books*, and *Pulp Literature*. Their first novella-in-flash, *The Clothes Make the Man*, was shortlisted for the Bath NIF prize, and subsequent novellas-in-flash, *The Price of Cookies* and *Redshirts Sometimes Survive*, are available from Off Topic Publishing. When not writing or teaching, Finnian can be found collecting rocks, watching *Star Trek*, or enjoying cat memes with ridiculous devotion.

J. L. Bermúdez is a queer Nicaraguan-American from sunny South Florida. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net anthology, and can be found in *Waxwing*, *New Delta Review*, and *Quarter After Eight*, among others. Her nonfiction has been published in *Passages North*, *Chestnut Review*, and *Phoebe*. When she isn't writing, she loves going to the beach and playing fetch with her Boston Terrier, Odysseus.

C Ray Borck is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Gender & Women's Studies at Borough of Manhattan Community College. He is presently researching the meaning of bicycles and building a little cabin in the woods—curious whether the geopolitical climate can get any worse, and inspired by revolution broadly conceived.

Connor is a transmasculine artist and writer from Midwestern America. His published work tends to share the topic of social justice and utilize experimental visual styles. For a more organized catalog of art and writing, look for updates on his Neocities site that is currently in-progress (connorsartroom.neocities.org).

a.d. is an award-nominated bisexual poet, writer, and visual artist. She is drawn to the sacred, the profane, the mysterious and the mythological, which provides inspiration for her work. As an artist, she works mainly with photography and artistic self-portraiture and strives to capture the ephemeral and transcendental, often using the female body to explore eroticism and religion. Her work has appeared in *HAD*, *Hominum Journal*, *Moonday Mag*, *Antler Velvet*, *Aôthen* and elsewhere. Tumblr/Twitter: @godstained

Gion Davis is a trans poet from Española, New Mexico where he grew up on a sheep ranch. His second collection, *Designated Stranger* (Thirdhand Books, 2026), has been called an “of-the-moment but timeless Beat-style masterwork” in advance praise from Diane Seuss. For the past four years, he has been touring and performing poetry with a band called Clementine Was Right. He currently lives in Denver, Colorado.

Erin Dorney is a conceptual poet and artist based in Western New York. She is the author of *Yes I Am Human I Know You Were Wondering* (Autofocus) and other books and zines. www.erindorney.com.

Dante Fuoco is a queer artist & educator based in Brooklyn, NY. He recently staged an Off-Off-Broadway run of his solo show *Blue Seal, Blue Sea (or, gay boy grieves death of gay-hating dad)*. Dante’s writing has been (or will be) published in *The Offing*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Foglifter*, *Poets.org*, *DIAGRAM*, *No*, *Dear*, and other places. His vast education work includes facilitating restorative justice workshops and teaching swim lessons to adults.

Ranudi Gunawardena is a Sri Lankan poet whose work explores the wombscape, childhood in rural landscapes, and the uncanny in nature among others. Her work has appeared in literary magazines such as *Action*, *Spectacle*; *Chestnut Review*; *Foglifter*; *Harbor Review*; *Magma*; *ONE ART*; *Shō Poetry Journal*; and *SUSPECT*. She studies at Williams College.

Katy Haas is a queer, nonbinary writer and artist who would like to meet your cat. They can be found writhing beneath an overturned rotting log, on instagram at @mouthshroom, or by reciting the 1998 Furby instruction manual backwards at the witching hour on the eve of a full moon.

Annalisa Hansford (they/them) is the author of *Romanticization of Grief and Ghosts* (Bottlecap Press 2025) and their second chapbook *Banana Pancakes* is forthcoming from Rockwood Press. Their poetry has received honors from the Academy of American Poets and the Boston Mayor's Poetry Program. They've studied poetry with Gabrielle Calvocoressi and Victoria Chang. They previously interned at the Grolier Poetry Bookshop in Cambridge, where one of their favorite poets, Frank O'Hara, used to frequent.

K.M. Hanslik is an Ohio-based writer and editor who currently works with *The Turning Leaf Journal*. You can find her most recent works in *Bleating Thing Magazine*, *Black Glass Pages*, and *Corvid Queen*. Find her and say hi on social media (@kmhanslik.bsky.social) or online at kmhanslik.com.

KT Herr (they/she) is a queer writer, stepparent, and curious person with work appearing in *Foglifter*, *Bat City Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and as winner of the 2023 American Literary Review Award in Poetry, among others. KT is a Four Way Books board member, a poetry editor at *Gulf Coast Journal*, and an Inprint C. Glenn Cambor PhD Fellow in critical poetics at the University of Houston.

Jennessa Hester is a transgender writer and scholar based in Texas. She is a Lambda Literary Fellow and has been a finalist for the Rhysling Award and Prufer Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Strange Horizons*, *Bellingham Review*, *Cream City Review*, *HAD*, and elsewhere.

Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey is a California transplant residing in Munich, Germany. In their writing, they hope to explore human-nature relation and deconstruct binaries that cast humankind in opposition to the natural world. Their work appears in publications such as *Adroit Journal*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and the *Cincinnati Review*.

Jules Kennedy is a nonbinary artist who loves to use bright colors and patterns in their work.

Ani King (they/them) is a queer, gender non-compliant writer, artist, and activist from Michigan. *Family Night: Stories* is forthcoming with Mason Jar Press in 2026. More about Ani and their work can be found at aniking.net.

Within the dissonant mind of **Kyrico**, they drift through emotion, uncovering the meaning in our darkest shadows; attempting to show the depravity and mystique of the self, the whole, the unknown, and the end. Through distortion, they trace where reality and imagination shatter, with a wish for you to realize its embracing beauty. Via imagery, visual and literary, see their world, *The Eldritch and Abyssal*.

Tara Labovich (they/them) is an Iowa-based writer, teaching college composition and creative writing. Their research heavily explores creative process and their writing has earned the Pearl Hogrefe Grant and the Adelaide Bender Reville Prize, and is nominated for BotN and the Pushcart Prize. Their writing appears in *Brevity*, *Tractor Beam*, *Crannog*, *Salt Hill*, among others. You can find them walking the prairie with their dog and offering free creative writing workshops in Central Iowa.

Olivia Lehman is a lesbian poet based in Virginia. Her debut chapbook, *Alternate Summer Where No One Dies*, was released with Giallo Lit in 2021. Her poems can be found in *Sage Cigarettes*, *Rappahannock Review*, *Ghost City Press*, *Oakland Arts Review*, and beyond. To reach her, summon her into the woods with a good joke and a fresh coffee.

K. Mobley (they/them) is a bundle of crows in a long green cloak. A poet and writer based out of Missouri, their works explores themes of gender, the body, and upbringing. A winner of poetry contests from Garden Party Collective and *Fatal Flaw Literary Magazine*, they have also been published in *Chestnut Review*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and *Street Lit*. Their chapbook, *BODY/LESS*, came out in 2024 and is available at Bottlecap Press.

Jackson D. Moorman (he/him) is a queer and trans poet, organizer, and nurse who lives in Oakland with his wife, son, and two tiny rescue mutts. He is co-creator of the poetry journal *Frozen Sea* and co-organizer of a poetry series for Palestine, In Water & Light. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Shō Poetry Journal*, *the minnesota review*, and elsewhere. Read more of his work at jacksondmoorman.com

Chi Pham is a writer from Houston, Texas, and an undergraduate at Rice University. His poetry was selected for Best New Poets 2025, and his fiction appears in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, where he was named runner-up for the 2025 Award for Flash Fiction.

William Roberds-King is a queer trans writer in the PNW. He lives with his husband and their furry gremlins.

Cristina Sanchez (she/they) is a speech language pathologist, mixed media artist, avid gardener, and cat & rabbit parent based in New York City. Through mediums including watercolor, ink, and pencil, Cristina explores the breadth of emotions inherent in wild landscapes and other natural forms.

Steven Sanchez is the author of *Phantom Tongue* (Sundress Publications, 2018), selected by Mark Doty for the Rochelle Ratner Memorial Award. He is a CantoMundo fellow, Lambda Literary fellow, and completed residencies at Tin House and Civitella Ranieri. His poems appear in journals including *Agni*, *American Poetry Review*, and *The Missouri Review*. He currently lives in Fresno, California with his husband and their three dogs.

January Santoso is a writer, teacher and sex worker. She lives in Los Angeles with her two cats, Tree Trunks and Loofah.

Elena Sichrovsky (she/they/it) is a queer disabled writer and cult survivor. Their work often uses body horror to explore themes of identity, grief, and recovery. You can see more of their photography on IG @elenitasich.

Mark Spero (they/he) is a poet and essayist. They received the 2021 Madeline DeFrees Prize, selected by Phillip B. Williams, from the Academy of American Poets. Mark won the 2024 Robert Watson Literary Prize, and CA Conrad selected Mark as one of the winners of the 2025 Queer Poetry Prize from *Palette Poetry*. Their work can be found in *Pleiades*, *The Cortland Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and elsewhere.

Ashley Steineger is a holistic psychologist and poetry therapist whose work has appeared in *Rust & Moth*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Palette Poetry*, and *Ran Off with the Star Bassoon*, among others. She is the author of the *Poetry Therapy Workbook* and currently resides in Raleigh, NC with her cat. She enjoys forest bathing, collecting tattoos, and untranslatable words.

Liam Strong (they/them) is a disembodied genderless question mark and the author of three chapbooks. They died in 2020 and have been writing ever since. Find them on Instagram: @beanbie666. Read more of their work at linktr.ee/liamstrong666

Gordon Taylor is a queer, emerging poet who walks an ever-swaying, braided wire of technology and poetry. A 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee and 2025 CBC Poetry Prize Longlistee, his poems have appeared in *Narrative*, *Rattle Poets Respond*, *Malahat Review*, *Palette Poetry*, and more. He writes to invite people into a world they may not have seen.

Han VanderHart is a queer writer living in Durham, NC. They are the author of *Larks* (Ohio University Press, 2025), the chapbook *Hawk & Moon* (Bottlecap Press, 2025), and *What Pecan Light* (Bull City Press, 2021), and have work published in *Poetry Daily*, *Kenyon Review*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Poet Lore*, *AGNI*, and elsewhere.

Han hosts *Of Poetry Podcast* and, alongside Amorak Huey, publishes River River Books.

Holly Lyn Walrath is a writer, editor, and publisher. Her poetry and short fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Fiction*, *Analog*, and *Flash Fiction Online*. She is the author of several books of poetry including *Glimmerglass Girl*, *Numinous Stones*, and *The Smallest of Bones*. She holds a B.A. in English from The University of Texas and a Master's in Creative Writing from the University of Denver.

Cela Xiè is currently an MFA candidate at North Carolina State University. His poem “莫生 Only Absence, No Time” won the AWP Intro Journals Prize and is forthcoming from *Mid-American Review*. His poetry has been published by *Sine Theta Magazine*, *Tab Journal*, and *VOLT Magazine*. He has a receipt book of poems, *Before I Spoke to Myself*, published by between the highway press.

Editorial Board

Stephanie Anderson (she/they) is a library worker, grant writer, and union organizer in Baltimore. With writing and collage nominated for Best of the Net, she holds an MS in Professional Writing from Towson University and is the author of *SOMEONE ELSE'S FEELINGS* (Ghost City Press, 2025). She's @whoastanderson everywhere that matters, but they'd love you to sign their guestbook at whoastanderson.com.

Eleanor Ball (she/her) is a Social Sciences Librarian and Assistant Professor of Instruction at the University of Northern Iowa. She was a 2025 Junior Fellow in Literary Programming at the Library of Congress and a 2024 Nonfiction Fellow with Abode Press. She serves as a Literature Editor at fifth wheel press, and her work has appeared in publications including *Barnstorm*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Yalobusha Review*. Find her online at eleanor-ball.com.

Haley Bossé (they/them) believes our queerness and transness save us. Their work can be found haunting the internet at haleybosse.com and their first chapbook is just waiting to emerge from the depths of Game Over Books. They'd love it if you read their Pushcart-nominated poem, "In a World That Cares for the Unidentified Woman Found By My Childhood Home" in *GARLAND* Issue 2 from fifth wheel press.

Romy Rhoads Ewing writes from Sacramento, California, where she was born and raised on a steady diet of shoujo manga from the library, pop-punk, and sour candy. Her work has appeared in *HAD*, *Oyez Review*, *Rejection Letters*, *Bullshit Lit*, *Major 7th Magazine*, and more. She is the author of *please stay* (Bottlecap Press, 2024) and also edits poetry and nonfiction for *JAKE*. She runs the archival site *SACRAMENTO DIRTBAG ARCHIVES* and can be found at romyrhoadsewing.xyz.

Qetsi'ah Joachim-Baggott (any pronouns) is a queer disabled poet, writer, editor, and general chaos causer from the UK. a Pushcart Prize nominee, her debut collection *Gospels For The Tongue-Tied* (2025) was published with kith books. he can be found on twitter @iamgoingtocry15, on bluesky @iamgoingtocry.bsky.social, and they run a substack called *Qetsi'ah&Answers*.

nat raum (they/them) is a queer disabled artist and writer based on unceded Piscataway and Susquehannock land in Baltimore. They hold an MFA in Creative Writing & Publishing Arts from the University of Baltimore, where they currently teach Electronic Publishing, as well as a BFA in Photography from the Maryland

Institute College of Art. nat is the editor-in-chief of fifth wheel press, the web editor of *Welter*, and the author of *journal of various worries*, *with gasoline*, *this book will not save you*, and many other collections of poetry, prose, photography, and other acts of hybridity. Their creative work has been published by *Poet Lore*, *Float Magazine*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *beestung*, and others. Find them online at natraum.com.

arushi (aera) rege (they/she/he) is a queer, chronically-in-pain, Indian-American poet, Arizonian student at UCLA. A Pushcart and BOTN nominee, they are the proud author of *exit wound (no point of entry)*, *BROWN GIRL EPIPHANY*, and *suburban suicides*. they can be found tweeting about writing and f1/f2 @academic_core and facing the perils of Instagram @aera_writes. they are also the EIC of *ink&ivy lit* and *Bus Talk*. their writing lives both nebulously on the internet and also at arushiaerarege.carrd.co.

Christine Salek is a former high school water polo player living in Wisconsin. Once a WNBA reporter, they're now content with their library science degree and the lifestyle that entails. Learn more about them at christinesalek.com.

Erica Leslie Weidner (she/they) is a librarian, writer, and editor based in the great state of New Jersey. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of *underscore_magazine*, a literary project with a focus on the city. Her literary and academic work has appeared in multiple online and print publications. Keep up at erica-leslie.com.

Editorial Credits

While the process of editing *Monarch 2026* was extremely collaborative, fifth wheel press editor-in-chief nat raum would like to express their gratitude for the specific efforts of our fantastic all-volunteer team.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT: Eleanor Ball, Haley Bossé, nat raum, Christine Salek, Erica Leslie Weidner

FIRST ROUND POETRY READERS: Stephanie Anderson, Eleanor Ball, Haley Bossé, Romy Rhoads Ewing, Qetsi'ah Joachim-Baggott

FIRST ROUND FICTION READERS: Eleanor Ball, Qetsi'ah Joachim-Baggott, Christine Salek

FIRST ROUND NONFICTION READERS: Stephanie Anderson, Eleanor Ball, Romy Rhoads Ewing, Christine Salek

FIRST ROUND HYBRID READERS: Stephanie Anderson, Haley Bossé, Romy Rhoads Ewing, Qetsi'ah Joachim-Baggott, nat raum, Christine Salek

FIRST ROUND ART READERS: Stephanie Anderson, Haley Bossé, nat raum

FINAL ROUND POETRY JUDGES: Eleanor Ball, Haley Bossé, Romy Rhoads Ewing, nat raum, arushi (aera) rege

FINAL ROUND FICTION JUDGES: Eleanor Ball, Qetsi'ah Joachim-Baggott, nat raum, Christine Salek

FINAL ROUND NONFICTION JUDGES: Eleanor Ball, Romy Rhoads Ewing, nat raum, Christine Salek

FINAL ROUND HYBRID JUDGES: Romy Rhoads Ewing, Qetsi'ah Joachim-Baggott, nat raum

FINAL ROUND ART JUDGES: Romy Rhoads Ewing, nat raum

PRINT LAYOUT: nat raum

WEB DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Christine Salek

BRANDING: nat raum

Anthology Finalists

The following works made it to our final round of consideration.

POETRY

“the skin on our faces is dead” by Hayden Berry, *Moss Puppy Magazine*

“Cruising in the Motor City” by Alex Bortell, *Split Lip Magazine*

“Eau de Cheval” by Isabella Boyd, *Susurrus Magazine*

“his worn jacket from fort campbell” by Jordan Byrum, *Artists from Maryland*

“Mother, I can’t serve” by J. J. Carey, *Dishsoap Quarterly*

“To the Gay Man at My Little Brother’s High School Graduation ” by Isaiah Gardner, *Variant Literature*

“The Inner World of the Cabbage” by Michael Getty, *Minyan Magazine*

“Sweet-bitter / Without Remedy” by Kimberly Hall, *Dipity Lit Mag*

“Hopes for HRT (Though I Understand That Estrogen is Not a Miracle Worker and There Are Things That Will Take Time and Work)” by Calvin Jones, *ink&ivy lit*

“Noah poem” by E.G.N. Lafleur, *Bleating Thing Magazine*

“the time travel body” by Angel Leal, *Radon Journal*

“Kissing in America” by Parker Logan, *Variant Literature*

“I Can’t Find My Gender” by Abby E. Murray, *ONE ART*

“Homegoing” by Karol Olesiak, *Pictura Journal*

“I tell Mary Magdalene an emotionally unavailable 33 year old man can’t save her but I can” by Bleah Patterson, *Palette Poetry*

“AFAB” by Eli V. Rahm, *Dishsoap Quarterly*

“passport” by Mk Smith Despres, *Frozen Sea*

“Sonnet with Lilacs and a Crescent Moon” by Meghan Sterling, *The Inflectionist Review*

“reflections on regret while pumping regular gas, \$30 worth” by Liam Strong, *Troublemaker Firestarter*

POETRY (cont.)

“second arrows” by Wendy Vardaman, *Lavender Review*

“The Sugar Tree” by Alicia Wright, *The Inflectionist Review*

“I first came out to my Nintendo 3DS” by Stephen C Wright, *Silly Goose Press*

FICTION

“Insides” by Alana Rosenbloom, *Anodyne Magazine*

NONFICTION

“Freakshow: Rural Queerdom in Three Acts” by Charlie Divine, *CRAFT*

HYBRID

“Subtext” by Emily Franklin, *Ran Off With the Star Bassoon*

VISUAL ART

“Ain’t No Use Overthinking” by James Diaz, *The Hooghly Review*

“Connection” by Finnley Greet, *#EnbyLife Journal*

“Protect Trans Goslings” by Rowan Procter, *Silly Goose Press*

“Fruits of the Garden” by Luke Rudman, *The Q&A Queer Zine*

Participating Publications

Our heartfelt thanks to the editors of the following publications, who took the time to submit nominations during our first year. We owe the beauty of this anthology to you and your contributors, as well as your support of queer writers.

#EnbyLife Journal, Abode Press, Ad Hoc Fiction, Anodyne Magazine, Arlington Literary Journal, Artists from Maryland, Asterales, Ballast, Bath Flash Fiction, Blanket Gravity Magazine, Bleating Thing Magazine, bodyfluids, BOREAL, Broadkill Review, Chestnut Review, CRAFT, The Crawfish, DIAGRAM, Diode Editions, Dipity Lit Mag, discount guillotine, Dishsoap Quarterly, Does It Have Pockets, the engine(idling, Epiphany, Epistemic Literary Magazine, Friends Journal, Frozen Sea, Geist, Genrepunk Magazine, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Gone Lawn, The Good Life Review, Gooseberry Pie Lit Magazine, The Hooghly Review, Hunger Mountain Review, The Inflectionist Review, ink&ivory lit, Inner Worlds, just femme & dandy, Kopi Break, Lavender Review, Lethe Press, Libre, MEMEZINE, Minyan Magazine, The Missing Slate Magazine, Moss Puppy Magazine, ONE ART, ONLY POEMS, Palette Poetry, Peatsmoke Journal, petrichor, Pictura Journal, The Q&A Queer Zine, The Queer Love Project, Radon Journal, Ran Off With the Star Bassoon, Shō Poetry Journal, Silly Goose Press, SmokeLong Quarterly, Split Lip Magazine, Susurrus, Tab Journal, Trash Cat Lit, Troublemaker Firestarter, The Under Review, underscore_magazine, Variant Literature, The Welkin Writing Prize, Water-Stone Review, WestWord, wishful thinking press

Acknowledgments and Notes

A revised version of “Gender study; gestalt” by KT Herr won second place in the 2025 *SmokeLong* Grand Micro Contest after its original publication in *Ran Off With the Star Bassoon*.

“Scrabble Poems” by Erin Dorney was originally created by hand on a Scrabble board using a standard bag of 100 tiles. All 100 tiles are used, either turned up (letter side) or down (black). To scrabble means to use your fingers to quickly find something you cannot see. The poems in this growing collection present a queering of both form and content: the use of a household game (with over 150 million units sold worldwide) to explore bisexuality (the most common LGBTQ identity according to recent studies, and how the author identifies).

Other books from fifth wheel press

LITERARY PUBLICATIONS

Trick Mirror or Your Computer Screen by tommy blake

Wilder Centuries by Yael Veitz

DADDY ISSUES by Sal Kang

how to construct a breakup poem by June Lin

Metem/psychosis by Junpei Tarashi

COMRADE by Daniel Liu

Where the Men Come From by N.W. Downs

AUTHOR OF ALL ILL by charlie perseus

Traum/A by JP Seabright

Heat Death of the Universe by Leela Raj-Sankar

Pantoum Stress Disorder by MNJames

mother bird by Sharon Zhang

COLUMNS by Justin A. Clark and Paxton Grey

THE DOUGHNUT WORLD by Jillian A. Fantin

ALL OF THEM ALL OF THEM by Akira Ritos

She Who Eats Tourists by Atalaya Magdalena

METAMOURPHOSIS by Alison Lubar

CHARM(ed) by Ashley Elizabeth

GOOD GRIEF by SG Huerta

BROWN GIRL EPIPHANY by arushi (aera) rege

I Am Never Leaving Williamsburg by C.M. Green

Aphorism / Paroxysm by Remi Recchia

in the aftermath by Jessica Nirvana Ram

ART & HYBRID PUBLICATIONS

Hazey Vol. 2 curated by nat raum and Aden Weisel

make a u-turn, if possible curated by nat raum and cc camuglia

Hazey Vol. 3 curated by Aden Weisel, nat raum, and Rebecca Herrera

GLARE by Aurele Gould

Bruising Bone: life in bloom by Perry Gasteiger and Rebecca Payne

SN_33P'sCoolZine.pdf by Tenacity Plys • 2025 LAMBDA AWARD FINALIST, LGBTQ+ COMICS

looking to the heavens by rosie villano

lamb/&/slaughter by Emily Perkovich

Make The Lights Work For You by Clem Flowers

COMING IN 2026

Way Downstream: a long-form prose anthology edited by Eleanor Ball, C.M. Green, Sarah Klein, and Christine Salek

ten-wheeler: an anthology curated by nat raum

COMING IN 2027

Bullwhip by Katherine Fallon

Gender is a Prism by Audrey T. Carroll

the wanting flesh by Ernest Chigaemezu Ohia

Twenties as Intersection by Evelyn Bauer

Ashes in the Holler by E.A

Container by Jade E. Welsh

Mouthbrooder by Amy Beth Sisson

The Secret Lives of Evangelists by Orlantae Duncan

The Book of the Wonders of Austin by Sam Parrish

letters to jimi hendrix on his rendition of the STAR-SPANGLED BANNER at woodstock in 1969
by Matti BenLev

COMING IN 2028

THE RECORD SKIPS FOREVER by Atlas St. Cloud

PREY by Aldrin Badiola

Rx: demonology by Jason Masino

Feminine Morbidity by Maya Williams

