

the
b'k
bitchin' kitsch



Vol. 15 Issue 2



Edited by

Chris Talbot-Heindl

About the Cover

“The Girl Who Broke Her Own Heart,” and oil on canvas painting by Aleena Sharif.

A nude brunette woman crying with a pink shawl wrapped around her. There’s a glucose monitor on her arm. One hand holds an insulin pump and the other holds her heart.

Aleena was born in Pakistan and graduated with a BFA and a minor in Art History from FIT. After graduating she has exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, London, Italy, Pakistan, as well as many virtual galleries. She currently continues her practice between California and Pakistan where she holds open studios in hope to create a safe space for nude paintings to be shown.

the **b'k** bitchin' kitsch

The B'K is a quarterly art and lit magazine prioritizing traditionally marginalized creators, but open to all. We are queer, trans nonbinary, neurodivergent, and mixed-race led, and as such, we are interested in platforming, centering, and celebrating creatives who are typically pushed to the margins. We are interested in people being able to decolonize and tell their own stories in their own voices.

Contact Us

For inquiries or concerns, write to:
chris@talbot-heindl.com

Table of Contents

Art

Aleena Sharif	cover
Mark Myavec	80
Megan Cartwright	13
Willow Critchlow	47

Fiction

Ajinkya Goyal	78
Emmy Teague	30-35
Jūlijs Avotnieks	68-71
Melissa Ren	72-73
Travis Flatt	76-77

Nonfiction

Ana Marie Boyd	60-63
Andrei Atanasov	20-25
Christy Tending	26-29
Magdalena Poost	8-12
Marshall Moore	40-46
Ocean Wei	55-57

Poetry

A. Jenson	18-19
Ami Patel	54
Dayna Hodge Lynch	17
Dianna Morales	66-67
Eben E. B. Bein	58-59
evelyn bauer	48-53
Jonathan Chan	74-75
n.l. rivera	38-39
Salem Paige	6-7
Sarah Peecher	36-37
Vanessa Y. Niu	64-65
Venus Knowles	16

how my parents will react when i come out to them as transgender

by: **Salem Page**

CW: Themes of rejection

my mother will drop marble
tears on the floor and they
will not break on heavy
impact / and my father will
take them in his hands the inquisitive
rage of his eyes will send blue
disappointment down the back
of my breathless ribs / he will take
years to stand from where he crouches
on the floor above me now he will
let the weight of her agonizing confusion
snap my neck –

i will recover in bursts my mother
will stand by my bedside
as if i am an ill child home from school
again there will be days where i am
more gone / and father will visit less at first
then more each day and we will build

something warmer than the woodfire we
called a furnace and breathing will be
easier as my parents' hands slowly unravel
from being tight around my ribs like a cobra at hunt;
a reminder of the ongoing deception
i seek to finally put to rest –

my father will understand
with time and my mother has love
wider than time itself / and father loves too,
though strange at times this hiding game will end as
bright something begins –

Salem Paige (they/them) is a queer, trans poet whose works have been published by the League of Canadian Poets and others. They live on Algonquin Anishinaabe territory (so-called Ottawa, Ontario), where they spend time napping excessively, binging reality tv, and annoying their partner and their two cats. Tip them at paypal.me/paegema

Trans Pietà

by:
Magdalena
Poost

CW: Body and gender dysphoria, birth, failed first love

On Shabbat, we sit cross-legged in my bedroom, again. I am drinking the blessed red wine faster than you are. The rain has made our feet peel. Downstairs, you joked that we had gotten married unbeknownst to even ourselves, and I sit, thinking about how that didn't scare me.

I don't really want to, but you say *I have never done a facemask*. I look at you and see you staring at the package. You are wearing my skirt, and I have the feeling like I would carve a hole in the fabric of space to protect you, to give you a tiny hollow place where you can unfold in any delicate direction.

I put mine on first, and then fix the holes where your eyes are meant to go. Gabbing. You are unnaturally still, frozen with your chin turned almost imperceptibly upwards. Don't want to let it slip.

I am impatient and peel mine off after a couple minutes, because it is slimy, because really I do not like facemasks, and because I want to lean my face against your chest.

Are you taking it off?

Can I take it off?

Underneath, your face is pink as a grapefruit and feverishly warm. I gasp and demand if you are in pain, and you don't say anything. *Let's wash your face.*

In the hallway, you lean against the wall. (Here is a gap, I recognize later. Here is a place we didn't quite close.) I do not recognize why, and so I laugh. We laughed, I think. Then something switches and you speak as though I have looked at you and laughed. *I haven't had the chance before. Okay? I haven't had the chance to do a face mask and that is okay and you can't expect me to know how to do girl things because no one ever taught me.* It feels like the anger of someone displaced in time, like a woman sitting in an old folks home, mistaking me for a river. A boundless, honest anger, homing in on me as the nearest warmth. I cling to your shoulders, try to tell you how the thought of your skin hurting felt like swallowing a hammer. Our arms make a circle, empty in the middle.

Later, in my bed, I sense your anger still, a forming wave far off the shore. I focus so hard, I do not notice the pall that has fallen over me, dragging iteration of this mothering figure I have always feared others mistaking as my silhouette. We are each hammering, I realize, on opposite sides of a wall.

Setting: *The dressing room of this play. MAGDALENA sits with*
THEATER DIRECTOR

THEATER DIRECTOR

Alright, we want to respect your boundaries as much as we can. We won't put you out there in any situation that you don't consent to. Which leads me to the next question: Is there anything you would feel uncomfortable wearing? Any body parts that you want always covered, anything like that?

MAGDALENA

Just. Gender-presentation wise I am comfortable with anything. Except, I guess, I...I don't really want to look like...

I know this sounds fucked up.

I swear— I think older women are the coolest
demographic!!!!

I just...my whole life people have treated me like
Like I

Like they look at my body and my saggy chest and treat me—

Even when I was in elementary school I remember—

The other girls my age were so—

They were treated like kids, like they were treated adorable
and

And there's just a way people treat you when you are a kid
who looks like a middle aged woman

It fucks you up.

I guess, I just

I just don't want to look like a middle aged cis-woman.

Here's what I am wondering. When did my body stop being
my mom's body?

When did this stop being about my mom's skin? I want a
date. Tell me when her insides became my outsides, tell me
when we were disconnected. Point at the edge of her flesh.

When I was born, my mother popped me out like a green
grape. The way I know a circle is holy
is: that's the shape of turning inward,
bowls,
our bodies around fire.
A circle is the shape of going away and coming back.

A circle is the shape of a hole.
A circle of the shape of a blueberry.
It is not the shape of your eyelids –
those are shaped only like coming back,
are shaped only like an usher showing you your seat in the
crowded theater,
are only shaped like mhm.

I was born from a line being drawn: between my mother and
me.

A field has to be squared up by a tractor

A hole turns inside out and then my little foot is stamped with
ink. I am a Libra, which means I know balance. Fairness. Like
to shop.

When I was coming out of her (me) when I was becoming me
(not her), the healthy bacteria in her vaginal canal entered
my digestive tract, and started populating inside the tubes
and corners and wending folds of my gut. What my body was
able to absorb from her milk, and what ran right through – it
was democratically decided by a jury of bacteria pulled from
inside, outside me, inside me, now becoming outside me.

I am looking for symbols of my body. Here is what I've
collected so far:

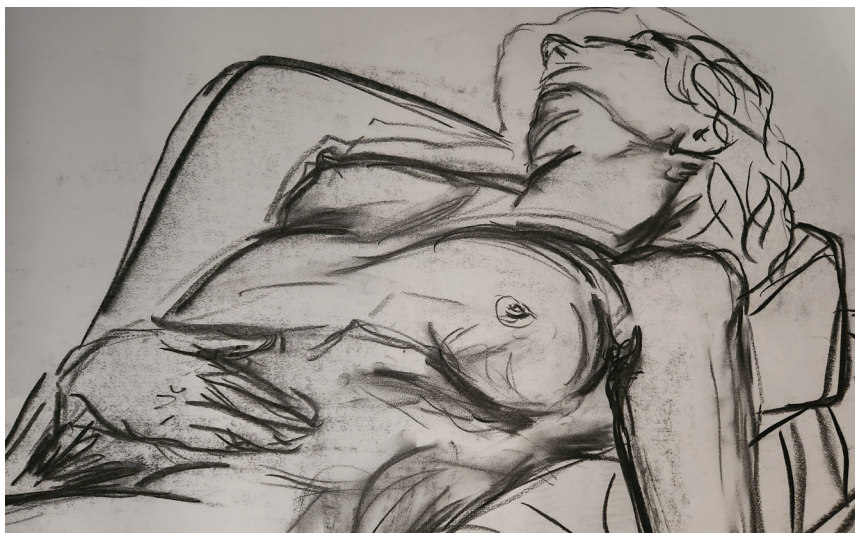
nesting dolls,
earrings,
corridors,
vases,
ears.

At what point is a rock a pebble?
At what point is a pebble ground?
At what point is ground rock?
At what point do we become our own beginning?

SAIDIYA HARTMAN

*I lose my mother again and again and again not in
the past but in the present moment.*

Magdalena Poost (they/them) is an interdisciplinary artist, aspiring mime, and public library fan based in Allston, MA. A recent Princeton graduate, their work has been published through the climate story incubator The Blue Lab, as well as the Nassau Literary Review. You can find them at magdalenapoost.com. Tip them on Venmo at @magdalena-poost.



Revelation by: Megan Cartwright

Megan Cartwright (she/her) is a poet and creative based in Australia. Her work has appeared in print and online in a range of journals and magazines. To find out more visit: <https://screechavitch.wixsite.com/mysite>

This page contained an irreverent poem that purported to be from a “genderfluid member of the Nigerian diaspora” who explored “the connections between identity, trauma, and humour.” It was accepted on the basis that it truly was from someone who had first hand experience of the impacts of colonization and trauma, unedited, because, as per our guidelines, we accept how people show up to tell their own stories.

Unfortunately, it has come to my attention, that this was in fact written by a white cisgender man to “prove” that publications will publish anything provided it comes from a marginalized person.

It is true that we never would have considered publishing this piece from a white, cisgender man, because it was an irreverent poem about colonization and decolonization and he would have no business writing that poem under our guidelines (or in my mind, at all).

But he submitted it as a genderfluid Black writer, and so it was considered, and eventually, after careful consideration if it was too irreverent, it was accepted as their truth. Beyond that, this man took the token payment meant for marginalized creatives only. Per our guidelines, we pay racially and ethnically marginalized, gender variant, and disabled creatives because they are least likely to be paid for their published works or equitably for their day jobs.

To prevent others trying to provide publishing opportunities to marginalized creatives to share their stories in good faith, I will share his name and his fake personas here:

His name is Jasper Ceylon.

His known fake personas are:

Adele Nwankwo (the fake person I published)

b.h. feinstein

Dirt Hogg Sauvage Respectfully

Claire Brooke Hawksmouth

Sky Child

m.b.

Eleanor Neveah Mei Payne (大屌女孩异议者!)

If you would like proof of this information, please reach out. I have a copy of a sample of his book where he brags about what he's done (and also has a land acknowledgment that mocks my Nation).

THE LAST SUPPER, AFTER HOURS

by: Venus Knowles

the closest thing to godliness is queerness.
all dolled up in drag, made out of divine and glittering gold.

the good shepherd sits at the back of the bar.
at the head of a cherry wood table set for twelve.

there are splinters forming a ring around the wounds in his palms.
bloody center of hand and glitter speckled in his beard.

against the pearly-gate doors, the gold filled floor, the jukebox sings.
hymnals for the holy, a repeating track of Diana's coming out confessional.

in the corner is judas with his gossiping tongue and burly throat.
in the corner his mouth is pressed against the neck of an angel.

the good shepherd sits at the back of the bar with a patient mouth.
all-knowing, all-seeing. turns to me and says – *don't buy a drink, i'll make it cheap.*

and he turns my water into a jack and coke, turns my unbelieving heart
from stone to pillow-fluff.

Venus Knowles (he/zie) is a Black femme writer and poet in New York City. He's found on Twitter at @venusrvalentino where he can be found posting too many pictures of his cat and making way too many threads; outside of the internet, Venus is constantly finding himself at the library or in the biggest park he can find.

My Last Mardi Gras

by: Dayna Hodge Lynch

Dayna Hodge Lynch (she/they) is a poet from North Carolina. Find her on Instagram @definitelyday or twitter at @writesofday. Their website is daynahodgelynch.com.

I shed my skin last night along with glitter but not my tattoos. Ashing away the sins of alms given by other revelers. Lost in beignets- powdered sugar spilling off us as we groove around the city. Between creole hymns of "WHO DAT?" "y' maw'n nemcomin'down?" and "bless your heart, dahlin'" I find myself. Frequencies of the fantasies we all indulge in during this time, increase with the substances. Tourists prance around coming for their first experience of drinking too much and too little self-restraint. Echoes of lurching is followed quickly by "THROW ME SOMETHING, MISTER." Carnival krewees holler from every corner of St. Charles and beyond. We pray to not hear any gunshots ring out in the humidity-crowded air. Yellow, green, and purple are found on everything from king cake to face paint, bodysuits, and our best walking shoes. Chunks of pavement missing, filled in by beads — as if brass bands had rolled through in the parade an hour before. Here, we are. Here, we will always be.

Uncle

by: **A. Jenson**

*Check please?
Can I get the check? Thank you.
Here's how it's going to be, uncle, I say
Taking cash out of my jacket pocket
You're going to use my actual name
You're going to mind your tone
And you're going to remember that I'm nearly forty years old
I take my phone from the bar
Wave it a bit for emphasis
You're going to bear all of this in mind
Whenever you call or text
Which you're of course free to do
Because changing my number would be a hassle all around
I've had it since I was seventeen, see
But I can mute your number—and will
If you keep this up
I am busy with three arithmetics:
The bill and associated tip
Counting back to seventeen, wondering where you were
And tallying up the ticks of your upturned tutting mouth
You're also going to repeat to yourself
As often as necessary
That your brother's child made a life for themselves
Not from what they were handed
No
Thank you so much, keep the change
Not from the raw materials
You're going to remind yourself that they took that life*

*And ground it up
Then packed it into sandwich meat and peddled it
That the life I have now is many, many degrees removed
I smile and push the wet glass away
I stand up and shake my sleeves down
The life I have now is built on the foundations of countless
trade-ins
Frankly
Countless revolutions along the scorched boulevards of myself
Do you understand
And you were not
He was not
None of you withered warts were ever
With me during a growth spurt
Or a revolution
Or an evolution for that matter
So, in short
I say, and I know I'm almost too many steps away to be heard
You can stop whining
About the effort it takes to swim nowadays
Or you can choke on these little waves of mine and sink
The bell over the door echoes me sweetly, tinnily
Sink!
And in the parking lot I am split open with smiling*

A. Jenson (they/them) is a trans/nonbinary writer, artist, and farmer from Tennessee and Kansas. They are currently revising a fiction manuscript between long days of harvest on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state. Their work appears in Ouch! Collective and Swim Press. Find them on Instagram at @adotjenson

The Lords of Summer

by: **Andrei Atanasov**

CW: Bullying

As a boy, I had a friend.

By virtue of being my only friend, he was also my best friend. We shared a first name, and almost every afternoon, although we'd spent all day at school together, we grabbed our phones and dialed each other's landline number. Often we'd call at the same time, which prevented both of us from getting through, and to avoid this we turned our practice into a cowboy duel: who could dial the fastest? We knew everything about each other. Sometimes at school, when other children were around, I lightly bullied him: a couple of punches in the shoulder, because the only way to survive in the schoolyard was to show you weren't the weakest, and because I knew he would never hit back. He never did. He was the wiser of us two Andreis.

Aside from our names, we also shared a love for Naruto. My friend was undoubtedly the bigger fan, and always, without fail, would have the latest fighting game in the series ready for us to play on his PS2. This was a big deal, as new console games were a rare luxury in the mid-2000s, when we had to wrestle them from parents who were barely scraping by as it was. We spent entire summers in his living room honing our fighting skills as we gorged ourselves on fresh strawberries his caretaker cut up for us like we were two young lords and she our subject, as Andrei beat me again and again, no matter which character or strategy I chose, no matter that the game's hardest difficulty setting felt like child's play to me. He was so good. I was jealous of this, of how effortless he made beating me look, and

of so many other things about him—his straight blonde hair, his confidence. The way he could recite old poems from memory.

We spent most of our time inside like this with all the windows open, lounging on sofas or sprawled on the bare wooden floor with dust-smeared controllers glued to our hands. But the summer days were long then, and boredom a persistent stalker. Sometimes, the mellow afternoon light and the greenness of the fields surrounding the building would draw our languid bodies out from their caves.

He called those boundless fields the Stadium. A stadium for what exactly, I never found out. All Andrei could recall was that it had once been used professionally in some sport. Since we weren't sporty types, the Stadium served more as landscape than playing field. Like the girls in *My Neighbour Totoro*, we explored the tall grass as we took lungfuls of air that felt clean and fresh after so long spent inside. Mostly it was just the two of us, walking our sandalled feet to blisters, but at times we'd come upon another kid engaged in some solitary activity like skating or making soap bubbles. We'd wave at them and resume our wandering way.

I preferred to keep these interactions brief. My visits to Andrei were bound by a ticking clock—I lived far away so my father would have to drive to pick me up, and after six p.m. his willingness to leave the house dropped sharply. I didn't want to waste that precious time with other people.

In this, though, Andrei and I differed. Unlike me, my best friend had other friends, and one day, he decided he wanted to introduce me to them.

Stories told of a band of kids from across the neighborhood who patrolled the fields like sky pirates their slice of the clouds,

demanding that whoever chose to wade inside their territory abide by their rules. These were Andrei's *other* friends.

From the start, his relationship with these kids struck me as odd. To me, he was a kindred spirit: a fellow traveller of fantastic, made-up worlds; a poet with a lot, often a bit too much, to say. To them, he was another person altogether. Mature, reserved. He never touched video games or played with action figures.

He explained this new *status quo* as he gave me my own instructions. Stand up straight, meet their eyes, and don't let them in on our secret.

There was only one problem.

In my hands, I held a plastic bag filled with Ben 10 action figures, which Andrei had asked me to bring when I arrived that morning.

Realizing this, we froze.

There was no time to head back inside the apartment. Andrei lived on the third or fourth floor, and the band was already on its way. We'd have to improvise. And we'd need to think fast, and well. From the way Andrei had presented them, these kids were hawkish about any signs of childishness.

Briefly, I considered hiding the incriminating evidence behind some tall bushes, but that struck me as somehow too pathetic.

"Pretend they belong to your brother," Andrei suggested.

"But I don't have a brother," I said naively, to which Andrei facepalmed himself.

"That doesn't matter. Just *pretend* that you do."

I fidgeted. Not because I didn't think his plan would work, but because its success depended on something I wasn't very confident would work in our favor: my own ability to lie. To say I was a bad

liar would imply I'd had enough experience to come to that conclusion. In truth, I don't think I'd ever told a big lie before.

The bushes rustled and three dark shapes emerged, lollygagging their way towards us.

I weighed my options. I was angry at my friend for forcing this situation on me. On the other hand, I wanted nothing less than to ruin his reputation.

Andrei shot me a glance that said, *Trust me*.

When the boys reached us, I was surprised to see they weren't much older than we were. A rose-cheeked boy walked in front, flanked by a pair of raven-haired lunkheads with nondescript features. His own hair resembled a freshly cut field of wheat.

I'd considered him the second he came out of the bushes, but now I was sure. As he lifted his head and squinted at us, I realized who this boy was. Years before, we had briefly studied karate together. Judging by the way he held himself, he must have stuck with it long after I had quit. Karate had made him serious and composed; it had bestowed on him the sort of gravitas Andrei and I had only seen in adults.

His name was Nicolae.

"Yo," Nicolae said, by way of greeting. His hands remained at his sides. It felt like we were already wasting his time.

We said our hellos, and my friend was given a quick nod of recognition. Andrei started to introduce me, but Nicolae stopped him and pointed a finger at the bag.

"Watchu got there?" he asked.

I opened it with clammy hands. "Just a bunch of shitty toys of my brother's."

“You got a brother?” At this his eyes bore deep into mine.

“Yes, I do.”

“And why’d you bring ’em here, if they’re not yours?”

Andrei and I glanced at each other. “We love to make fun of my brother. He’s got all these action figures, *ahem*, toys lying around the house, and all he does is play with them all day. He’s such a loser.”

The bag contained three figurines, chief among them Diamondhead—a huge, muscular guy supposedly made of diamond, with protective spikes jutting out from his back. I loved him because it seemed nothing could hurt him.

Nicolae took stock of the bag’s contents, like a customs officer hunting for smuggled goods.

My heart was pounding like a witch drum. The golden-haired enforcer lifted his gaze and looked me up and down for the first time. I didn’t know it then, but this was how it would feel to be a student taking an oral exam.

“He is,” he finally said, handing control of the bag back to me.

We chatted for a bit, and I tried a few tense jokes which went mostly ignored. The more time we spent with them, the more it seemed like what my friend had with these guys wasn’t real. I understood the need to belong—that’s why I’d chosen to help him that day—but I didn’t get why anyone would want to be friends with someone who didn’t allow them to be themselves. With me, Andrei was lively, and funny, and creative, and kind. He was the first boy I’d ever heard saying how much he loved to read. That day, he was holding so much of himself back. He’d smile, half-heartedly, at some passing remark of Nicolae’s, content to speak only when spoken to. I couldn’t wait for them to go.

When at last they left, the sun had sunk below the horizon, and the

shadows were starting to reclaim the land. My father would arrive shortly; I couldn't help feeling the whole day had been a waste.

We didn't bother going back inside. Finding a comfortable place in the grass, we sat watching the darkening sky. We didn't speak much, and whatever we did say felt stilted, forced. Like our conversation was corrupted by the shadow of those boys. As my eyes followed the gentle light bleeding into the fields, I got the sense that something had been lost that day.

Pretty soon, though I didn't know it yet, my friend would transfer to another school. We'd cross paths a few times over the years, but things would never be the same. Even so, as I finish typing these words, I find myself missing him. We last saw each other three or four years ago, after he messaged me out of the blue, and as we walked the same green fields again, their vastness diminished by buildings—brand new apartment blocks complete with asphalted alleyways and tiny parks for children, I couldn't help but think of all we destroy in order to survive.

Previously published on the Practice Space blog.

Andrei Atanasov (he/him) is a fiction author and memoirist from Bucharest, Romania. By trade a lawyer, his literary work has appeared in Every Day Fiction, Flash Fiction Magazine, Drunk Monkeys, and elsewhere. He would love you forever if you subscribed to his blog Practice Space, at practicespace.blog.

How to Burn Your Life to the Ground

by: Christy Tending

CW: Mentions of drinking, drug use, deportation

It started with a life that someone else tried to plan for me. Parts of it belong to me, but sitting in the cold and beige basement apartment that looks out on a garden I was not allowed to access, I do not belong to myself. There are some bits scratched out in the parts of the dirt no one else knows I'm trying to tend in my spare time. I am trying—tenderly, futilely—to grow it in the shade, to spare myself the shame when it fails.

Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti said, “We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth; there is not the slightest doubt about that.” On my good days, I try to believe him. To remember that he is a part of me. That I carry his heart and what he fought for in my back pocket.

If you are not afraid of ruins—if you want to follow my blueprint—here is how to burn your life to the ground:

First, major in poetry: that is what tilts the logs toward one another. It provides the pages that will ignite first and offer the dry warmth so that the rest goes up. Make grilled cheese

in your apartment after the bar closes and dance under the vaulted ceilings while you wait for the geometry to be just right.

I spent my days writing poetry on Muni through San Francisco, from the Haight to the Sunset, and back again. I barely studied for the LSAT practice tests and did well anyway. But I was clear with myself that anyone truly serious about burning a life to the ground would not, under any circumstances, actually go to law school. That is life-building shit. It can provide kindling, but not the spark necessary to actually ignite a life that was well-intentioned and designed to please. It was too tidy.

Go to Canada instead. Do not come home until you're deported, until you're dragged kicking and screaming off the bridge. Until you've learned enough that you can't unsee how untenable and ridiculous your little life is.

I permitted myself to be carelessly adrift in a world that seemed to demand that I be palatable and ambitious but also filled with self-hatred. I allowed myself to falter. I failed to live up to my potential. I left my partner alone for too long and was too smart for him. Burning your life to the ground involves drinking seriously, taking drugs effusively, and fucking around even though you are old enough to know better. Your mileage may vary.

Maybe it will take time to see what you need to burn; it took me years too long. I didn't recognize the broken clock at first, or the repetitive fights that demeaned the dreams I was trying, secretly, to grow.

Maybe it will take time to gather the materials. Without the right fuel, you'll just be burning holes in the soles of your shoes with your cigarettes, pretending that will keep you warm, walking out to the end of your block for a smoke until

you die, trying to hide the tar under your fingernails and letting that suffice for ignition.

To really burn your life to the ground, you have to let it engulf you. Only then will it split the seed of who you are meant to be wide open. You need to let it break your heart, to ruin you, until you're pacing the halls in the middle of the night, relearning how to move the human body in which you find yourself. Trust that you will re-teach yourself how to breathe once there's oxygen again.

I settled in among the ashes of what I had destroyed. Sifting through the rubble for a broken toy or a discarded baby tooth, I took stock of what did not burn. Noticed who brought a meal when I was standing in the hollow shell of my kitchen. I had to relearn how to feed myself amidst the unmistakable charred smell. I would wake up late and dry my tears on the hardwood floor of an apartment I discovered belonged entirely to me. My own scrap of borrowed real estate. I relished the thought that there was no going back to the predestined life.

I was no longer afraid of ruins. I had walked through the ruins of my own making and survived.

I vowed to belong to myself. But I want to tell my old self—and you, too: one day, you will walk into a room and all eyes will be on you. People will tug at your sleeve to ask questions and share their fretting. You will be the one facilitating the meeting the night before the protest, and you will be the one with the plan that everyone shuts the fuck up to hear.

Listen! You could hear a pin drop, I want to tell that sad self. And in the silence, there will be self-belief.

They will take the legal support form seriously because you were the one to press it into their hands. They will believe

you when you say that they are safe. You will tell them where the bathrooms are, and how to locate the exits in the event of an emergency.

I do not remember the moment when this shifted. I think it started with a match. But everything that matters survived the blaze.

Christy Tending (she/they) is an activist, writer, and mama living in Oakland, California. Their first book, *High Priestess of the Apocalypse*, is forthcoming from ELJ Editions in 2024. You can learn more about their work at www.christytending.com or follow Christy on Twitter @christytending. Tip them on Venmo at @Christy-Tending.

The Creature on Your Shoulder

by: Emmy
Teague

CW: STIs

You were young when it found you.

It was just casual experimentation. What young girl hasn't done a little double-part spellcasting when her boyfriend's parents weren't home? You didn't really do anything, anyway- there were a few lines crossed, but not that final line, so it was fine. You could still be considered an apprentice. Your wand stayed in your hand, your cloak ruffled with the runes but fastened in place. That relationship dissolved and you thought very little of your first forays into dual-casting, billing it as a somewhat silly experiment; neither of you knew what you were doing, anyway. It hadn't meant anything.

It isn't until nearly four years later that you feel something sting as you shower. Startled, you look in the mirror and there it is- a small creature settled on your shoulder. Its claws dig into your skin, its dark eyes watching you. Nothing you can do will make it explain what it is, but you know this is bad. This is very bad, potentially casting-ending entirely.

Your apothecary has very little good news. They've done the work, they've tested what they can, and this monster is here to stay. Its claws are buried in you and nothing will get

it out, the hold as strong as your own skin. *I thought you said that you hadn't done any dual-casting*, the apothecary says, examining your intake paperwork.

I haven't, you disagree quickly, then pause, remembering those early experiments. *I mean... we kept our own wands. It wasn't real dual-casting.*

It was enough, she disagrees, and that is that.

The monster fades from sight, with the correct potions and spells. You cannot see it, you can no longer feel the claws in your skin, but its weight is there every day.

And it grows heavier with every partner who discovers, when the dance of intimacy begins, that you have a creature of your own. Some of them are fine with it... supposedly. Often, you get no further than this point in the dance. You begin telling them earlier and earlier, and they begin to halt the dance more and more quickly. Contact with a creature can give birth to another. And who would want one of these digging its claws into them? You can't even blame these people for not wanting to take the risk.

Finally, you find a partner who doesn't mind. *A lot of guys would be bothered by that, you know*, he tells you. *I'm not, but a lot of people would be.* He is a good person, better than most, is what he means by this. You accept that, and the relationship continues from there.

You gave him his own link in the chain that binds you. When you grow a brain and manage to shatter those bonds months later, the creature's weight has bowed you over, and it is a very long time before you have the strength to even think about another partner.

Rejection follows rejection, but you refuse to pretend that the creature doesn't exist. You haven't seen it since the first

time it appeared, but its weight has never lessened. You have never been able to forget that it is there, and it feels like a piece of dirt you will never be able to wash away.

You find another partner, one who is funny, sweet, and kind. You tell him about the creature. You're in tears when you do. He assures you that it's fine, that he doesn't mind, that he still likes you. You wait, and he doesn't use this new knowledge as a knife to cut at you. He tells you for the first time that you're beautiful that night. He kisses you goodnight and calls you the next morning to discuss the next date. You wait, but the blade doesn't appear, and you think maybe you've found *something*.

Two days later, the two of you finish your dance. You are so happy, so comfortable in your skin. You have found someone who doesn't mind that the creature lives here and always will, that its breath ruffles your hair sometimes and you can feel its eyes boring into your skin.

And then, as you're catching your breath after the spells you wove together, satisfied and happy, your new partner tells you that the casting conjured nothing for him. *I'm sorry, he says, I was never able to forget about... it.*

The weight of the monster on your shoulder has never been so heavy. You can almost feel the claws, can see the dark eyes watching you, and you know, more than ever before, that it will never leave you. You hear yourself telling your now ex-partner that you're sorry, that you understand, that it's okay. You see him to the door. You hug him goodbye as he apologizes again. You close the door after him gently.

He does not call you.

You cry for days.

The monster can and will go nowhere. It is part of you, like the breath that tears its way out of your chest, like the blood you can feel pounding beneath your skin. It has been with you since you were a fumbling adolescent and will be there when you die a gray-haired elder. This thought makes you scream, and you go back to the apothecary.

I haven't seen it since the day you tested it to prove it was there, you say, knowing that you sound like you're begging. Are you sure it's there? You tell yourself that the weight you feel isn't true, that you didn't see what you thought you saw in that mirror.

The apothecary wasn't wrong, though, and here you are.

A television show comes out about people with creatures, how gross and creepy they are. You begin to notice how movies poke fun at people whose shoulders bow with the weight of these things, especially ones like yours. You hear your friends crack jokes about them, you see funny comics about them in newspapers. A dear friend tells you that they'd rather die than have a creature of any breed.

Your monster is invisible. These joking people, these friends who think they are being heard by like-minded 'clean' folk, have no idea, and you don't tell them otherwise... but you watch, and you listen. They don't believe that creatures would live on someone like you. You make mental notes and wonder to yourself how different the world would be if everyone's monsters were visible. You make excuses for why you haven't dated since the partner who was most assuredly *not* okay with the revelation about your condition. Your family promises that someday it'll be different, that someone will appear that won't mind. A monster-handler, if you will, someone to whom the claws aren't frightening.

You don't believe in monster-handlers anymore.

It is nearly a decade before you tell the last person about it. *Take your time*, you end the text. *I'd rather you be honest and head off now than later, I won't think worse of you.*

And it's true. You can't think worse of them if they save themselves. Your monster has nearly doubled you over now, and who would want this kind of a burden? You're afraid to look at your phone, afraid to face this latest rejection and the person you have only met three times but who holds a special call on your heart already.

Your phone buzzes.

I think actually a lot of people have that, he writes back. I heard once that something like forty percent of people have one and don't know about it. I like you, I'd like to keep seeing you, so I'll see you on Wednesday?

And you cry, for a different reason this time.

As you get older, you come to terms with this. Being a creature-carrier is not fun. It gets heavy. It is scary. It will always be there, claws buried in your skin and eyes watching you. There is nothing that anyone can do about that weight. There is no weapon, no potion or magic to take it away. It is like your bones, like your breath, the fire in your blood. There's no such thing as monster-handlers.

But there are people out there who will lean against you, help you carry the weight of the creature on your back. There are people who will carry you, too. And one day you will meet one, and they will tell you that the weight is not a burden or an inconvenience. Months will pass and you will not think of the dark-eyed creature with its claws buried in your skin.

Someday, the claws won't bite quite so badly and the weight? It will lessen until it almost feels like nothing at all.

Emmy is a bisexual disaster who is probably reading comics and eating leftover challah instead of writing. She has been published in *A Siren's Call*, *Roi Fainéant Press*, *Sad Girls Blog*, and *Hare's Paw* magazines, and has short stories in anthologies by *Dark Lake Press* and *Bag of Bones*. You can find her everywhere at [@yoemmyteague](#).

Assembly Hall, 2009

by: Sarah
Peecher

If I wrote

*a swaying crowd beneath a parachute
ceiling, lingering scent of popcorn and
pyrotechnics, echoes of funky Jesus
music from towering speaker stacks*

would you feel like you've attended that concert, too, even though
it's a half-sketch of the images from that night?

Maybe there's more to this memory than the concert itself, like the
streams of crowds winding the circumference of the venue, or the hill
of graveled snow I climbed with my friend in the parking lot.

Or her brother, a couple years older than us, in his moto jacket with
layers of pockets, offering his sweaty palm as I descended the hill.

Remembering how that touch felt electromagnetic, warm and particled.

An invisible aurora borealis arcing overhead, slowing time.

Snow wiped from jeans, a torn ticket stub stuffed into my purse,
the clunky van door handle, the texture of polyester, or the proximity
of his long eyelashes and rumpled hair as he pulled the seatbelt
across his body in the seat ahead of me.

And then I'm sitting, studying the nape of his neck, assembling the
shape of his shoulders in glances, my heart bounding like an arctic hare
toward my tingling fingertips, my friend chattering on and on.

Sarah Peecher (she/her) is a poet living and working in Chicago. She holds a Creative Writing MFA degree from Columbia College Chicago, and her recent work appears in *Allium: A Journal of Poetry & Prose*, *Bluestem*, and more. When she's not writing, you can usually find her obsessing over her container garden. Find her on Instagram at @sarahpeecher. Tip her on Venmo at @sarahpeecher.

i guess you could call this a love poem but i'm not pressed

by: n.l. rivera

CW: References to ambulances, paramedics/EMTs, and resuscitation

i'm probably not qualified to speak on it,
but i have to say that this shit with
spring and flowers and rebirth is
getting a bit tired cause

yeah sure it's a nice parallel to falling in love and
feeling all brand new and
beautiful, but i don't know,
to me at least, falling in love feels more like
being in an ambulance on one of those paramedic shows
and being everyone inside:
driver, paramedic, patient—

and i'm flooring the gas while
charging up the paddles and pressing them to my own
goddamn lifeless chest and yelling,
“come on, stay with me, kiddo! stay with me!”

and opening my eyes to carsickness and fluorescent lights and
an unfamiliar face and wondering
is this my second chance?

and at the same time turning to my buddy in the passenger seat
with a tired-yet-relieved smile
and laughing just once and asking him,
“mondays, amiright?”

i mean, sure flowers are nice and all,
and i mean no disrespect to those
that fall in love like a bud blooming open to the sun
for the very first time, but still,
there’s something to be said for love

that rips the air from your lungs
and hurtles down a local road. love that
makes everyone get else
get out of your fucking way,

for love that blows through red lights and never,
not ever,
not even for a second,
changes its mind
and eases off the gas.

love that shouts “clear!” just before
you bring yourself,
gasping,
back to life— i mean,

who wouldn’t want a love like that?

n.l. rivera (they/he) is a queer Latino writer living in New Jersey. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in Bullshit Lit, beestung, Spare Parts Literary, and elsewhere. Eventually he’ll develop a strong sense of identity, but until then, they plan to keep writing poetry. Online, he lurks on Twitter and Instagram @nlriversss.

The Seltzer Letters

by: Marshall
Moore

CW: Alcohol, police violence (not detailed), COVID

Lime Perrier:

You haven't encountered the phrase *taste level* yet because it won't become common in public discourse for another couple of decades, but you'll know what it means right away. Things will change. Taste will matter. This comes about not in spite of TV—which you'll watch more of than you might expect—but because of it. Your viewing habits will feel like a betrayal of books and of reading, of the crisp erudition you're trying to cultivate. The shows that influence the public's taste level the most are contests to find the next celebrity fashion designer, chef, singer, runway model, entrepreneur, drag queen. In fact, there are more competition shows for drag queens than anyone other than RuPaul could have imagined back in the '80s. I realize how little sense all this makes now, how strange it must sound, but people will come to speak of a dish or a dress or a look as being *elevated*. This is the language you're learning. The word is more than just a descriptor for your grades or your height or your opinion of yourself. For now, though, you're allowed to think the Perrier you walk around the dorm drinking from a wine glass is terrible. But try calling it *aspirational*. It's also *pretentious*, but we'll get to that. Remain stoic in your compulsion. If you can't bring yourself to love the effervescent astringency, you can at least aim to conquer it.

Here's another phrase you won't have heard yet but will recognize at the bone-marrow level: *generational poverty*. You can't be from the South without knowing it, without feeling it. Your grandmother's parents grew up in the rubble of the Civil War. The whole southeast quadrant of the country lived in the shadow of the aftermath, of Reconstruction, to the extent there ever was a reconstruction in anything but name. For your grandparents' generation, indoor plumbing was a luxurious necessity acquired in living memory. So was electricity. "When we got the electric light," is how your older relatives put it. Other family members grew up in converted chicken coops, in camper vans, in ramshackle houses that leaked like colanders when storms blew through. Even there at school where you are now, you've seen bars of soap in the washing machines—slippery mementos left behind by students who can solve quadratic equations in their heads but don't know how to use detergent. In time, you'll know what to do with your heritage. For now, you're allowed to find it vulgar and troublesome, to resent it for holding you back. If steeling yourself before you take that next sip of lime Perrier is what it takes to keep from being the country boy you know you're not, then go ahead and finish the bottle.

Clearly Canadian:

We should get the disclosures out of the way: you grew up guzzling Mountain Dew, Dr. Pepper, Pepsi, and the original formulation of Coke before the company went and messed it up. It will take them another couple of decades to come up with another good cola beverage, but don't worry about that now. From where I sit, this is fizzy, sugary overkill. The mere thought of all that soda makes my kidneys writhe. But you're in your twenties. Sugar doesn't scare you. Caffeine is a way of life. You know these drinks are rotting your insides even as you toss down another glass of diabetes and head back to the

fridge for a refill. You're still too young and too thin to worry about gaining weight, so let's set *that* concern aside for a decade or three.

A sweetened seltzer beverage from Canada will have nothing to do with you deciding to move up there someday if you can, nothing at all. But consider that tidal pull of generations who didn't finish high school, much less college; the bone-deep scorn for anything fancy, anything gourmet; the pride and contempt that accompany growing up in the part of the country that rebelled and fought and lost. You see all this and it's not for you. That heritage isn't your destiny. So what if this refreshing new beverage is basically Sprite in a pale blue bottle with a transparent label and a range of five or six flavors? It's tasty and tasteful and somehow that speaks to you and it tells you you're leaving someday: North Carolina, the South, the East Coast, the country itself. A succession of exits. The thing is, sweetening the seltzer changed everything and nothing. The lightness and clarity were there all along; this just expedited things. You'd have found your way to them sooner or later. Clearly.

Ásványvíz:

Budapest is difficult. When your train crossed the border between Austria and Hungary and the scowling passport inspectors came through, that mild tingle of alarm might have been a premonition. You had barely stepped off the train at Nyugati Station when a swarm of taxi touts descended. The one you picked tried to charge you the same amount in euros as the number of forints you owed him. Despite claiming not to speak English, he understood "fuck you." And the hotel, a converted ship anchored along the city's Danube promenade: charming online, grim and damp in real life, with a shared bathroom you know you wouldn't have booked and

towels the size and thickness of paper napkins. The Budapest tourism office referred you to a private apartment for a reasonable rent, but racing around the city to buy groceries and proper towels burnt your first day and a half to the ground.

You can't make coffee with seltzer. Let me be clear: this isn't Future You criticizing his two-decades-younger counterpart for stupid life choices. You've made plenty of those and will make more, but you're spending far too much time in Hungarian supermarkets picking up 2L bottles of what you hope is regular spring water and shaking them to see if bubbles form. There's a difference between agitation and carbonation. After two days, eight bottles of the stuff sit on your rented kitchen counter. Shopping in Paris, Amsterdam, and Vienna, which you visited on the first legs of this trip, was much easier. You've studied French and German and could figure out the Dutch. But Hungarian is nothing like English, and you're about eight years away from quick, accurate translation on your mobile phone. Think of this as a test run for expatriate life. Two weeks after you fly back to the States, you're off to Korea with no plans to return. To your credit, you've been studying Korean and can read a bit already, but if you were going to spend five days in Hungary, you should have checked online and confirmed that the tap water was not just drinkable but good. It's a victory when you finally find Evian, even if it means carting eight liters down Castle Hill one sultry afternoon. You will later tell bored friends how good coffee tastes when you brew it with Evian, and they will think—correctly—you're pretentious.

Alka-Seltzer:

Let's call your forties the hangover decade. Sorry. To come straight to the point, you are not going to like a lot of what

happens in this chapter of your life. As I've said once before, this isn't a blame thing. You start off with a health crisis that sees you lose about forty pounds (not that you had them to spare) and baffle every doctor you visit. They test you for everything: HIV, various cancers, things you've never heard of and you grew up reading medical dictionaries. Just when you get a proper diagnosis, get your system sorted out, you get illegally sacked (sorry) and have to take the university to court. The judge will force them to settle. Call it a win. The money's nice, but it doesn't compensate for the terror and stress. Your next job is better, at least until you find out the hiring manager is lying when he says your one-year contract will be renewable. And the job after that: rampant incompetence and a pay cut to boot. It keeps the rent paid and the lights on, and you like the students and most of your colleagues, but some days a pint at lunch is all that keeps you from running out the front doors screaming.

Things do get marginally better. The Ph.D. is a good experience inasmuch as getting a doctorate is ever a good experience, but the pressure is intense. And when the tear gas canisters start flying and the cops start beating people up and dragging them off the street in Hong Kong, where you spend the hangover decade, your wine intake ramps up in proportion to the violence in the streets. The first time this happens—in 2014—it's fairly benign, even kind of exciting. Hope hasn't died yet. The protest movement fails, though, and when things kick off again five years later, toward the end of the decade, the summer is an inferno of street fires and clashes with the cops. Scuffles turn into armed, organized combat. It's not just dangerous, it's terrifying, and you're close enough to the center of things to hear the darker stories months before they hit the media. It goes on for a year. So yes, you spend your forties intermittently hammered, and with reason. Plop plop fizz fizz. What a relief turning fifty is.

Generic sparkling water:

At the time of this writing, you're about a quarter of the way through the supermarkets' own-label sparkling-water decade, which seems as good a name for it as any. You're in England, which is interesting until it's not. Somewhere along the way, it comes to feel like daily life. Brexit and the pandemic (sorry) have led to labor shortages and supply-chain collapses, and bare shelves in supermarkets are the norm unless you shop at Marks & Spencer or Waitrose. You may never take eggs and bell peppers for granted again. Or seltzer itself, for that matter. Sometimes you can't find it. There's a CO₂ shortage, because why wouldn't there be? Other things you won't take for granted: Going out on weekends without needing to check first to see if it's safe. Going out, period, without needing a mask. If this suggests the decade is off to a frightening start, you're not wrong exactly, but there's a simmering indifference now, a bit of insulation. Things got worse but somehow failed to kill you. You're looking ahead and making alternative plans.

Back in your Perrier days, you were convinced your poisoned roots would never grow anything worthwhile. Turns out they did, albeit not in the way you imagined. Taste still matters but less than it used to; elevation is no longer about your height being measured by ticks on the kitchen wall. You've achieved the lightness you were always reaching for by setting things down, by dropping ballast. You should keep dropping it. And let's not dwell too much on the excesses of your forties: what happened, how you coped. You've spent a lot of time dehydrated from long-haul flights and other forms of fleeing. Deep fatigue is allowed. Besides, now that you're in your fifties, it's time to rehydrate. There's always a six-pack of something sparkling at the ready: Highland Spring, San Pellegrino, Buxton, or the generic stuff—whatever's in whatever store you're in. If we're being honest, one tastes a lot like the next: crisp and adequate, almost refreshing. So

take another sip and then another, and stifle the burp. Or be unabashedly vulgar and don't. You're exactly who you've always been, which is exactly who you were always going to be. Sorry about the spoilers, and the rest of it. Drink up.

Marshall Moore (he/him) is an American writer, publisher, and academic based in Cornwall, England.



L🙄VE

by: **Willow Critchlow**

Willow (she/they) is a 31 year old queer poet and published (although, perhaps fledgling) film photographer from Cape Town, South Africa. When not assembling stanzas at 3am you can find them on Instagram at [@willowoliviarose](https://www.instagram.com/willowoliviarose)

Twenties as Cowardice

by: evelyn bauer

CW: Abstract mentions of death and a ghost gun. Imagery that evokes disordered eating and possibly suicide. A mention of climate change.

I

Blessed be the obsolete
whaling, blighted wood, disposed cellophane
bless the voluptuous curves of the landfill.
Take one bite from that baguette & leave it to rot
in some forgotten pantry.
Sunlit consumerism begets midnight disposal,
as holy as any cathedral or clock face, the glistening air turns
purple over slow moving riverways
smog as the new censor, sheathed in plastic firmament blessed be!
Take an axe to old furniture & leave it streetside,
new cosmopolitan cactus on some synthetic knoll
growth drags along the skin
serrated, ten businessmen stare wild-eyed over a building edge
spotted fluttering lanternfly made new home in
WASP-y sensibilities blessed be the teeth of the masses,
crumbled for dentist-curiosity &
raw material brings endless profit blessed be the State:
held together by aging stucco & the stiff upper lip

of a once successful dressmaker
new saint of mercantilism bringing
cream soup with salt to taste
Once, people dreamt of moonlight
illuminating a mango tree,
now only the skin of things remains
a mellow spice left to blossom on cow's tongue,
take another breath before settling in
from the window: a perfect view of the city's expanse
a ribcage uncovered by melting snow
salesmen set off to un-crossed valleys in the distance
& people amble, blessed & askance
eyes darting toward unknown
botany & side streets littered with dark soil

Recipe: a tablespoon of white miso & a touch of dark soy sauce.
Spinach. Yellow amber from a distant land. A ghost gun made
from clear acrylic & a certain target.
Grated ginger, garlic, & a sense of shame. Escarole & raw
mustard. Combine ingredients in seven or eight copper pots,
stir on high heat. A door will open, peer into it.
The fridge is covered with mold.
Remove from heat & add a sheet of gelatin, wait for the invention of
electric cars or
an assassination for the new era,
newspaper articles with all the sordid details left in the rain.
Accompanied by an image of ten politicians
wearing strange tweed vests,

a telltale warning our time is up.
A shot of whiskey to settle the nerves:
one will need a cool disposition. Here comes a
regular visit from some teetotaler association
vowing to pull everyone off the teat.
There's nothing more you could wish for.
An infirmary for the new age! New ways to solve all problems!

Death provided to the masses for only a small fee!
From distant lands the very same scent wafts over us,
drives us to madness, no fantasy of escape.
Someone long ago sold all your senses
to the highest bidder & now we all pay the debt.
To know who is forbidden.
Time is up, anyway. Time is up.

||

I've taken to collecting many jars
of different colors, like shards of sea-glass
from childhood. Something to catch light
when placed before the
Window. A memory of something.
A clay pit baking under Massachusetts sun. A coffee
pot warmed by the fireplace. A list of other things,
other images, other memories, other people.
I believe it's time I enter the bedroom
& unmake sheets. Piles of string covering the floor,
it's a gambit few refuse to take.
What is it all for anyway. Preheat the oven
to 300 degrees for toasting the focaccia,
a diet of only stale foods & cardiovascular diseases.
This is America, keep my brownies sans walnut or else!
A culture of sickening health with no real intent.
Stretch Armstrong stretched 'til he snaps, whizzing
back across the room and leaving many
children with a bloody nose no we don't have a tissue,
make do with cling film or Saniderm, my apologies.
I installed a check engine light in my stomach & now it won't stop blinking.
& more unseemly fixtures of decline. Nothing to be done but

Organize my tbr stack into endless milkcrate variations.
Ensconce in black plastic. A burial of sorts—
a tenuous system. A closet left open & empty.
House sparrow felled like Walser in the snow,

we should all be so lucky.
May G-d show us all what they saw,
final image as blessings, as montage,
as New Wave Cinema. Workers get organized! Or touch lips
to porcelain & pray
Or visit a variety of new vintage stores surreptitiously
scattered through the city thirty dollar furs of medium quality
to soothe discontent & that'll do.
Fibers stay marinated in chemicals,
anti-fungal insecticides
or others, abstractly-scented— Mezzanine, Iota,
Fluorescence, Winterisms, & Charred
Radicchio, migraine-manufactory in every product.
Lately they've been promising endless summertime for the faithful.
Two degrees for the wealthy, five for everyone else.
We always have to share.
Bread and water suits me fine, as long as the bread is
hand-mixed sourdough & the water is ice cold
with a twist of lemon. Drug bust on my street pulled up
nothing but clover sprouts
they said they'll try again next week.
Rifle tucked away in a kitchen cabinet,
leave it all to the dogs. I'll be long gone,
unmeaning trans-Atlantic passageway.

Great blue heron gives waterlogged guffaw
& good marsh sensibilities.
On land pigeons cavort around a square in Paris,
exhausted but hand fed. Here the same hands
open a pack of Parliaments— silvers.
Cattracks and exhaustion lead to a
dusty apartment, fur wafting
over ventilation shafts & 70s wood.
The squash is still flowering, no fruit.
Pink pepper spilt on Formica counters.
Once, sunshine

Lifted spirits, ferried them out of the corners
like cobweb, rinsed them off, set them to follow
wood grain paths toward silo or window sill.
Something still provides warding or maybe
just darns socks & pours good espresso.
Not much more to ask for.
Highway evil hypnosis through rhythm
danceless messaging the thrum of movement
all sorts of other nothings pretend to bring
change but the problem is intentional.
Systemic brutish nasty &
organizational but don't take my word for it,
ask any modernish troubadour & you'll get the same response
& this isn't being testy or only a little.
I've never pretended to be a figurehead or an
intellectual but still step carefully & count every grain
of spelt before milling.

Property is theft & sort all that out.
Rent in the age of mechanical reproduction,
put that phrase in the missive & think of a
few others before bed. Everything feels pre-prepared,
infused & bagged, eternal. Maybe those
worth a damn have already been
martyred & weeds grow from their fingertips
or maybe just forsythia or maybe just ideals.

Ideally, we'd be
metamorphic & tempered by struggle,
pressure-built into strength but it's all weary now.
Soft. Another spin around the sundial .
I am thinking of a glass case full of
wing-pinned butterflies
& shatter.

evelyn bauer (she/her) is a writer and bookseller living on stolen land in so-called 'New England.' She is often found reading books and petting cats. You can find some of her other work at evelynbauerpoet.com, and her poetry has been published in such mags as Stone of Madness, fifth wheel, Moist Poetry Journal, and Heavy Feather Review. Peruse her twitter at @neo_cubist

boundaries

by: **Ami Patel**

What are boundaries?

The ghosts ask with curious eyes.
They skip into the kitchen
and open all the drawers
like the answer can be found there.

Flustered, I try to explain
as cans of beans flop and apples ruddy the floor.

*Boundaries are when someone
says no or not yet or asks
for what they need
and you agree, gladly,
with an openness in your heart.*

They look at me for a second too long
shimmy away to jump on my bed
and smack clothes off my hangers.
They're having more fun than I
ever do in this coffin of a home.

I want you to leave
I whisper into my arm
my own flesh swallowing my desires.

Ami Patel (she/her) is a queer, diasporic South Asian poet and young adult fiction writer. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee whose poetry is published in various places, including The West Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, and They Rise Like A Wave: An Anthology of Asian American Women Poets. You can find her at amipatelwrites.com. Tip her on Venmo at @amipatel84

Triangle:

An Enumerated List

by: Ocean Wei

CW:
Vague
allusion
to suicidal
thoughts

1. I am falling in love with triangles. The stability it symbolizes is the constant that I miss all my life.
2. My roommate sees shapes in people, and I am a scalene triangle. It makes sense: my shape is never well-adjusted. I am writing this at 1:39 a.m., eating the lemon raspberry ice cream our housemate bought. Four years became enough distance for him to take care of me like a child.
3. I hang the blue post-it with a scalene triangle on the door. It lies alone; my roommate cannot see her own shape.
4. Another housemate writes on her whiteboard: "Stop. Before you enter the room, are our shapes compatible?"
5. My roommate says that she didn't know shapes could be compatible.
6. I don't believe in astrology, but lately, I have been asking everyone for their sun, moon, and rising signs.
7. If there is an earthquake or a thunderstorm — more likely, a tornado — seek shelter. If no shelter is available, make a triangle.

8. In case of an emergency, make yourself a triangle.
9. Someone once told me that under the one-child policy, each family unit is a triangle. Perhaps I was the side that held it together. I hope not.
10. It feels good to be a triangle. Just enough acuteness to keep bullshit away. I don't want to be palatable.
11. Please don't call me idealistic. I am a poet, after all.
12. My mother would have wanted me to be a circle. She thinks it would keep me alive longer. Sorry.
13. My friends want to make triangular earrings to replace my crescent ones. That would be good. Poets had been whispering about the moon for too long — how can you not? She gazes right back.
14. R. told me that one to five percent of the population cannot visualize things. A condition called "aphantasia." Sometimes when I think about you, I "see" shadows of triangles.
15. I have always related roofs to triangles. I have always wanted to sit on roofs, to be the one with crows and vultures. I have always wanted to jump off roofs.
16. I hated geometry. Had no idea how I passed it.
17. A surprising amount of people I know have synesthesia. Some of them see colors in people, some see numbers, and some see shapes. Some say everyone has synesthesia to a degree. I like triangle people. They make me feel safe.
18. My favorite ice cream flavor is mint chocolate chip. The chocolate chips are triangles.
19. Triangles are exhausted. I drag my ass through classes and five-hour shifts. I feel like throwing up, so I drink two cups of vinegar

- mixed with water. I feel better and go on editing papers.
20. I feel like turning the angle around and stabbing my own heart.
 21. I am melodramatic. I am a poet, after all.
 22. I don't believe in soulmates. What do two triangles make, a fucking rectangle?
 23. If I was born two-dimensional, I would be a triangle.
 24. I wouldn't say that I am in love with this shape.
 25. My legs are in constant pain, as if something sharp is stabbing them; especially my knees, especially on stairs.
 26. Triangles seem to be associated with "hurt." I imagine picking a triangle — an imagery shape that does not exist — and slicing open my vein.
 27. Triangles can never be as whole as circles.
 28. Triangles represent the union of body, mind, and spirit.
 29. I used to say that my body does not match my mind, but that was the old days, a grossly distorted understanding of bodymind.
 30. When I was alive, I aimed to be tender and whole.

Ocean
Wei (he/
him) is a
trans writer and
a senior at Kenyon
college. Find him on
Twitter and Instagram at
@_oceanwei.

Check and check

by: Eben
E.B. Bein

for you

CW: Death

Going on an adventure with my Florida man
says the caption in the last Facebook post
she'll ever make. In the picture, they are wearing
real smiles and their no-good motorcycle helmets.
She did not take the picture from above
to slim her body. She holds herself
to him tight, smiling.

I'm thinking about unfairness
and of course, I'm thinking about you, mom
because today, the day after my bandmate passed,
you did not use her death
as you have used your own
to make your stand. Instead,
you've texted me: *Check and check*

like when I was four
and scared of sleeping and I would ask
will you check and check? because
I wanted to be sure you would come back
when I was asleep, that you would check
and check and I'm crying as I write this because

you still do. You still check on me
and there is nothing like 37-year-old
death, death by adventure
death pressed to new love after years of singledom
wanting and finally getting and the dying
my dear singer friend, more hours
on the mic with you than almost ...
but yes! I will double you on the chorus
and yes! I got that one harmony
that crosses up while you go down
yes! I will fly to Florida, sing it at your funeral because
mom will check on me, yes, she
who taught me to sing
in the round—a sturdy weft that still dies
but first goes on
and on.

Eben E. B. Bein (they/he) is a biology-teacher-turned-climate-justice-educator. Their poems can be found in the likes of *Nimrod Journal* and *New Ohio Review*, in their chapbook *Character Flaws*, or at ebenbein.com. They live on Pawtucket land (Cambridge, MA) with their husband, where they are completing their first collection about parent-child estrangement, healing, and love.

Ghost Grief

by: **Ana Marie Boyd**

CW: COVID-related memories and anxieties

My physical therapist was the one who hugged me when my thirteen-year-companion cat died.

It was a pandemic-death. Many of us know the kind now, the kind that we would come to find out there were no high-vault sanctuary ceilings to hold the echoes of our tears for, the type that a resounding Ave Maria could not attend to this time. However, she sent her condolences and was genuinely sorry that she could not make the trip, asking that we please keep her in mind for when it became safe to gather in vestibules again.

It turns out Maria is a really honorable woman, and she did the right thing by taking care of her health and canceling her trips. But God, we missed her. I missed her when my losses became too many for a holy candle arch.

And what irony would become our lives, it turned out? That we could do things like heal each other by staying away? That Maria could love me by not brushing arms with me anymore. And, did we invent a new kind of love in the pandemic? Did we call it loneliness when maybe it was the deepest love of our lifetime: a love rooted in sacrifice, in willingness?

There were no houses for grief like ours in the past three years.

The ghosts lamented this. Lamps crashed inside empty houses, the results of Ghost Grief, parapsychologists said, a kind of grief that floated as spirits looked for long corridors to fly through so that they could leave a chill in the air for the ones they loved and had left behind. It was at least something they could do. We all want to put our anguish somewhere. Suddenly, they could no longer find the ones they loved because everyone had run for shelter almost overnight. And so the ghosts grieved. They sang their Grief Songs and threw discretion to the wind with their mighty nightly howls. I think the ghosts were probably kind of pissed that no one was inhabiting the houses they wished to haunt. I really don't blame them. We all lost things, including the ghosts.

There were no houses for grief in the past three years.

All of us were brought to a new precipice in our daily lives and public service jobs of questions like, *Should I spend an extra minute with the grocery store attendant? They are the glue that is now holding our community together, or Should I infuse an elevated amount of attention today during my 100th walk this week, to the elderly woman who is looking at me longingly from across the street divide where we are social-distancing from even the passersby now? And will it be a quick smile or a long one, just in case her night is long?*

What are the new lines of my professional regimes, and are they the same? Perhaps the lines with colleagues have a slight blur that they never had before, now that the world is shut inside their homes, many of them completely alone. As a community, were we to ask the same old questions? Or were we to make the questions new? Maybe it made sense to have food delivered to the woman we didn't know but hadn't seen exit her house in four days.

My physical therapist was already working on my body every

week, so when I appeared to her one early morning, the only human I had shared a room with since Clarence's passing, I bowed my head and wept. "My cat d-d-died," I stammered.

When you aren't used to being around humans, I can tell you that it's anyone's guess what might come out the first time that you are. And there was a new resounding of words in public spaces because not only did my cat die, but he died in a pandemic. And that was a new phenomenon. Now, things were not only dying, but they were dying in pandemics. And so I beg the question again, *Are the social protocols the same when we are suddenly placed in front of a communal catastrophe?*

As we were all trying to hold it together one morning at work, one of my students walked into school during the Limited-In-Person-Instruction that we provided during the pandemic for kids who were high-risk. She walked in with a shaved head and a vacant look. I remember my stomach sank.

This was the student that, for the past four months, I had been hand-delivering fantasy-genre books to at her house out in rural Coburg that couldn't receive internet access. I had many concerns about this student and what isolation would mean for them, so I invented a new norm: I drive-by delivered books to her doorstep because she loved to read, and I at least wanted her to have books to look forward to. I guess they were kind of like an offering, like a We're-Still-Here-and-You're-Still-Here kind of thing. Regular rituals are a way to show people (and ourselves) that we are still here and that some suns will always set close to the same time.

I remember that morning she arrived at school for an in-person class, in what felt like a frailer version of herself. Her hair was shaved off. I remember immediately saying quietly to myself, *Did you shave your head because it feels like the end of the world? Because I wouldn't blame you if you did. Truth is, I've considered it myself.*

And maybe the main difference between our pain Before and our pain After is that Now the whole world knew it.

We couldn't be the Culture-Who-Is-So-Good-At-Faking-It anymore in a pandemic reality because our secrets were being exposed without us. And all I found myself doing was trying to chase the sky and catch the secrets like handkerchiefs blowing in the wind.

"This is my father's coat," she told me that morning when she arrived. "He smoked too many cigarettes and died." As I said, when you aren't used to being around humans, I can tell you that it's anyone's guess what might come out the first time you are.

"I missed you," I stated simply.

She smiled her sad smile.

"I cut off my hair. I just want to travel lighter," she finally said to me, very matter-of-factly.

"Good for you," I answered.

And then I walked out of the classroom and into the restroom where I could have my privacy, and I fell to the ground and howled like a ghost.

Ana Marie Boyd is a poet, writer, and educator who lives in Eugene, Oregon. Raised in a multiracial and multigenerational home, her writing proudly incorporates her Spanish-American culture and explores themes around grief/loss, community-love, and reckoning. Her writing has been published in Bee Infinite Publishing's Future Splendor and literary magazine All My Relations.

Last Watermelon of the Season

by: Vanessa Y. Niu

CW: Sickness

My mother tells me she feels like she is dying & to take the watermelon out of the freezer. It is the last hot day of the year until next May and she tells me the watermelon might be ruined if it is frozen. I am considering another trip to the ER as a car passes out window blasting Lil Nas X and the bar downstairs switches tracks to Whitney Houston—take the watermelon out—knife into cold soft flesh—down and over—it is ruined, yes. *I feel like I am dying.* I put a piece in my mouth and its juice drips into the sink. *I'm not going to the ER again. Throw the watermelon out if it is ruined.* I slice it into squares and wonder if it is cancer, wonder how many weeks until the hospital gets back to us about our appointment. *I am slowly rotting away.* The hot days make it worse. Today is the last, I remind her—packing the watermelon cubes into a glass container—the forecast days 60s and 70s the entire rest of the month. Do you think—I stop, not wanting to say the word cancer, worried it is like a curse, a taboo word, a summoning spell. Do you want some watermelon?—*Turn on the fan, please.* There is witchcraft & heavy percussion & synths in the air. *I think I am going to die.* I say hospital and hope it has the same effect as dying or the unspoken cancer, then watermelon. The juice soaks into my fingers and I press the discarded shell into itself, say bend—the cubes go in the fridge—stay. *Throw them out.* We will eat them together. She turns away—nothing more of summer.

Previously published by No Tokens.

Vanessa Y. Niu (she/her) is a first generation Chinese-American spoken-word and page poet who lives in New York City. She has written text for the modern composition scene at Juilliard and Interlochen, and can be found at the opera house, a slam-poetry session, or attending open physics lectures when not writing.

disassembled

by: **Dianna Morales**

My mother doesn't know.

There are so many aspects of my soul that she does know.
The taste of my food. The shape of my heart. The press of my
hand against her back. The warmth of my love. The chill of my
apathy. The melancholy of my mind. The words of my mouth.
still—

my mother does not know.

She knows why I have a scar on my middle finger and she
knows why I dropped out of college the first time and she
knows what my favorite book is and she knows why I don't
drink and she knows who my best friend is and she knows
how I feel about my father and she knows what I think
about religion and she knows why I dropped out of college
the second time and she knows where I was when I lost
myself and she knows who I want to be and she knows what
television show the quote on my arm is from and she knows
when I am struggling to survive and she knows it will pass as
it always does.

Still—

she doesn't know.

We talk on the phone once a week and she doesn't know.
She holds me close to her, her body which created mine, and
she doesn't know.

Every breath in and out and in and out and in and out and
she doesn't know.

She calls me a woman—
because she does not know.

Dianna Morales (they/them) is a young, queer Mexican-American writer residing in Austin, Texas. Dianna's work has been published in The Field Guide Magazine, Chinchilla Lit, Dream Glow Magazine, CERASUS Magazine, The Rhizomatic Revolution Review, and has one poem forthcoming in Passengers Journal. Most importantly, Dianna is also very fond of cats. Find more of Dianna on diannamorales.com.

Stranger

by: Jūlijs Avotnieks

Emīls slung an arm around my shoulder, dragging me out of my thoughts. The crisp air hit my face from the first step out of the big metal bird I had been stuck in for the past few hours. We were finally back home after years of being away.

Except this was no longer my home. Hearing the Latvian words from strangers around me was weird and almost foreign. My tongue was used to forming these same sounds, but my ears were not used to hearing them from anyone other than my family.

I walked through the airport in a haze, unsure how I made it from one place to the other. Emīls kept hold of my arm the whole time, all too aware that as soon as he let go, I would disappear.

I finally jumped out of the haze when we walked through the automatic doors leading out of the baggage claim. Our grandparents were waiting, eager smiles resting on their faces. Grandma was holding a sign with both our names neatly written out. Grandpa was holding a small bouquet of lavender.

Emīls let go of me to run to them and envelop them in one of his tight hugs. I trailed behind. I could not remember the last time I talked to my grandparents. Expecting nothing, I was surprised when rough hands pulled me into a warm hug.

“For you, Madars,” Grandpa said, handing me the lavender. “I remembered that it was your favourite.” I stared at the purple buds in silence. He was right; they had once been my favourite, but now their smell cloyed my senses. It was all too much. A bitter taste filled

my mouth, and my eyes stung. I would not survive this trip.

At the house, I ran upstairs to my old room without thinking. Emīls stayed downstairs to talk with our grandparents while I listened to their voices float through the walls. Nothing had changed. Mum's old books sat on the shelf, a layer of dust covering them. The dark bed sheets still smelled of the same washing powder Grandma had used for years. Drawings that Emīls had made were still neatly stuck to the wall.

It was late by the time the house quieted down. Emīls slowly creaked the door open, trying not to wake me. I sat up, staring at him until he noticed.

"Jesus," He yelled when he saw me, one hand clutched to his chest. "I didn't think you'd still be awake."

"Let's go walk."

Emīls was reluctant to agree. He did not want to go out on such a night. The wind was picking up, and the smell of rain was in the air, but he would not let me go alone.

I closed the doors behind the soft snores of my grandparents and took a good look at my neighbourhood. Behind me, Emīls was struggling to find the sleeves of his jacket. I took a deep breath and walked down the brick path that led to the gate.

It was strange how a place you no longer considered home could be so familiar. I still knew where to turn to find the path hidden beneath tall grass that led straight to the forest. I still knew where to find the small patch of grass where orange lilies bloomed every year without fail. I still knew how to find the open field where I could spend some uninterrupted time away from everyone.

We waded through the flowers and grass until it got short enough to lay out the blanket I had brought.

“Why did we have to come back?” I let the words get carried away by the wind, but Emīls still caught them. There was a long pause as he thought about it. The chirping of the crickets and the whistling of leaves on trees filled our silence. I lay on my back and watched the stars slowly twinkle back into existence.

He started slow and careful but sped up as he went along, the words practically jumping off his tongue. “We promised Mum we’d come back for the summer. You know how much she loves this place. But also, it’ll be good for you to get some better memories. I know it’s probably too late for you to ever call this place your home, but maybe there’s still time for it to carve a place in your heart. I know that’s what it did for me.”

Silently, I let the tears leak out the corners of my eyes and form streams down my face. My chest heaved as I tried to control the sobs that forced their way out. Emīls noticed and grabbed me in a hug. He didn’t say another word; he just waited for me to stop crying.

Scenes from the past flashed behind my closed eyes.

A teacher looked down at the attendance list and then back at me, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion. The only sounds I heard were Emīls’s comforting murmurs, but I still remember what she had said that day. There’s a girl’s name here,—. My dead name cut through me like a knife. Even now, years later, it still haunts me. Hearing it made me feel invisible, but also as if I was standing directly underneath a spotlight. It says you’re a girl. I’m sorry, but I must follow my list, even if you ‘claim’ that you’re a boy.

The day we left Latvia, I did not shed a single tear. While my parents suppressed glistening tears, I suppressed a smile. A new start was exactly what I was looking for. A place where no one knew me; where the language did not give strangers ideas about my gender; where I was finally going to be free.

He did not try to placate me with words about how the situation had

improved. I did not need to hear that. He kept holding me until the tears stopped flowing, and for some time after that.

The sounds of the night started to fill the silence. A dog howled in the distance, and another answered its call. Wind wove through the tall grass, pushing the strands one way and the other. A lonely plane made its way through the sky, leaving behind a white streak.

I let the words linger in my mind a bit before offering them to Emīls. “I’ll try.” I owed it to my past self to move on as much as possible.

We walked back together, footsteps in sync.

Slowly, the good memories erased the dark ones. The glint of the spoon dipping into the chicken broth as Emīls told one of his jokes again; the splash of the waves as we ran through the cold water on the beach; boisterous laughter as we tried to help Grandma with her cooking.

When the time came to leave again, I was not suppressing a smile. I was desperately holding back my tears. They poured over as the plane hurtled down the runway and lifted off into the air.

“We’ll be back,” Emīls said while pulling me into a hug. “Next year will come sooner than you think.”

Jūlijs Avotnieks (he/him) is a young trans writer who has lived all over the world. When he isn’t writing or drowning in work, he enjoys reading and running.

Untraditional

by: **Melissa Ren**

“Jason and I are getting married this weekend.” A wave of nerves crashed in my gut.

My mother fell silent on the other end of the call. I checked the phone screen in case we got disconnected. The timer ticked away.

0:59

1:00

1:01

My chest tightened.

“At city hall,” I announced. “We already scheduled it. Saturday at 10 AM.” I paused. When she didn’t respond, I blurted, “Nothing fancy—”

That’s the worst thing to say to a Chinese mother. She had waited thirty-two years for the matrimonial Tea Ceremony. She likely drafted a guest list for the reception, and a seating chart to go with it. Hell, she bought a cheongsam, despite me never confirming my intent to marry until now.

“Just show up—” I winced. Like some nobody? “I mean, I’d love if you and Ba came.”

Still, she said nothing.

My eyes bulged. “I’m not pregnant! If that’s what you’re thinking.” I gripped my forehead. Why was this so hard? “Jason

and I wanted something intimate with just family.”

The custom was to have a formal affair. Breaking tradition in a Western context evoked a free spirit. But to my family, the lack of celebration insinuated embarrassment, either of my future husband or of them. My heart heaved.

Her hefty breath pierced my ear.

“I’m sorry, Ma.” My voice cracked. “I know this isn’t what you imagined.”

She cleared her throat. “You can have Poh Poh’s ring if you like.”

Melissa Ren is a Chinese-Canadian writer, and editor at Tales & Feathers. Her writing has appeared or forthcoming in Factor Four Magazine, MetaStellar, Solarpunk Magazine, Fusion Fragment, and elsewhere. Follow her on Twitter & Instagram at @melisfluous or find her online at linktr.ee/MelissaRen.

sound and color

by: **Jonathan Chan**

my father was thirty-five when my mother
had me. always, he would speak of how he

started late, apartment already signed
to his name. i am twenty-six, trying to reverse

engineer all the sums and woes that go
into a child. how many payslips stack

to form a modicum of independence.
how is an old-new not the same as

stagnation. a writer writes that therapy
is cheaper than moving out. living with

your parents at thirty is nothing unusual.
the housing market is going crazy.

the rental market is going crazy.
why hedge when the recession begins

to arch its back and there are only so few
jobs available to earn a kind of life. one

person removes their instagram posts on
crypto. another person writes in their

linkedin profile their passion for making
an impact. they spin and they cycle and

they climb. we count down the days to
marital pageantry and geriatric pregnancies.

we count down the ways one can make
due with only the fringes of adult life.

frittered away in the din of night,
i sat, reading, for sound and for color.

Previously published by Quarterly Literary Review Singapore.

Jonathan Chan (he/him) is a writer and editor. Born in New York to a Malaysian father and South Korean mother, he was raised in Singapore and educated at Cambridge and Yale Universities. He is the author of the poetry collection *going home* (Landmark, 2022) and Managing Editor of *poetry.sg*. More of his writing can be found at jonbcy.wordpress.com. Tip him on Venmo at @jonbcy or PayPal at @jonathanchan1256.

The Show Must

by: **Travis Flatt**

CW: A character has a seizure

The stage pistol fizzles and the blank sputters inchoate. Just a wettish pop—no flash, no bang. Pregnant silence, which I stagger backwards to fill, tripping over my boots and tumbling butt-ward toward the boards. Time slows to “No!” motion, that peculiar, hovering accident time. Laughter from the house greets my unintended slapstick. My lower back catches the cushion of an upstage chair and it shrieks away in protest, a shabby, pink antique wing with fraying arms.

[Black out.]

And I sit in the dark, spinning.

The theater gambles every time I’m cast. I flicker on and off when startled, flustered, or shocked. Lee, the Epileptic Actor. I warp through untold seconds of a seizure’s gray-void nowhere. The stage manager grasps my arm, and hoists me from where I’ve sat slumped like an empty puppet.

Are you okay?

Unsure where I am but swimming up toward it, I sputter and break through to the surface, coming to life backstage surrounded by the thickly made-up actors, ghoulish by ghost light. Everyone’s draped in pearls and lace, tuxedos, pill or top hats. The warehoused costumes reek of dust and mold.

Can you go on?

If we stop the show, that’s all she wrote, folks: don’t bother to audition again, Lee. If the show must, I must. I count backward from

twenty while someone wraps gauze around my shoulder, though this is merely stage medicine: I've just been shot, after all.

Hold still.

I throw a thumbs up at the stage manager, and ask her to point me in the direction of the stage. We're at "places" now and I'm walked to the wings. Time's skipping like a scratched CD. Take a deep, shuddery breath and enjoy a moment of backstage ambient music: muffled coughs and shuffling programs. I lean into my co-star.

What happens in this scene?

My co-star thinks I'm joking; I've never been more terrified. Oh shit. Is this the part where I'm in the police car or the jail cell? Or—

[Lights up. Enter RICHARD wearing a bandage and escorted by MAJOR GREEN.]

For the next hour, I open my mouth in the direction of my co-star(s). Words exit my lips, thank God, though I couldn't tell you which ones. Afterward, they insisted I was brilliant. I don't remember a thing and apologize profusely. This they laugh off, embarrassed, and tell me not to be ridiculous.

Don't be silly, Lee, that was crazy.

When they say "crazy," their mouths mean "brave," not the ableist slur, but have you noticed what their eyes suggest? How they regard me? This is how they'll look at me tomorrow. And tomorrow. And tomorrow.

Travis Flatt (he/him) is an epileptic teacher and actor living in Cookeville, Tennessee. His stories appear or are upcoming in JMWW, Heavy Feather Review, HAD, Bull, Rejection Letters, Door is a Jar, and other places. He loves Shakespeare, dogs, and Shakespearean dogs.

Tell Me, Bad Decision

by: **Ajinkya Goyal**

The day I met you, I warned myself not to fall for you. But you see, that's just it. You were an unattainable ideal whose embrace I desperately wanted to be enveloped by. A fire that would allow me to escape, but leave me singed nonetheless, a lingering reminder of the mistake I so gladly made. You were a mirage of elusive perfection so still and beckoning that I almost didn't want to come too close for fear of seeing it dissipate. But, of course, I did. Unattainability only amplifies yearning, and truly, what are we without a little Yearning?

I often joke about having two minds: one that does the thinking and produces the most logical path of action, and one that disregards this conclusion in favour of leaping wildly from one bad decision to another. It is the latter that often controls my actions. Whether this is fortunate or not, I do not yet know. So, Bad Decision, I leave this one to you. Let me know when you have an answer.

Ajinkya Goyal writes speculative and gothic fiction, along with smatterings of fluff and angst thrown in for good measure. Their work is strewn across the written word, screenplays, and comics, but they probably spend more time daydreaming about their stories than they do writing them. He attempts a stab at the mortifying ordeal of being known on innocentlymacabre.com, and you can support his work on ko-fi.com/ajinkyagoyal.



Filling station

by: **Mark Myavec**

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