



the
b'k
bitchin' kitsch

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Submissions

The B'K has strict submission guidelines. Please read them before submitting something for consideration: talbot-heindl.com/bitchin_kitsch/submissions

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About the Cover

"Unbearable Weight of Dreams" an acrylic on paper piece by Aaron Hahn.

Aaron Hahn (he/him) is a New York City based writer and artist who is originally from South Korea. He currently teaches reading and writing at a prep school.

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Communal Buffet With My Former Archenemies

by: **Rachel Alarcio**

I sit in a plastic chair, sweating like ten lechon-bound hogs, sandwiched between former childhood bullies now attending top ten unis. We three gather around a mat of banana leaves for kamayan, a Pinoy cornucopia of prosperity, a potential background for old animosities to arise like the tides in the Hundred Islands. Instead, I turn and half-smile a congratulations to each of them, my old archenemies. Their obsolete memories wash away with the breeze. Silent, I mourn moral victory.

Rachel Alarcio was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, two award-winning WriteGirl anthologies, Exposition Review, and displayed for millions in transit at Los Angeles International Airport's Terminal 7-8. Find them @raechillout on Instagram and @rachelalarcio on Twitter. Tip her at on PayPal at paypal.me/rachelalarcio.

Catharsis

by: **Tangela Williams-Spann**

“So, if the long hand is pointing straight up, that means ‘o’clock’ and if the long hand is pointing down, that means ‘thirty.’ Okay?”

I was met with a couple of blank stares in reply. One student nodded in an “if you say so” type of way.

I wasn’t expecting much. An impromptu math lesson on the last day of school is not going to be the most engaging thing in the world. I just thought that since we were all watching the clock anyway, we might as well try to get a little more learning into our day.

The last day was a half-day for students. Meaning they would be going home at noon. Teachers would remain at school to finish report cards and packing up their classrooms for the summer. Some teachers had been packing for the past week and didn’t have a lot left to finish. Others had barely made a dent in their end-of-the-year checklist.

I was the former. Almost everything in our classroom was boxed up and labeled for the inevitable move. I knew our classroom was moving, but where to hadn’t been established yet. Just another unknown to add to the list that had grown over the past school year.

Our unknown school year.

We hadn’t known when classes were to begin for students. We hadn’t known if we would be teaching virtually or for how long. We hadn’t known how we would make virtual learning accessible for our students and families. We hadn’t known what precautions would be taken to make people feel safe about returning to school buildings. We hadn’t known what date teachers would be forced back into the classrooms regardless of precautions.

We hadn’t known how difficult this was going to be. We hadn’t known if we could pull it off successfully.

We may never know.

As my students and I continued watching the hands of the clock, the appointed hour drew closer. We wiped everything down meticulously with cleaning wipes one more time as a class. Everybody made one more trip to the restroom before the trip home on the bus. I checked to make sure that everyone, including myself, had cleaned their desk out.

We sang the goodbye song and gave hugs around the room.

It was around the fourth hug that I felt it. The massive lump in my throat that precedes a huge emotional collapse. It was choking me in an effort to escape and I was doing my best to fight off the surge of emotions that were warring inside me.

The last time we had a dramatic goodbye like this, we didn’t know when we would see each other again. It was scary to admit but the adults weren’t sure if we would ever see each other again. Early estimates were at a two-week separation. A bit of an extended spring break to

allow the administration to come up with a plan. Two weeks became four. Four weeks became a quarter. The quarter became summer break. Summer break became winter break and spring break again before we returned to our classroom.

When receiving the return orders, we proceeded with trepidation. Things were going to be different and that was a huge adjustment for teachers and students. We sparsely decorated our classrooms and pulled materials out of storage to prepare for our learners to return. Just over half of my students returned, the other half stayed home and learned virtually.

We said our classroom goodbyes and I walked the kids out to the bus. Other teachers were outside doing the same as I was; saying their farewells and offering well wishes to the graduates. I saw more than a few people in tears as I gave my friends one more parting wave that they returned through the bus windows.

I quickly make my way back to my classroom and locked the door. The waves of feelings crashed against me once again and I choked down a small sob. This year had been so much. There was so much loss, fear, grief, and hopelessness that all of us were feeling. It was as if we had been tasked to walk our kids through a hailstorm while avoiding a lava flow. The odds were stacked against us on every side, but we pushed through. We physically made it to the finish line, for now.

But at what cost?

I stacked the kids' desks and chairs into the corner of the classroom. The janitors needed the space cleared for summer cleaning. Without the furniture, the classroom looked more barren and depressing than usual. The classroom that we barely had time to enjoy. The classroom that wouldn't be mine after today. I stood at the center for a moment, trying to get a grip on my swirling emotions.

Until I had finally had enough of pretending to be strong.

I sank onto the greenish, brownish carpet. The ancient air conditioner was keeping the floor cooler than the rest of the room. I gasped in deep breaths of the cool air and tried to control my breathing to no avail. The blades of the worn-down ceiling fan danced overhead in their symmetrical patrol, and I felt awful that I hadn't noticed their presence in the room until that moment. Lying flat on my back, they were unavoidable. What else hadn't I noticed as I struggled to be a symbol of normalcy for my kids? What other truths was I avoiding just to make things feel okay for them? How much more was I expected to take?

I threw a hand over my mouth to stifle the loud sobs that were now escaping my dry lips. I didn't want to disturb any other teacher that was having their own private breakdown nearby.

Tangela Williams-Spann (she/her) is a mental health and wellness blogger as well as the mother of an autistic person. She has a masters' degree in Special Education from Grand Canyon University and has worked in special education for over fifteen years. Her first book, *Sad, Black, and Fat: Musings from the Intersection*, was released in August 2021.

Second-Class Subject(ive)s

by: Shufei Ewe

who wants to wander
with me

through the fog of a foreign
childhood in the sultry,
sweat-slicked rural countryside,
its roads girded by
tresses of palm trees
and lemongrass;

watch with wonder as the lawn
lush with
my earliest memories
wring itself yellow,

a foreboding of that final visit
before *ah gong's* death?

where does the connection
happen, when
i mention
the familiar migrant surrender
within subordinate silence;

when i say bananas and i
have a lot in common
— *yellow on the outside, white on the inside* —
embalm my slipshod vocabulary
in the cavity of a stone mortar;

preserve my *mother tongue*
in the form
of finite dust dotting clammy
vernacular school classrooms?

tell me if we'll see
eye-to-eye,
in my pre-coded binary,
precariously perched between
model minority and *unwanted visitors*;

with a face best designated
for perpetual sino-diaspora—
a race best designed submissive
until subversive

do i meet you do i gaze from afar
 in the margins through gaps of our parallel lives?

is this my story,
 or your diversity allegory?

Previously published in Wizards in Space Literary Magazine.

Shufei Ewe (she/her) is a copywriter by day, insomniac by night, and overthinker all times in between. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Versification, The Adriatic Mag, HAD magazine, Capsule Stories, Ayaskala, The Bitchin' Kitsch and more. Find her online at @ewe_too on Twitter.

community care

by: **Gaby Benitez**

CW: reference to school shootings.

i do not know how to stop death.

wasn't taught how in school - although teachers these days are told to throw themselves in front of it and children reminded to hide and to run from it, reminded that if their shoes are too colorful they may draw attention from it.

i don't know how to stop death - but would offer my body, my bank account, my broke-down car, my job, anything, would offer it gladly, for the opportunity to learn. any deal with the devil would do. sabes quien puede enseñarme? does the jellyfish, cycling immortal through youth and elder, know how to stop the police bullet, know how to take back time, cure sickness, keep the electricity running, look beyond disaster? what lessons do the deep sea bacteria have on surviving fascism, does the lobster? blue and expansive, shedding skin after skin after skin —

how do we learn? i barely know what it means to stay alive. i take daily probiotics (if i can remember), hope to make this house a home for bacteria deemed “worthy,” deemed “good,” to culture a biome of health, to perpetuate life.

my sexual orientation is the living; my gender - mostly human; my fetish - thriving/abolition: seeds sprouting in untainted soil, wind in the grass, cross-pollination, clean water, birdsong & the echo of earthworms digging, beetles diving mazes through leaves, land back, reparations upon reparations, both the calm after the storm and the storm itself, the dragonfly on the hunt, the planarian (flatworm) splitting in two again and again, duplicitous, multiplicitous, the chatter of mycelium sharing sugar water with a forest as small as one tree or as big as thousands. my kink - the sound of the state breaking apart, the whoosh of every prison vanishing, the music of people unharmed unharmed unharmed free of harm, dancing silently or as loud as possible. swimming in joy and grief, basking in emotion, the ring of the both/and, the I love yous, the smack of eating good food, of kissing, of fucking in love, lust, affection, anything but indifference.

have been dreaming in anger, in color, with mantis shrimp eyes, full spectrum. legs upon legs. dreaming of copepods, angels microscopic, spoonsforhands spoonsforfeet, synchronized swimming in our drinking water, stirring the soup of apocalypse. ameobas bursting in the roiling boil, in the purification process. i hope ~~greg abbott~~ the oppressor of your choice drowns in the stew, or dies of thirst in a cage built to hold

children escaping climate catastrophe.

how many spoons do we need to dish out the end of capitalism, the end of colonialism?

pooling enough spoons until the ground stops bleeding oil, until the veins of the earth are replenished with clean water, with revolution, with migration and movement - with music music music.

hand feeding one another an orchestra of slurps: mouths full, bellies full.

Previously published in Stone of Madness Press.

Gaby (she/her/ella), is a queer, Xicanx writer in her quarter-life-crisis living in her evergentrifying hometown of Austin, TX. She writes to make sense of her experience living in this tumultuous world, to make sense of the ways we relate to others, the earth, the cycles of life and death. (IG: @gabriellebenitez Twitter @gaygardengoth)

Reflections

by: **Vee Signorelli**

CW: discussions of dysphoria, mentions of familial emotional abuse, depiction of being cat-called as a child, mentions of anxiety, mentions of TERF ideology, depiction of therapist not fully believing a gender identity

The house I was dog-sitting at was absolutely covered in mirrors. After my middle-aged friend gave me her keys and left in her car for her vacation, I gazed around, slightly intimidated. As a 19-year-old with an undiagnosed anxiety disorder who believed fully in ghosts, I found mirrors terrifying, believing that if I looked at one too long, I would see something evil out of the corner of my eye. Something that I couldn't control or defend myself against. There was a mirror on every surface, including one huge mirror that took up an entire wall in the living room. I did my best to ignore them all.

That avoidance vanished the next day when I put on my new binder for the first time. I'd had it for a couple of weeks, but I wanted to be alone when I tried it on, wanted to hold space for myself, and there was never any promise of privacy in my house—not because it was small or crowded, but because my family simply didn't believe in my right to keep something to myself.

Cool air brushed against my bare skin as I wrangled the binder over my tits, the stiff fabric unfamiliar and unyielding. I snuck a glance in the mirror and grimaced, looking away quickly—it basically just looked like a sports bra. Nausea coiled in my stomach. I put my shirt back on over it and turned to look again, not expecting much.

It was everything.

I'd lived my whole life trying to be what other people wanted, needed me to be. I kept myself locked away, stuffed into a back corner, visible only through the corner of one's eye. I was even out of sight for myself. That was the first instant I'd seen myself in front of me.

Like a child finally facing their fear and realizing it wasn't so scary, I was overcome with exuberance and a fervent need to interact with it. Suddenly, the medium size mirror in the bedroom wasn't big enough. I scooted out on stockinged feet into the living room, and I stared at myself in the giant mirror that took up the whole wall. For the first time in my life, I drank in my own image. I hadn't realized how much I typically avoided mirrors until that moment.

A few years earlier, I'd gotten a hint. "You look tired today," my therapist had said, a few minutes after our session started. "Like, really exhausted."

I made a noise of interest. "Do I?"

She tilted her head. "You didn't notice it? When you looked in the mirror this morning?"

My eyebrows scrunched together. “What do you mean?”

“You know... when you were brushing your teeth or washing your face... you didn’t look at yourself and notice it?”

I paused. I had done both of those things, standing in front of a mirror. But I had not looked at myself while doing it. “I guess I don’t really... look at myself in the mirror.”

I’d already come out to my therapist as genderfluid. After this revelation about mirrors, she became convinced that I was actually a trans man in denial of my own identity. Any time the topic of gender identity came up in our sessions, she nudged me towards admitting that I was actually a guy. I didn’t think I was a trans guy, but I also wasn’t sure if I could trust myself.

Two years later, I would take a trip to NYC for a literary conference and stay with a trans guy I had met earlier that year at another conference. We had a few days before the conference started, some of which we spent together, and some of which I spent alone, either exploring the city or hanging out alone in the apartment. In his space, by myself (with few mirrors, beside the small one in the bathroom), I could imagine myself as anyone I wanted to be, not really having to deal with the reality of my body. But then, there was also him.

I felt overwhelmed any time I looked at him—his flat chest, his beard, his voice. It opened an aching want in me that I didn’t even know I had. At one point, we went to a baby welcoming for a delightfully queer couple he knew. As my friend held the baby, the child reached up to touch his beard, eyes shining and mouth open wide in delight I watched, barely able to breathe, as this baby did the one thing I wanted to do so badly myself—give into the blatant, aching awe inside of me.

On the last day we spent together, I asked him how I should go about getting a binder. It was the first time I’d discussed my interest in binding. It felt dangerous, as if I was breaking a rule, to admit that I wanted something. It felt good, but in a way that scraped at my insides, that urged me to notice how many other things I wanted, too. I saw that flicker in the corner in my eye of all the pieces of myself I shoved to the side, all the parts inside myself I couldn’t control, all the numbed terror I felt surrounding the fact that I couldn’t control how other people perceived me, the creeping horror that I didn’t want my body to be the way that it was. It made me realize how much I would have to fight for the things I wanted. How much space I would need to figure them out. How much I would have to give up to find that space.

Wearing the binder for the first time, I had a taste of that space. There were no more ghosts in the mirror, there was nothing to be afraid of anymore. I was here. I had power. I could ensure my emotional safety and comfort. I could show up for myself, and give myself what I needed, even when it was hard.

And it has been hard. Most especially because there is no one set answer of what I want. Since that day, I’ve only worn a binder intermittently. Some days I love it and some days it feels unnecessary or even actively bad—because some days I really fucking love having tits. Even on the days when I don’t actively like it, I’ve realized over time that I

don't actually mind my breasts most of the time—I mostly just hate what they signal to people.

The first time I looked in the mirror and wanted to change the way I looked, I was twelve years old. I was at a restaurant with my sister, wearing a bright, floral dress I had just bought with my allowance. I walked from the booth we were sitting at, waiting for our pancakes and malts, to the bathroom. Two men who were well into their sixties wolf-whistled at me as I passed. I ducked my head and tried not to let them see my blush as I made my way to the restroom. I was twelve. Twelve.

In the restroom mirror, I looked at my chest, still so small but apparently now noticeable enough to garner me this kind of attention. I felt excited, like I'd gone through a rite of passage. And I felt ashamed. I wanted to push on my brand-new tits until they went away, sunk back into my chest, where they belonged.

Seven years later, I would stand in an empty house covered in mirrors, and stare and stare and stare at my flat chest.

When I'm by myself or surrounded by other people who have tits, they never really cross my mind. But as soon as I'm with people who have flat chests, something inside me aches, and I stare and stare at their broad expanses of flat chests, and I'm back in that room with the baby and my friend, stunned and amazed at the possibilities.

I'm aware that some of this plays directly into the hands of TERFs, who would claim that I actually only identify as transmasculine and occasionally want to have a flat chest because I don't want to deal with the reality of being a woman in this world. Thankfully, I know that TERFs are wrong, and that identity is simply complex in ways that they will never understand. I refuse to let TERF ideology stop me from expressing the complexities of my desires and identity.

I've grown more comfortable with the fluidity of my desires. I no longer need to fit myself inside a specific label or experience, even when sometimes I wish I could. I know that the thing that is abnormal is our modern obsession with categorizing people, and that throughout space and time, people have experienced what we now call gender identity in an infinite amount of ways. My inability to fit myself perfectly into a pre-assigned identity category isn't a failure of my own—it is a failure of a society that insists that everyone make their experiences small and manageable. I want to change my physical body, and I don't. I see myself as a guy, and I don't. Mostly, I want to be able to look at myself in a mirror and see myself looking back at me, always. I haven't gotten there yet, but I hope that time is coming.

Vee Signorelli (they/them) is a queer literature enthusiast, with a focus on Young Adult literature. Find them on Twitter @findmereading where they talk about books, theology, bad shark movies, and trauma recovery.

this madness is mine to keep

by: **sloane angelou**

strange voices
i do not sleep at night
early mornings are precious
day breaks at noon
do not touch my skin
this is madness
my madness is mine to keep

in my previous life i died as Virginia Woolf
in the ocean i quenched dread for living
i lived as a free spirit
as queer as my madness could allow
but that human body became a cage
birds chirping in my sky it was dark
i discovered why the caged birds sang through my mouth
Nina Simone used my hands
i swore to never leave blackness again
the suffering may be much but it is mine

and if disaster arises a thousandth time
i will quench it again this time in a lake
and beg my mother to forgive me for being white just that one time
if she refuses my drowning i will have to choose a lake of fire
die by fire

strange voices
i do not sleep at all
early mornings are long
day breaks at noon
do not touch my skin
this madness is mine to keep.

Sloane Angelou (they/them) is a storyteller & writer of West African origin; passionate about learning of human existence by interrogating human experiences. They exist in liminal spaces. Tip them on Venmo @Nnennaya-amuchie.

Three of Cups

by: Hikari Leilani Miya

car after battered car rolls in, windows down

eyy! pahk ovah deah!

you wonder how many loud-mouthed Filipinos this house can hold,
remembering that at one point it held Nana, Tata, all seven children,
working in the Dole pineapple fields, clothes stained with red chalk dust.

you cling to your older stepsister, but are pulled away
by rough embraces of those who say they're your auntie or uncle

you don' remembah us, eh? you were theeees beeg!

they hold their hands down to their shins, slip a twenty or fifty into your hand
as mom scowls and yells

Lito! Precy! ah ah ah! no!

like chiding a dog who won't stop barking
angry Ilocano noises bounce like a birdie, mingled with laughter.

the little orchid and gecko covered house is filled
with the meaty, musty scents of every Ilocano
on the island of Oahu, skin softly tanned,
teeth like crooked fences, wrinkles like Pele's fertile valleys.

as rejoicing reunion shrieks fill the street,
you look for Tata Ventura's chameleons
he keeps in the stainless steel sink next door. you don't see them, so
you become a chameleon in their camouflaged absence,
blending in with cousins you met when you were
six years old, trading Pokèmon cards and crayons

next time, we get da Bulbasaur cahd!

now twelve and thirteen, you trot around barefoot with them,
place worn zoris at the door, gather round the ice cube TV spewing
Disney channel specials, a whole world away you were never allowed to watch,
say da kine and so ono! and shave ice, never snow cone, all pau
sit next to them at round plastic tables in rickety chairs
cracked with the weight of time and humidity.

you've never seen so much food,
never had so much prepared and laid out
in your family's honor, all the aunties hugging
mom because she hasn't seen them since
you pretended you knew how to ride Gilbert's skateboard
and you scratched it and the floor and your knees.

pork lumpia, vegetable lumpia, beef lumpia,
chicken pancit, beef pancit, spicy vegetable pancit,

orange mochi, pink mochi, tri-colored mochi,
giant pots of soul-soothing sunset colored miki,
ube ice cream melting into soft, starchy purple
something wrapped in banana leaves,
mysterious meats and fish you've never tried—

you don't like my pancit? I made special, just for you!

you too skinny, you know!

you don't have space on the partitioned foam plate
or in your stomach.

dad is at the heart of the cluster of men,
his educated opinions and Japanese American skin
truly the fairest of them all, but he listens and nods,
ignores the cigarette smoke. he drinks with them
beer after beer, laughs redly and says *oh really?*

aunties gossip and argue over who should do the dishes

No, no, I got it! You go ova deah for little while, you stop helping!

push saran-wrapped loaded plates to husbands and kids
to put away for tomorrow's solitary lunch-rush celebration. you keep nibbling
Nana's fried chicken and lumpia, never-ending streams of lilikoi passionfruit juice
flowing sweetly down your throat as you chase the peeping geckos round the corners,
front-line in a crowd of giggling cousins.

you round the house for the thousandth time, poking your sister's arm,
wondering which male is the notorious cousin Richard,
who went to prison for "stealing a lady's purse."
you put away your money in your wallet, hide it underneath the bed in your luggage.
you haven't understood mom for the past two hours,
her speedy lips emitting energy every female gulps down like starving carnivores
slurping down seventy-five cent purple egg balut

you tink dat's bad? Kayla, she been kissing all da boys, she go out...

so this is Filipino family celebrations, broken English forming broken
stories you come to realize have nothing to fix underneath all the laughter.

such a little rascal you were, you know! climbing all over da rocks!

you read somewhere that parties were the pinnacle of civilization

wow, you read dat much, yeah? no worry bout school! you smaht.

so somewhere in this dusky sea of sweat-stained shirts marking plastic-covered furniture,
dirty feet sanding faded red tiles, full beer belly burps belting satiation
is humanity's oldest tradition, our innate craving for camaraderie
steeped in stew and bittersweet memories

Hikari Leilani Miya (she/her) is an MFA student at University of San Francisco. She is the assistant poetry editor for lit mag "Invisible City" and lives in SF with her two snakes and disabled cat. She works as a behavioral specialist for children with autism.

Teach Me About Names As A Commodity

by: **Sher Ting**

I cut my name in half
as a peace offering.

The way all Chinese do
in a foreign land.

For every mangled pronunciation,
I could do a covert renunciation

of my belief that my name
was ever

one-halved
from a whole.

That anything less could ever make me
anything less than.

That a bird could lift off a branch with one wing.
That a guitar could sing with half its strings.

If you asked me to, I'd tell you my name was worth
less than half its weight, pared to the bone

and peddled at the local cafeteria for acceptance
and a dime. That my birth was a wound

stitched close, the cord a synapse bled dry. The way
grief echoed and drew its roots into thickening blood.

I could tell you anything, be anything
you asked me to—subtitles, by-lines, an erasure poem.

I could be a mirror staring back at you,
pontificating the whiteness of Narcissus.

The day my skin was an echo of the glass ceiling,
I erased my face to steal a song from a body

that wasn't mine. I stole till I became a name
said without hesitation, a breath

absolved of a shadow. I melted the tension lines,
colors bleeding into alabaster sky,

to become nothing
to become something.

For the only way to exist,
I've come to find,

is to live, pellucid like the lake.
Body waning like the lunar moon,

I turned it inside out and cried
to find it white

as the carnations in bloom.

Sher Ting (she/her) has lived in Singapore for most of her life before moving to Australia for medical school. She is a 2021 Best of The Net nominee with work published/forthcoming in anthologies including Byline Legacies and Pages Penned In Pandemic, and literary magazines including Eunoia Review, Capsule Stories, Kissing Dynamite and FERAL. She tweets at @sherttt and writes at downintheholocene.wordpress.com

How to Wear a Saree

by: **Syna Majumder**

CW: non-specific suicidal thoughts, references to depression

Step one: come back to the starting point.
In Kolkata, the festival outside blurs
your vision into points, and you turn away.
You have seen your mother do this for
the longest time. She wraps it around her
waist and you lose track of the fabric, watch
the yards slipping away into collectedness.
You hold a hand out against the cotton,
the red border lit up against your skin.
A promise of the language you speak, the
language those before you did, and the
language you will never be able to get out
of your head, binding. You are young then.
You want to run away from it all.

Step two: Pleats, one on top of the other.
You talk to your cousins and you know
each other, know your names and your
parents and the fact that you are supposed
to care, but there is nothing. Nothing beyond
a dull love that was born into you, familial.
Takes years to know their favorite colors.
You look at the fabric folding, the width of both
your palms and are not sure if you will ever
make something that beautiful without
feeling unworthy of it. Everyday, it is a loss.
Grandparents grow older and you don't talk
beyond courtesies, taken up by the arching
questions of your self-interest. Insignificance.

Step five: Drape a fabric section over a shoulder. You are standing in front of your own mirror, a mess in your hands. You have forgotten what you used to see, you have forgotten the feeling of your mother's hand on your cheek, and you are a betrayer. You have lost track of time, be it real or imaginary, your obstacles seeking you out with your own eyes. It is a failure, to not know how to cook, or to pray, or to hold your hands up above your head and believe in the good of the world and it is what you are now. But however blasphemous it might be, your family loves you. You are losing, imperfect, broken, but they will keep you alive.

In the end, there is just one thing to do, the only thing you ever had to do. The street is loud and full of words, hope and laughter and recognition packed into people. Your people. There is no life in being the perfect child, and you were never cut out for it anyway—even the Goddess leaves at the end of the season. In these moments, you believe in being whole again, long-gone stories embracing you with every bite of food you eat. You had left morals behind, ashamed of being a child, but the fact is immortal: you are not alone. The loss of those you knew is real, but their love is larger, and you can finally grow again.

Syna Majumder (she/they) is a high schooler from India who loves to talk about any movie she might have seen. Her work has been published in school magazines and a local newspaper as well as recently winning a country-spanning Essay writing competition. You can find them @fuzz_pedals on Instagram.

Balcony Sunbird

by: Cat T.

CW: Illness and death

Morning bloomed in the modest car porch of the terrace house. A space meant for vehicles, overrun by beds of well-trimmed grass and cobblestone. Flora of every local variety flourished under the gardener's touch—white cotton knit gloves with red palms reminding the plants of their first embrace with soil cushions. From seeds to a legion of verdant vegetation, no square meter on this porch was spared from their reach; only occasionally would the elusive neighbor appear among the shrubs.

It is said that a gardener works their own special kind of magic with each garden they grow: enchantments to make plants look greener; fingertips that weave life to its will. *Gardening comes from within*, they say. To sing of soft joys; to laugh with each spring bud; to hear their clandestine whispers—one must garden with your heart.

She gardened with her soul.

Every part of herself infused into the essence of her plants. The gardener's eyes were like her sentinel white bougainvilleas, papery gentleness lined with a thorny gaze of protectiveness. The people in her life would always describe her disposition as akin to the myriad of hibiscus plants she grew, her favorite flower. A vibrant petaled smile, an openness that put even the broad leaves of her philodendrons to shame. Her garden became a haven for all, not just plants—the bees, butterflies and sunbirds. Everyone was welcomed to visit her serene home of greens.

But the life she gave her plants could not sustain her.

The gardener, who was usually the one that nipped pests and encroaching diseases on her beloved children, knew that her care would not be reciprocated. Her body wilts, only wispy grey locks remained on her crown; her entanglement with this vile vine continued until nothing remained. All husk when she returned to the earth.

A legacy lost—without the gardener, the plants she had so carefully cultivated, faded into a mass grave of decay. Yet, one stayed.

"Mak! Ada kelicap!"

"Aisha, biarkan lah."

"It's building a nest on our balcony! When will the babies come?"

The yellow-bellied bird chirped with haste, bordering annoyance: "Be patient! I'm still settling in!"

More metallic pitched cheeps reminded the young girl not to bother its home. It ruffled its olive-green plumage before taking flight, in search of more material for a sturdier nest. The sorrow of losing one's home was hard, but it could always rebuild. To never taste the sweet nectar of the gardener's hibiscus flowers—that saddened the sunbird the most.

Perhaps it should not have stayed, just like the other animals and insects that left for better prospects. Their feeding ground had been demolished, usurped by weeds and the stench of death; there was no reason to linger.

But it could not find the will to abandon this place—memories of its first kin were made here; the warmest giggles from children passing by; bountiful banquets at the tip of its downcurved bill. *Home* never had a name, a face. It was always: move to where the food is or where the best mate would present its worthiness.

It didn't want to leave home.

First nestled on the low branch of the tree next door, it waited, hoping for the blossoming garden to return. The crows perched on the sagging telephone wires mocked it for such futile efforts: "Leave. Leave. Leave. Trash and weeds will be all you eat." Their galvanic cackles and caws, trying to dissuade the fool disguised in feathers. They underestimated a sunbird's heart, it would not sway that easily to the cacophony of reason.

It required a tectonic shift—under the mercy of monsoon gales and harsh deluges against its small frame. While it survived, the tree did not. Snapped, a twig split in two pieces across the asphalt road. Nature's fickle winds uprooted its plans once more—a crushed spirit and flattened mess of a nest, all signs indicating: "It was not meant to be."

Again. Was its only reply to the cruel earth from which it sprouted.

The knot of exposed wires protruded out of the top corner of the balcony, a project long forgotten by the terrace house contractors. But it was enough for the architect bird. A branch entwined with plastic and copper instead of bark and leaves did little to deter the sunbird. The instinct of nest-building is ingrained deep in its hollowed bones, every strand of dried lalang and spider web it has scavenged would not go to waste. Such is the unique craft of an avian artificer working delicate materials with its needle-like beak—from pendulous stalk to the flask shaped structure, all molded with meticulous care.

Aisha took twice as long to sun their laundry on the DIY-ed clothes' wires in their balcony facing the back alley. Her mom told her to hurry up and finish her chores, time and time again. But all advice falls like water on a yam's leaf as she could not resist the glint of curiosity that glazed over eyes whenever she heard the familiar calls of the kelicap.

It became her morning routine, to greet the mother and its hatchlings, counting down the days to when she will see the young ones. Schooling from home had been tough

on Aisha, but with a new-found bird friend and more to come—loneliness was whisked away by the kelicap's wings, replaced with a soft warmth of excited chirps from her companion.

Until the nest disappeared altogether.

Desperate tears drenched her ruddy cheeks, an anger and panic sprung forth like wildflower blossoms. She yelled for her mom and dragged her siblings to the balcony, demanding to know what had happened. Not a single trace of the nest, a mere limp twig on the balcony floor—the only physical remnant of their presence here.

“Aisha... Mak dulu pun pernah macam ni. The kelicap will leave but that doesn't mean they're gone forever. Tunggu next year, they will come back. Hmmm? Ok?” Aisha's mom rubbed the small of her back while the adolescent's figure burrowed into the crevice of her mom's shoulder, tears gradually drying.

The young girl jumped to her feet, scrambling to the family's shared computer. “You're just saying that to make me feel better. I'm going to Google it.”

As usual, her mother was right. Bird watchers and other professionals in the region noticed such patterns among the common olive-backed sunbird. The palisade of information only worried Aisha more: *what if a larger bird had threatened them or stole their nest? Did I disturb them too often, was it my fault? Or were they recycling their materials for their next nest?*

Aisha pouted, she was not a very patient person. The skies remained that placid shade of blue each day without her friend, no chatty hellos and fluttering feathers to start her mornings.

I hope I can see you again, my dear friend kelicap.

Girlhood

by: **Beck Guerra Carter**

CW: Mentions of meat and blood, implied suicidal ideation

I couldn't be a boy
so I became a beggar.
My skeleton is the only part of me
that makes sense. Which is to say:
I'd rather be bones. My old love
looked like a slaughterhouse.
A house full of meat and blood
still looks like shelter when you're starving.
Sweetness that can only come
with hurt. *How can I still*
call that sweetness? My new one
holds me and his heart is a fracture
I grow through.

Beck Guerra Carter (they/she) is a nonbinary lesbian poet from Austin, Texas. They are an MFA candidate at Texas State University. They have been published in *Lavender Review*, *Q/A Poetry*, and *Odes and Elegies: Eco-Poetry from the Texas Gulf Coast*. Their life is more than a list of failures and accomplishments. So is yours.

Happy Returns

by: **Mike Hickman**

It's not a card, it's a piece of paper snatched from the photocopier, and there's not a design on the front so much as a schoolkid scrawl smiley face. In biro. And I'm not confused or annoyed, even though I've read the message – also in biro. I'm more...sad. Because it's happening again.

"What's this for?" is one possible response to the eager, needy smile leaning towards me over the desk. "How'd you come to believe this especially mortifying misconception?" might be another. Although I won't be going for that one because the mortification always seems to be mine.

It'll be your fault, this, comes the whisper from the back of my head that only occasionally bothers to feign my voice. You'll be responsible for this somehow. Again.

"Oh," is all I eventually manage to say. I don't pick the paper up, even though it's only just standing. Even though the gentlest of breezes will topple it. Picking it up would confirm that she is right. Just as not saying anything right now would confirm the same.

Why does this happen to me?

"Well, it is, isn't it?" Juno asks. "You kept it quiet, didn't you?" Something about the way she says it demands the addition of "you sly dog," but it remains unspoken.

I look at the biroed emoji. It's genuine enough. The work of a second, perhaps, but there can be no doubt that this is a deliberate and even kind act. Can there?

And I'm thinking of witches – bear with me for a moment here, please – and how naming them can defeat them. And I'm wondering at the things I've been told before, with such confidence, in every other new job I've had over the years. Everything from being seen on the street – like being spotted on my way into the supermarket somehow nailed me down as a particular type forevermore – to having my clothes identified, down to label and size and obvious alterations. I'm thinking of what Juno needs to hear me say here – that she's right, that it really is this date, that I really am that sign, and that she really was the first to notice, to do even the slightest thing to mark the day.

Which would make it more about her, somehow, wouldn't it? Juno, my new office manager and her beneficence. This is her telling me who she is and needing me to accept it.

Which would be fine, perhaps (would it?) if she really had got the date right.

“How did you know?” I ask, when it becomes clear that the “oh” isn’t going to cut it. The smile was already leaning towards “aha, I’ve got you, haven’t I?” and the eyes had that knowing twinkle. With me – her idea of me; the idea I was letting her have of me – trapped somewhere behind the reflection.

“HR system,” Juno said, with a nod towards her computer. “You’ll get your go when they give you a log in.”

In a fortnight’s time, I thought. Because the newbies aren’t trusted to book their own holidays until they’ve had their indoctrination/induction, I thought.

So, you could say this was Juno exploiting information she had access to that I didn’t. You could say that was a trifle unfair.

You could say, “Oh, I see, so that stuff’s all on there, is it?”

“From your application,” Juno said. And she stood back and she appraised me head to foot, even the bits I’d kept jammed under the desk precisely so they couldn’t be appraised. “Amazing what can be done with technology and data these days, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes,” I replied. “Yes, it is.”

“Well, Happy Birthday,” Juno said, leaning in for a final whisper, “You won’t keep it quiet next time, will you? You don’t need to be keeping things quiet here at Chapman and Morris, you know.”

I watch Juno as, buoyed by my acceptance of her handmade benefaction, she returns to her desk and the obviously open HR app where, no doubt, she’s been reading the wrong employee’s details. I’ve let her have her moment of kindness. I’ve let myself have mine. I’ve discovered the first of the many things they’ll believe about the person I’ll be playing while working for them.

Until the next job. I wonder when my birthday will be there?

Sometimes Doctor, always writer, Mike Hickman (@MikeHicWriter; he/him) is from York, England. He has written for Off the Rock Productions (stage and audio) and has been published in Agapanthus (Best of the Net nominated), EllipsisZine, the Cabinet of Heed, Sledgehammer, and Red Fez.

Follow the Music - Part 1

by: Chachee Valentine

CW: Description of animal gore, death, institutionalization, and abuse in an institution

Tonight, a tarot reader I follow on YouTube speaks of deer spirit, how deer spirit is with me. I wonder if this spirit belongs to the 12-Point buck we hit on a paved road many towns ago, that night you picked me up from Gram's apartment. Now I feel you everywhere. The tarot reader says someone with the initial D, yours, is always near me, that whomever D is strokes my cheek, hushes,

It's okay, Baby. Everything's gonna be alright. You are safe, loved, protected.

It's possible that to be with me you have melded yourself into deer spirit. Or maybe in a parallel universe, I am deer spirit, your protector, keeping the sadness, aloneness you felt for my mother, close with my own.

~

I still carry guilt for not telling anyone about the dream.

~

Gram and I were watching the *Love Boat*, followed by *Fantasy Island*. I had fallen asleep on her lap. Grandpa Ernie set his sauce on simmer and had gone to bed because he was old school Italian. The dream was a quick flash: I'm in a car and hit something hard, so hard, the impact pops me off the plushness of Gram's baby blue chenille housecoat. She gave me a pat and led me into the bedroom. Wanting to feel cared for, I pretended to sleepwalk as I climbed onto the aluminum folding chaise lounge Gram arranged into a makeshift cot.

Every sleepover, my grandmother seemed to know when I needed her to hold my hand. Bed to bed, we played a game to help me fall asleep. Like on *Gilligan's Island*, we were stranded on islands separated by chopping seas. Swells lifted below our extended arms. Waves peaked sharp teeth, no match for the love between us. Holding hands for our lives, my grandmother quelled my *Don't let go!* mumbles by giving my hand a gentle, intermittent squeeze.

~

A long, intoxicating morning always followed. Grandpa Ernie hummed along with his prized vinyl record that crackled the dawn. Their parakeet, Baby, whose mate had died, would whistle and chirrup to Jimmy Durante. I remember Gram telling me the story about how one morning when Grandpa Ernie got up, the parakeets were unusually silent. Baby's sweetheart must have died in her sleep. When Grandpa Ernie removed the night cover to sing good morning, Baby stood perched next to her hardened body on the bottom of the cage. Grandpa Ernie said it was as if Baby's eyes slid down the sides of his Opaline head, numb in despair, and that it took a lot of coaching for Baby to learn how to sing on his own.

The four hundred square foot one-bedroom apartment bubbled under the tangy pressure of

oregano, tomato, garlic. Although not related by blood, I admired Grandpa Ernie's rituals. I marveled at the way he ate meals on small plates. For breakfast, Grandpa Ernie would break up slices of thick, crusty bread and place the scraps in a bowl. Next, he'd fill the bowls with steamed milk and coffee sweetened by sugar lumps. Under the bloom of mustard yellow sunlight, night lost its grip as we slurped coffee soup. Baby and Grandpa Ernie crooning to vaudevillian music made it easy to imagine another place and time when people enjoyed eating together.

~

When I came to, a nervous man was talking me down. Rain poured sideways. On the slick road, my bird chest pressed against the guard rail.

Gimme your hand!

On the bridge, I thought about the dream I had the night before on Gram's lap of hitting something hard. Even though I knew the deer was dead, I sobbed out loud that I would jump if someone didn't tell me the fate of the deer. After it smashed onto the hood of the car, its body struck the glass like a crack of thunder. I wanted someone to say the words:

The deer is dead.

After it hit, I watched the deer's velvet ear droop in slow motion. Through the shattered windshield, our three heads sat in the car and became a distant horizon for the deer's slot-shaped pupil to focus. While its body twitched, the deer's lone eye locked onto mine. Mother screamed. The inside of the car submerged into the deep woodland surrounding us, while my head refused to turn away from the deer's eye. A throbbing enlargement of yellow headlights barreled down the road in our direction. The engine's throttle choked as the deer's eye looked as though it was watching flashes of memories of his day. The deer tilted its head, untied its legs, fell from the hood of mom's car, wobbled into the opposite lane. There wasn't any time to look away.

If his antlers had been a little smaller, it might have not caught the underbelly of my truck.

The driver behind the throbbing yellow headlights told us not to worry because he was a hunter, said the *meat* would not go to waste. He said those words as he and another man hoisted the tepid carcass into the bed of his pickup. My brain stopped working when the driver said the word *meat*. One minute the deer was hopping over the hood of the car, and then we were having a staring contest. Now the eyes, ears, legs, and belly of the deer were being addressed as *meat*. Being skinned alive on a road, dragged by its antlers, must have felt surreal, like being dragged by a single braid through a psych ward for unwanted teenagers. On the bridge, I blocked out the man's words and thought about the deer's family being left behind. All deer have a herd with whom they belong. It's impossible for a deer to miss curfew, to be late for dinner, to forget about date-night, skip anniversaries, or act too busy to tuck in their young without anyone in their herd holding them accountable. Deer family stay together and share the same worn path to ensure no one goes missing.

~

I'm driving across the middle of Texas on one of those barren desert roads. Your only sense of being alive on these roads comes through watching wind turbines, from being careful not to feel

hypnotized by a giant pinwheel strongarming the vertical skyline. Methane clouds of rotting cow manure seep into the car vents and snake up my nostrils. I don't know what it is about this oppressive road, but I am back *there*, back in that place that still runs through my veins like gravy.

~

Kicking and screaming down a hallway, I am pulled by my braid. I am fighting for my rights, fighting for my life because I cannot get a witness. That is, I did not have a witness until I met Sohar and Chinnici.

Dragged into a quiet room, a bare room with walls covered in padding, the padding camouflaged with carpet. The Keys think I'm not smart enough to notice what kind of room this is, but I am. You don't put in that much time in places like that and let anything escape you. They want me to *shut the fuck up*, but I don't listen because I don't care. I scream until a hairy-knuckled hand covers my mouth. Like any animal being subdued, I bite down. My canines sink into the balmy puff pastry of his hand made from Holstein butter, soft and chewy. Once my jaw is clenched and locked, there's no letting go until a boney, nude hand belonging to another Key slaps the side of my head across my left ear. The needle's fury happens quick as death, and I am out.

~

Right when I slap shut the air vents, the car runs out of gas. Here is one of those times I could go missing, I think, but hang on. For a woman to go missing, someone needs to notice her absence. Her presence needs significance. A woman is no one if she does not matter to anyone. At the very root, woman means not or none. If a woman's energy was never important to the herd, she remains unmissing. I wonder if the deer's family paced and snorted in their family den all night long, never learning about the fate of their buck. I've been *unmissing* for over fifty years. I'll always be free to roam.

Women do not magically disappear. Why do we say that anyway, *missing*, as if we've misplaced a set of keys. Those we refer to as missing are not lost objects. If we cannot locate a person, they either do not wish to be found, or a captor has methodically hidden or killed their prey.

Throughout this life there have been hundreds of times I could have been buried, drowned, left for dead, my body on the bottom of a quarry. No one would look for me except you. If you had known the truth, our truth, you would have looked for me, but it's too late. You're as dead as the deer we killed.

Read Part 2 in The B'K Volume 13, Issue 3.

Non-Fiction

Chachee's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the following publications: *Words & Images*, *InSite Magazine*, *Stolen Island Review*, *Lullwater Review*, *Fugue*, *Prairie Margins* (2010 & 2022), *Askew Poetry Journal*, *Alchemy Literary Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *The Parliament Literary Journal*, *Creative License*, *11 Mag Berlin*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch* (2021 & 2022), *Cajun Mutt Publishing* (June 2022). You can find Chachee on Instagram @forensicpoet. Tip Chachee on PayPal at forensicpoet@gmail.com.

a theft

by: **Jasmine Kaur**

if i were a renaissance painting,
i would step out of the canvas
cover my naked body in glittering night
and slip out of a museum stuffed
with nude female forms.

i would wash away the paint
so intently caked on my skin,
letting go of how i was drawn
for the sake of how i am.

they will say i was stolen,
and maybe i was.
though i prefer to think
i stole myself away,
becoming both
the thief
and the theft.

Jasmine Kaur (she/her) is a punjabi, queer writer/artist. She likes to surround herself with stories and poetics across mediums. Some of her work's been published by VIBE, ...ongoing..., and Tilt. She's currently a Masters in Philosophy student at Delhi University. Find her at <https://sites.google.com/view/jasmine-kaur/> or @trying0000 on twitter. Tip her on PayPal at www.paypal.com/paypalme/rajandeepsingh13.

The Last Weekend in July

by: **Zach Murphy**

It was the summer of 1993 and Keilani and I sat by the crackling fire as the bullfrogs croaked a sonorous symphony, the grass swayed from a whispering breeze, and the stars zipped in different directions across the vast night sky.

“What a weekend,” Keilani said, resting her hands on the back of her jet-black hair.

“Rad like a cat wearing sunglasses,” I said.

“Satisfying like spelling Sriracha right on the first try,” Keilani said.

That was our thing. One of our things. In fact, when you’ve known someone since the age of five, you amass a lot of things.

I leaned in toward the warmth of the fire, took a deep breath, and prepared to tell Keilani something that I hesitated to tell her all summer. “I decided I’m not going to Northwestern.”

“What?” Keilani asked.

“I’ve thought about it a lot and I just don’t think college is for me,” I answered.

“But we had it all planned out,” Keilani said. “Together.”

“I’m so terrified of tossing four years away,” I said. “And going into debt forever.”

“Why did you wait until the last minute to tell me?” Keilani asked. “You always do that, and it drives me crazy.”

“It’s not the last minute,” I said.

“That’s another thing you do,” Keilani said. “I know it’s not literally the last minute, but you just have this affinity for suddenly dipping out on plans.”

“Like when?” I asked.

“Remember when you didn’t even show up to your own birthday party? The party that I organized!”

“I had the flu!”

Keilani stood up. “And the time you said you would pick me up from my dentist appointment and didn’t show up?”

"I had a panic attack about driving in downtown traffic," I said. "I had just gotten my license!"

"I had to use a payphone while half of my mouth was numb!"

Keilani tossed another log onto the fire and a flurry of sparks burst into the air.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Keilani sat back down, fanned the smoke away from her eyes, and brushed the ashes off her sweatshirt. "I'm going to miss you. That's all."

"I'm going to miss you too," I said.

"So what do you plan on doing?" Keilani asked.

"I want to save the world."

"Like Wonder Woman?"

"No," I said. "I keep having these dreams about rainforests losing their color and oceans warping into garbage dumps. I want to try and do something. I'm just not sure what yet."

"Maybe someday there will be an invention that allows us to see each other's lives from far away," Keilani said.

"Sure," I said. "And maybe Blockbuster will go out of business!"

We both laughed until we snorted.

Keilani reached over and grabbed my hand. "We'll still look up at the same moon," she said.

I wondered if I'd ever have a moment with Keilani like this again. "What a weekend," I said.

Keilani sighed. "Over too soon like a Prince song."

Zach Murphy (he/him) is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His debut chapbook *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) is available in paperback and e-book. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Important Information About Your Bronchoscopy

by: Kristin Entler

*after what is supposed to be an
outpatient procedure*

I. Pre-Op

Do not intake food up to 6 hours before your scheduled procedure. Your doctor will inform you of your scheduled procedure time. Per your doctor's orders, do not take any of your other medications before your procedure. Tell your nurse a comprehensive list of all the medications you take. If you can't remember them, make sure to bring a list. Do not eat or drink after the procedure until the numbness in your throat and mouth has gone away completely. For 24 hours after the procedure you should not:

- drive
- operate any heavy machinery
- return to work
- drink alcohol
- sign legal documents
- be responsible for small children

Do not expect to go home the same day. You should expect:

- fever and fever symptoms
- light lung bleeding
- mild to moderate lung irritation
- sore throat
- hoarse voice

II. Post-Op

Crinkle rose pink
speckled gunk-spit
into a tissue,
ribcage rattling
from bronchi in full bloom;
tastes like pollen-dust
scratchy, stuck
in throat
that won't
let go of sludge
no matter how much
air exists,
crunching muscle
against muscle;
from a sterile room
watch a city crow unspool
a straw from its to-go cup
casting it aside,
in control of what
goes in his own throat.

Kristin Entler (she/they) was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at 6 months old, and first came out as LGBT+ several years after her diabetes diagnosis at 12 years old. She currently serves as Poetry Editor for NELLE and lives with her partner and their dog, Azzie, who maintains that he gets all his stubbornness from both his parents. Tip Kristin on Venmo at @Kristin-Entler.

on turning 23 / when we weren't in love i could leave without him waking

by: Raina K. Puel

CW: classism, age gap relationships

slivers of morning light press in
you sleep as i slip into my tights
florence wraps her fluffy body around my legs
won't you please stay? she seems to ask
i want to get back into bed
wake with you on my twenty-third birthday
but i have to leave you to return to you
packed & ready for our flight to the writing conference
where you'll get too drunk
swaying on the street
shoelaces untied
& tell me you want to have my babies
i'll feel pride you've chosen me
but also fear
for the decade between us
& i'll get annoyed with you
for kicking bread under the table
instead of picking it up
you'll tell me people are paid to clean so it's fine
i won't be convinced
& we'll go to panels & readings
where i'll feel like an imposter
but stay close to you
as if your publications & prestige will transfer to me
like newsprint to silly putty
& i'll get triggered at a bar
where people are smoking cigarettes inside
i'll take off
you won't understand why
because i'll never tell you
stale smoke drags me back to places i'd rather not
& you'll get annoyed with me
for insisting we strip the bed & tidy the air bnb
because why would we do that when people are paid to clean
it's not until we're back in boston
we have an argument

a conversation
about when it's personal differences
vs. when it's about power & privilege
& i don't remember what we conclude because i am tired
though i know florence bites our feet
during the make up sex
that doesn't really make anything up
right now she isn't biting
she's winding winding through my legs
& i hear your sleepy acrobatics
turn to watch as you reach
to draw my body toward yours
when your hand grasps only sheet
you open your eyes
bolt up
scan the room
until you see me in the doorway
then you collapse back into bed
with a gentle snore

Raina K. Puels (they/them) is a queer/poly Boston-based writer, educator, and kinkster. They hold an MFA from Emerson College and read poems for Split Lip Mag. You can find their writing in The Rumpus, Hobart After Dark, PANK, and many other places listed here: rainakpuels.com. Follow them on Twitter: @rainakpuels. Tip them on Venmo at @rainaaaaaaaaa.

“God hates Kansas—you know where I stand.”

by: Clem Flowers

I nodded as my motormouth Lyft driver carried on as the glowing road studs melded into danger lines—

felt the hours bleed from me under all those shoeshine lights out along the interstate.

I finished my last cigarette (“Shit, I’m gonna vape, so you’re cool.”) somewhere back around Midtown Mile—now I’m playing on my phone to have something to do with my fevered hands and trying to take my mind off the

Wanting
Wishing
Waiting

to have you reach out to me, even though I know those days faded under the last harvest moon when I was in your wedding party to the sweet barista who’s now mother to your two kids and we had a group hug and grinned for pictures and I kissed both your cheeks and made pretend like I wasn’t gonna skip the cake to have a hard cry out on the curb a few feet down from where the DJ was taking a smoke break and loudly arguing on the phone about fantasy football standings and just looking up to the gossamer high beam and aching to evaporate into stardust and—

“All right, we’re here.”

We smile at one another & I exit his Eagle Summit that has the “Ass Gas Or Grass—No One Rides For Free” sticker next to the “Coexist “ on his back bumper and I’m tempted to ask if I can stick around another minute or until that 90s song about hearts in a blender is over but he wishes me happy trails and I’m too polite to say otherwise.

Then I stepped out into a night I hoped had a bit more distraction left in it for me before the church bells started at dawn.

Clem Flowers (They/ Them) is a soft spoken southern transplant living in spitting distance of some mountains in Utah. Maker of a fine omelet, but scrambled egg game needs some fine tuning. Nonbinary & bi, they live in a cozy apartment with their wonderful wife & sweet calico kitty. Tip them on Cash App at \$blessblam.

When I Was a God

by: **Tanner Armatis**

i will remember this— I whispered.
I held electricity in my hands by touching tvs.
I cut wind wherever I ran.
I screamed and ears bled.
I was tied to a corner and confined for eons.
I escaped and wreaked havoc and was caught again and again
i will remember this.
and I smiled, happy with the destruction, the sadness, the annoyance,
because those bigger than me were shells of what they once were
and they said I would one day grow up. Like them.
i will remember.
And they were pathetic.
They never tested anything.
They always stood still.
They only stared at the tv.
They never touched it.
i will remember.
And they told me about the future.
Because one day— I would have responsibilities. Commitments.
And I couldn't do whatever I wanted.
i will.
So I sewed the memories into my brain
so that even if I grew up— like them—
I could still remember
when I was a God.

Tanner Armatis (he/him) has been published by No Contact, the Daily Drunk, CP Quarterly, the Royal Rose, and elsewhere. He was a reader at the North American Review. @ok__tanner for bangers about manga (mostly One Piece). He is blessed to be living with two wonderful cats and his amazing girlfriend. Tip him on PayPal at paypal.me/armatistanner.

greenville, ms

by: Ashley Bao

CW: references to racism

in mississippi i meet an
a yi standing next to a long-closed
shop, paint and signage peeling
from the walls.

M ng Sang Groc ry, the remaining letters
a faded blue; mississippi summers
have bleached every downtown building.

todee's sundee, why you not at church, child?
mississippi mouth, chinese body.
when she sees my surprise,
the a yi's chest and curls shake in laughter,
floral blouse clinging to her wrinkled skin,
crow's eyes tilting up to the beaming sun.
aw, what's with that face?

she has a house at the edge of town,
framed photographs hang in the foyer.
a hundred years ago, her grandparents left home
to pick mississippi cotton.
fifty years ago, she worked the register, serving whites
and Black people because she was neither.
twenty years ago, her kids moved out, only
returning to mississippi for christmas.

she makes grits and bacon for breakfast,
fried rice with bacon for the bible study
tonight. her doctor says she should eat less meat
but she remembers the days where they
only ate white rice and beans stewed with the last
of the pork grease because there was no money for more.

beesides, what chahnese and
what southahnah doesn't eat pork?

her brothers and best friend come over at six-thirty sharp.
they saunter in with canes and leathery skin, but their smiles
have stayed the same since the days they used to live in one room
behind the grocery store.

they place their dishes on the mahogany table,
scratches from years of use streaking the wood, and
the a yi's oldest brother takes out a worn black leather-bound bible.

we bow our heads
(today was sunday after all)
before indulging in recipes that have
weathered two thousand years of chinese humidity
and one hundred fifty years of mississippi sun.

Ashley Bao (she/her) is a Chinese-Canadian-American high school senior. She spends her time writing and dreaming, mostly about cats. Her poetry and short fiction has appeared in Liminality, Strange Horizons, Cast of Wonders, and elsewhere. She may sometimes be found looking at cute cats on Twitter @ashleybaozi. Tip her on Venmo at @ashley-y-bao

you

by: **Will Arthur Spiller**

eternal flames burn incensed rage
cleanse old wounds with scents of sage
embroidered stars, aglow in space
form sun-kissed freckles on your face
your lips, god's ears, final breakthrough
i never could grow tired of you

baby's-breath sweet disposition
view yourself from my position
strumming beats on your heart strings
mulberry glow to our mood rings
serene peace that you imbue
i never could grow tired of you

through greying hair and mottled hands
time ruining our best laid plans
sleeping still among wildflowers
in winter's moon and april showers
beyond the night we bid adieu
i never could grow tired of you

