



Flail House Press

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Foreword

Dear reader,

As I am sitting here editing the final touches into this issue of our magazine, I am full of both love and adoration. The idea to create a literary magazine came to me when I realized that there were so many incredible and talented people in this world who do not get enough recognition for the art they create. With *Flail House Press*, and the help of the dozens and dozens of our friends, writers, and supporters, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope this issue finds you well and I hope that the voices you hear throughout these pages resonate with you, reader. Thank you.

With love,

Richie Vincent

Thank you all for experiencing
this for us.

We are just as afraid as you are.
All the love in my heart goes
out to you

for choosing to survive with us.

Solidarity forever,

Tyler King

Edited by Bailey Fox, Tyler King, and Richie Vincent

Little Death Boy
By Ayesha Alexander

Flitting from
your back
bone to your
collar bone

from the
feral depths
of your
calves

to the
achilles in
your ankle

carrying on
by sound
rippling over
oceans

a shadow with
a burning
orange circle
near the
lips

pale skinned,
Ill, little death
boy, melancholy

orgasms 3
times every
Sunday

lies in
Stillness to
praise the
blood running
from the
stop lights

in the palms
of a liars'
hand
Sunday.

We raise
one for
God, but
God doesn't
appreciate it

neither do
the sheets

little death
boy fell asleep
at the wheel

and I still
cradle him
between
my thighs

little death
boy goes to
the bathroom
when his
fingers
dance

relieves himself

and I still
want to
cradle him
little death
boy kills me
and I let him.

Projectors

By Christopher Costello

We communicate in gestures. You, running
your shy fingers over the wisps of hair on my chest.
Mine dancing to tell you the hallway is empty.
The long goodbye, hugging behind the door, half-open,
Your back tenses under me when the building creaks,

I try to turn my voice into something you might fall asleep to.
Your heart thuds against me, I adjacent myself to the sound.
There's a civil war inside your chest, and I am nothing
like a peace treaty. But here, now, you have named me ceasefire.

We spend a lot of time in the back rows of movie theaters
but all I can do is watch you watching. You study the male leads
like an etymologist, freezing them under the glass of your gaze,
pulling off their wings with the delicate precision of a lover.

When we get home, which is to say my apartment,
you practice walking like them, squaring your shoulders
clenching your jaw. It makes me laugh, which makes you laugh
and then we collapse into each other, rolling on the floor, fighting
to breathe. We clear the tears from each other's eyes, but the next day
I find you in front of the mirror again.

Having skin is a lost art practiced by old masters
none of us have been able to imitate.
You have been told that I am clarity
but the sound of my shattering reveals
what a poor substitute I am.

Pressing your lips against the cool glass
of my face is a burning reminder of what
you forgot. Open me and find me empty
at least I am emptier than you.

From up a bur oak

By Samone Jones

there is blood in the right eye of the
south-country brown boy
and there are stray threads of rope in the left

he crouches naked in the pigweed
while a doe pisses a circle around his feet

dirty geese march one after
another along the ring
each nipping at the tail-feathers
of the goose before it
exposing crusted pink bottoms to
the cold marsh air

the bloodiest-mouthed throws its beak to
the sky and wails

“boy brought himself to the lynching
and his bones gon’ bring the others”

the flock screeches and honks
“we’ll pick him clean
we’ll pick him clean”

the doe wades deeper into
the marsh on shaky legs
while south-country brown boy shovels handfuls

of dirt and piss and pigweed
into his mouth
hoping to swell heavy enough
to drown

Who wants her china?

By Lexie Stepro

I want to remember this.

You might be dead when I come back in two days,
but for now I will focus on the pink fans
in your Christmas tree, the popsicle stick
snowflakes and the Angel tree topper- the magic
resting against the hospice walls redecorated with home.
For now, I will take turns eating the cordial cherries
left by your great-great-grandchild. You promised
her you would eat them all. Sleeping skeletons can't eat
but we want her to believe in that kind of miracle,
in paper skin returning to youth and endings
that are peaceful, in shallow breath that can hold
the weight of a century. I want her to believe
in the ice cream you kept in the freezer drawer,
in the rose-shaped soaps and long dining room table,
in always bringing as much as you can with you.
I can't imagine you'll hear me any better now,
but I will tell you anyways. The nurses told us
that the hearing is the last to go.

01.11.2019

By Nicole Gruszka

I went to my grandparents' graves -
those that I knew
and those I was born too late to miss -
and I lit candles nestled in glass and plastic lanterns on
their tombs.
I stood silently for a moment,
gloved hands holding each other at the small of my back,
hit with the stark realization of,
oh
I'm supposed to be praying right now
or at least I should feel something

navigating the narrow alleyways of cobblestone, grey
granite, dirt where grass does not dare grow,
my aunt and godmother's faces illuminated by thousands
of glass and plastic lanterns,
brows relaxed by the sort of confidence only attainable
through decades of mourning
I wonder if I, too, walk as though I've always known how to
navigate this overcrowded cemetery
or if my foreignness is written on my face as plainly as
belonging is written on theirs

I've waxed poetic for years about the burden of feeling
not-quite-American
but I should be home right now
I should be fine
I shouldn't feel like I'm playing at something that I have
known for my entire life
But I don't know it -
I never have,
Not really

I know this place and its rules and norms the same way
my cousin Sebastian,
with his years and years obsessing over John Wayne
westerns,
knows how to drive from one side of Houston to the other
Poland - not Warsaw, but the parts of Poland where the
forests are thick,
where the families can trace their relationship to their
neighbors back at least to the First World War -
has never before existed for me in a way that is tangible,
only in overheard fragments of drunken nostalgia at dinner
parties I never wanted to attend
or as a rebuttal in a heated argument,
never as a place where I come home to an apartment
reeking of coal smoke
after exchanging pleasantries and weather small talk with
the blue aproned woman who sliced my deli meats
or after spending hours taking notes in a cathedral older
than even the idea of America

I shouldn't feel like this
I'm not entitled to it -
not the way someone whose tongue could never wrap
around the hills, valleys, and whispering brooks of my
mother's maiden name is,
not the way someone who has never been here is,
hasn't spent their life mirroring the rituals of
is

as I walk through this cemetery, I walk over the bones of
the people
who taught my father how to drive a car
who tutored my sister in math
who picked wild strawberries in the forest for hours only to
gift them to a much younger version of myself
and I feel almost nothing
little more than a sense of duty and this unshakable
dread,
that perhaps I don't belong here
that I am not shaped from this clay the way that my
parents always told me I was

selfishly enough, this is what finally pricks tears at my
eyes,
but this is a day for mourning the dead.
the tears wetting my cheeks translucent, honey-golden in
this light
endow me with the aesthetic of belonging
of appropriate participation
that always, *always*
eludes me

Start buying your own condoms.

By Lexie Stepro

My skin's been going from purple to yellow,
I've been watching it shift between shades
under the interior lights of my car. My skin
won't look like skin again for two weeks
and by then I'll be a full week late,

I would hesitate at the doctor. I'd let them play me videos
to change my mind, I'd sit through the pre-abortion therapy.
I'd let the woman outside the clinic lay her hands on my shoulders/
pray over me/touch my stomach/speak in tongues. I'd tell
her about the bloody tissue I found between my legs a year
ago and I'd let her name the new pit redemption.
I'd picture two different men while she speaks-

The boy with black hair that pulled me under his blankets
and dared me to show him how not to drown in them.
The television that sounded like white noise and the time
we lifted the weight of our history so close to a dying body.
I admit that we are strangers now.

The man with sandy blonde hair that told me I was a sign
from his God, that anointed in a holiness the Earth
had not given him. When he told me I was soft, that he was alpha
and omega, first and last. He said he could spit the patriarchal
cross down my stomach and make me like it.

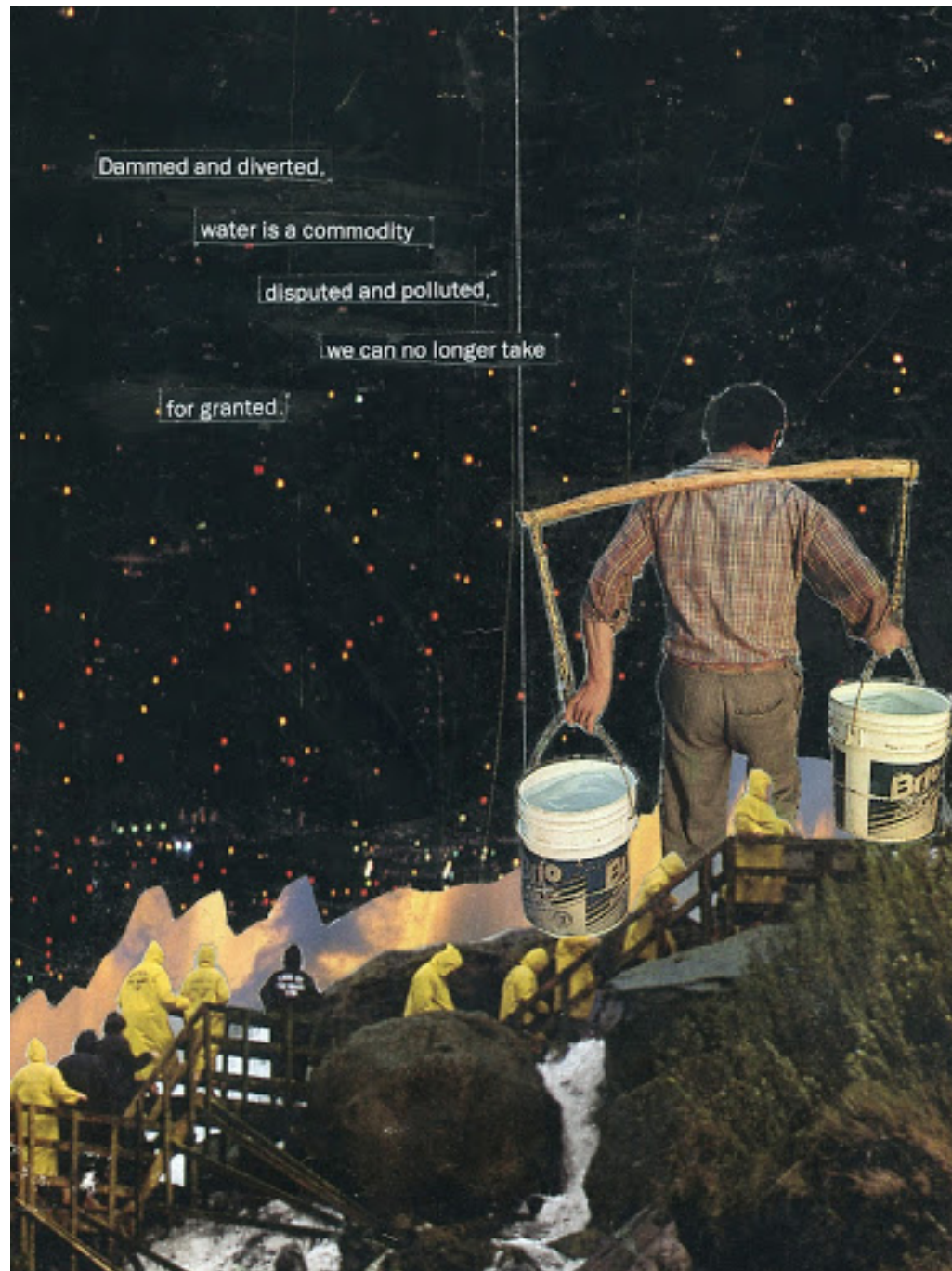
Neither of them would want a pit.
It would have too many pieces of me.



By Ryn McCall



By Ryn McCall



By Ryn McCall

WHEN THE WORLD WAS AT WAR, WE KEPT ON DANCING

By Amirah Hata

Even in the chaotic noises sounded like a musical to their ears. At the four beat steps, they graced the battlefield spinning around and around like the never-ending clockwork.

The song counted down from the fourth minute where they believed that *sì* (死; *death*) was never a jinx. Because here they are four years preceded their first meeting and they could do four years more.

The third minute count reminded them of the lucky-third charms that they were bestowed upon along the way. For when they were together, *sàn* (散; *break up*) would never happen. Two powerful souls bound together to give birth to an even stronger force. And that force was love.

It took two to tango. The end was getting closer and closer, and they realized it, they could only let out a forced laugh (囁, *ér*), pretending that they were back in their safe neighbourhood with their usual tea and scones.

One (一, *yi*). They became one at the last minute. Like how the halves of each heart fit perfectly well like missing puzzle piece. They became whole.

Thirty-five seconds down and it felt like everything was moving too fast, too sudden, too hastily. Their 4/4 fox trot could never keep up with the past pace of war but that was alright. Let it be slow but steady, for this might be their last 35 seconds of freedom before surrender their body, mind and soul to the claws of war that were meant to be scar their lives permanently.

They knew. So, they kept on dancing until the last second.

Leave All Valuables

By Dylan Benjamin

Upon arrival all lips were collected.
You Cannot Enter This Country With Your Lips
They say.
A woman asks *why*?
They take her child and put it in a cell with
other children faceless nameless lipless kids
why? why?
They take her warm lips

Do Not Ask *Why*.

In a line the Bodies move to the next room
You Must Give Us Your Twisted Tongues That Slither
They say.
You Must Not Speak Here.
When the tongues are collected, a test begins
Your Tongues Upset Us; Your Accents Upset Us
They say.
Now Say 'Asylum'.
ah-shiy-um. ah-shiiy-um, ah-SHIY-um. good, good?
One man is taken

Do Not Say This.

Lastly, an interview in a concrete room
How Can You Come Here? They ask. Uninvited?
They look
Their eyes are on throats.
The pressure is a blocked dam that will not break
A man can't talk with his hands against the wall.
A gun
pressed against his back.

Do Not Talk Here.

There is no response for the voices have gone.
We Will Keep These Things You Bring To Our Country
They Say.

Until You Leave Here.

postcommunist haikus

By Nicole Gruszka

so, here I fucking am
in front of a dying place
of cracking concrete walls

chainsmoking, standing
gargoyle of parking lots
alone, but not quite

the oldest woman –
she has been here from the start,
from empire and tribe,

her history etched
into thousands of creases –
asks me for a smoke

offers me a sip
of some lukewarm quince vodka
she hides in her coat

tells me of her kids
how they live so well abroad,
both in germany

how they don't come back
barely speak their mother tongue
it's not worth its price

Dayton, Ohio

By Ayesha Alexander

In the corner of the living room, right before the kitchen, to the left of the doorframe, there are marks on the wall. I left the beginning of an immortal rainbow there hoping someday to return. It wasn't my first home. It was the home I formed myself in. Here, I didn't understand the dry depression of the word Poor. My mother hated it, said look up and see the ceiling, if it is there you are not Poor. Sometimes the power was out, but our bellies were never empty. Sometimes we bathed with water heated by the microwave. Kids in school don't understand poverty. Christmases were a secret gift. It is how my mother hydrated. Our trees were never empty, even when foam coolers acts as refrigerators; bags of ice as the freeze; bologna will be on the menu from now until further notice. My classmates said I must eat a lot. Kids do not understand the correlation between childhood obesity and high poverty areas. Things that are good for you are ingredients to a meal. Food is cheaper when it is microwavable. My mother walked out the door at 6AM and walked back in at 10PM. My mother was also the father. My mother made homes of sacrifices within herself. Had no choice but to put adults into children. My mother is the hero in this narrative. In this narrative, I come out as an Empath, my sister a teacher, my mother still searching for her happiness. Digging with broken nails for pieces of it, and I wish her a smile every morning, and a longer life so she may, for the first time ever, feel complete.

hot bath

By Adrian Whittamore

ever since i was born wrong i have been chasing the womb,
dipping myself in one pool after another
looking for the one that will unmake me and spit me out anew,
this time shaped right, this time parents who love me,
this time not hollowed out inside.

the water of my first womb was cold and bereft
so the tubs i lie in now scald my skin newborn pink,
and if this isn't what love feels like, at least
it burns out the pain.

i dip my head under the water to hear my own rhythm,
a substitute for a mother out of heart's reach,
and it is soothing in its steadiness if not in its vitality.
may i be my own creator, i whisper,
before i swallow down the bathwater like communion.

there is science in this, in the way the press of water to face
silences the static in my head,
the way the numb buoyancy of being submerged
helps me to forget the way that i am shaped.

there is flawed therapy about this, about reenacting rebirth,
something about reconciling traumatized children
with their adopted parents, something about a child
smothering to death beneath a blanket in the psych's room
as he screams and struggles to be reborn.

i swallow down more of my anesthetic aquatic
and as i close my eyes,
i wonder what happened to that boy next.

1,2

By Harper Murrell

1

The bathtub drains and my skin pricks.
The drain is supposed to be plugged but it empties anyways.
Despite its best efforts, despite its purpose, it
can't keep me warm any longer.
As the water lowers and reveals me it cools.
I am robbing it of its warmth, making it my own
only to lose it to the chill of the air.
I could refill it. I could turn the water on as hot and as heavy as it goes.
I could turn it on and never turn it off but why would I do that?
The water will just go cold again

2

Kill me gently. I crave pain but I fear death
and I do not need to be sated.
Look into my soul and tell me I'm
worthless, It's like a drug to me.
Feeling terrible feels so good and you're
the only one who can do it to me the way I
like.
I get high as my stomach sinks.
The knot in my gut grows and swells,
It is the only thing preventing me from being empty so
how could I let it go?
I try to smile but the contractions in my cheeks feel
foreign it feels wrong to put on a mask when I'm alone.
My happiness paces the room looking for a way out,
she doesn't want to see me like this.
I stare in the mirror and say "thank you,
It feels so good to feel."

Berries Over Blood
By Isabella Townsend

Blood does not equal glory, or

The frog's body was on the cold,
metal table as my teacher glided her scalpel down his stomach.
His insides were no longer held by the confines of
muscle and flesh and blood.
He was sliced in half and we called it science,
yet I still wonder if just seeing a wound makes any of us understand any more
than we did before.

No matter how melodramatic and overdone,
I take the scalpel,
and I cut out the darkest pieces of myself
just to give them to you,
maybe if I show you what is under all of this skin
you can understand what is under yours,
or maybe these shoulders just want to carry a little less
than they had to yesterday.

But there is no romance in martyrdom.
And I remember that my first love was allergic, so
I switched from peanut butter to tuna sandwiches.
Lunch became our favorite time of day:
alone at the peanut-free table.
This is the most sacred and warm memory this heavy heart has had the pleasure of knowing.
I am beginning to think that this is the only time I gave the world a chance.

I am coming to terms with the fact
that my torment will never be either of our truths.
I know we want you to be the teacher with my back on cold metal-
or we want to conflate being seen and being known-
but it is time I admit that my hands are stained of more berry than blood,
no matter how much either of us want to recognize our damage in someone else.

And what I mean to say
is that I still eat tuna for lunch everyday,
because I have decided to give the world a chance again.

The world deserves it and so do I.
There are days that this soul has known suffering more than it's own name,
but that does not mean you or I have to gut ourselves to feel a little bit less alone.
You and I are more than our locked jaw and bitten tongue.

So, take my hand
and walk through this with me,
as we count the flowers and the soft lips who never fail to whisper the song:
"We have so much more in common than what has happened to us."

Phantom

By Ayesha Alexander

I am so self-aware
I've memorized the back of your head

The first way I met you
The last way I'll know you

See, I've seen this before;
premonitions of your back walking away

Don't take it personally when I dig holes around you
It is for both of our protection

See, my depression is tricky
Has diminished me to a structureless being

I'm so Phantom
I have the taste of dead poets on my tongue
I'm so phantom
'Speak up' must be my name
I'm so phantom
I leave my body here for anyone to take.

Before the curtains go down
I collect my bones into plastic containers
Label them melancholy
Make sure everyone can see them
 looks something like attention

Before the curtains go down
My walls become imaginings of how I want to intimidate
Except your hands can go right through
Because I am impossible,
 but not really
I give you permission to enter me
 then take it away

And you, my lonely audience,
will laugh when I tell you how much I love to disappear

Until I put on my most famous act
and don't come back

What I mean is, this wall is an illusion
You can step here, if you wish
 But I'll warn you
I wear the most colorless depression

This is not the one that is in style
This is not what is trending on Twitter
This is real-life ghost in a humanoid

When I say ghost,
I mean when life is always right there
I can't seem to be present

It is what goes on in my body;
Never being able to describe it
 feeling it anyways

I told you my depression was tricky
You may see me, you may not
You may love me, but don't

The final act, I imagine, is something like a song the first time you hear it;
that stuck in the throat happiness that only comes inside the first listen

The final act is right before I disappear
 It has never been written.

Dead man's bones

By Sierra Smith

mosaic mausoleum
where the shattered
Come together
In the name of dexterity
Glass stained with the blood
Of the lamb
Inscribed with disengaged hieroglyphics
Plea insight
For born again

a mortician dead inside
paints her face
to look alive
she pulls back skin
to fake some laugh lines
petals press on the cheeks
that were never rosy
Joy never came
This mourning

spider webs weave melancholic lace
That drape a rib cage
fabricating curtains capturing time
so the things behind
Never quite learn
To move on

Organ keys pressed hard
linger an eerie aria
the Gospel choir chants
never to find the harmony
that kindles warmth inside

painting caskets i've been grandfathered into
Impressionist movement
colors bleed instead of mix
rationalizing boldness
as a means of necessary conviction

bleach is
Too diluted like
the mind of a deranged woman
All the while
singing the hymn

it is finished

death is swallowed up
But it owns so much in me
Funerals proceed
Black is the new irony
for a bed of leaves wash over
the False prophets that carried us all
Through the ages

Leave it all at a small wooden cross
snug in a coat pocket
indentation marks
In the palm of fear
Forbidden truth

body wants

By Kayleigh Wells

i want to be touched, i want to taste the salt between us, i want it to burn at the ache in my cells. when's the last time your fingers grazed my spine? when did our breath last mix? i only ever get lonely when i go to bed, when the space next to me is cold and i'm aware that i need your heat. why am i so cold? i dreamt of us under the bed, hiding from rain that wasn't real. i'm in a stable full of golden horses and then there you are, crying in the closet i forgot i had. i don't forget you. the deepest hole burrowed into my desperate heart, an infection i curated. i used to think i'd know if you died, now i only know that i'm afraid to. i recall the different ways i've ever been touched, felt. i think about three ways of loving: that which is doused before beginning, quelled by the explosion of loving poison, the thorn in my side that i fell in love with because i thought i had to. loving now is new. it's the slow burning incense in the bedroom, it's slender fingers, careful and strong. i bite it's flesh like a lifeline, it's past midnight and my head hums with memory, my body with want.

Aphrodite

By Nova Grace

And sweet mother,
She's all I can see
Draped in my shirt
Soft and sublime
A wreath of kisses
Lie adorning her neck
Velvet lips part and
In her breath I hear
The melodies of my name
Sang to heaven and back

tears are places

By Salam Wosu

Its another morning, I wake before the sun
The day-old tea on the table takes me back
To that day of paused moments and silent cries.
We were like stars- nectar nesting in the nucleus of a neon night
Lost in sad symphonies singing slow songs
We cried
as crickets crept in the crescendo of the night
Tears our only break leading us out of hazy gray skies.
He always said 'A man has no use for tears'
But a tear lurks, licking the lid of my eyes, lingering.
His words were like a war raging on in a body
There is no hiding place. To listen is to witness bullets hitting from within We curled up like dying flowers
beneath a storm. Crying
The lights went out in our eyes
our hearts dried up and our tongues burned to cinders in our mouths. There is a portion of my heart rich with
memories and turgid with ripe tears But there are not enough memories to keep the dead awake
There are not enough roads to lead a soul out of misery.
A man once said when a loved one dies we learn to live more
And I began to hear 'there is a pathway out of tears'
Or is the path through tears endless? A river never ending?
I am travelling through a road of memories
I do not know who to hold or where to embrace
You were a tree with roots that soared over birds
and now life has hewn you to a poem filled with tears.

Its another morning
Yawning
Mourning
Every day is a room filled with sad voices

Slowly I reach for the door
But no one is there to open.

Giving Back
By Alexandra Parrott

Spread me through the flowers.
I want to sink my roots onto the ground,
And grow till I touch the sky.

Let the wildflowers bloom from me,
Their bright hues sprouting from dark thoughts,
As if to tell me it's not all bad.

The animals take comfort in me,
I give them food, and therefore life,
And I will surround myself with their chatter.

I will live in the dusk of quiet mornings,
And bathe in the rain that falls,
Until the weeds overtake me,
And those flower petals fall.

Reef Tapes

By Liam Malia

We had reached the bluff by sunrise. It was lined with Douglas firs and the path was well-tread by people like us. We sweated. It ran down our backs and gathered at the nape of our necks. Like a pair of bellows we puffed out air and drew it back in, great big cold gulps that tasted like fresh water. Our feet thumped but were muffled by the leaves on the ground. There was a breeze, and below us, the river.

We ran down the other side and zig-zagged down the steep bank of the river to the path that ran alongside it. Here, the shrubs were thicker. The river was present in the white noise of it running past. It was only every so often that we caught sight of it. We had been warned by a park ranger that bears liked to fish here early in the morning, but beyond a bird or two flying overhead, we were alone.

He was twenty-five which was a whole four years younger than I was. He had those sort of broad shoulders that kind of made me want to die. When he was younger he'd been scrappy. Not violent. Just a bit eager. He said the cadets had sorted him out, but that wasn't true. It was going to uni and giving a shit about something that did. I met him after he graduated, and if I tell you it was through his girlfriend, would you judge me? He was a writer but his money job was working for a charity. This was his first holiday since he'd taken the job. It was supposed to be a joint couple's week but-

So we were in his girlfriend's car and we didn't have a hotel room and hadn't for the past few nights, and we'd been sleeping there, taking it in turns to sleep stretched out on the back seat while the other two tried to get comfy in the front. Going out for a run this early wasn't a pretension of fitness (not *only*) but was a necessity, because we were slowly but increasingly not slowly going mad. I wanted to bounce the cassette tapes of Reef's back catalogue off his girlfriend's head and his head and the head of the guard at the US border and the guy in the 7-11 in Vancouver who'd told me they only had Embassy low tar. In the back of the car he had stacks of *The New Yorker* and it enraged me that his girlfriend could read them for hours on end while we drove without wanting to hurl. The way he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel when we waited at lights- and oh, god, the way he turned down the music while the engine idled and turned it back up when he accelerated- they made me want to cut the brakes on the car and send us flying into the back of one of those obscenely large American lorries. I, in turn, infuriated them. I drank too much coffee and constantly had to pee, and I was always suggesting we stopped and got out at funny museums and art galleries. We had tied our shoelaces in silence while she- the girlfriend- slept, then began to run, slowly then faster and now slowly again.

We were reaching the point where we would have to stop and turn back. The sun was beginning to get warmer and there was less shade here. I didn't want to be the one to suggest it, so I kept running, slightly behind him. I waited for him to call it. A game of fitness chicken. His shoulder blades contracted and expanded under his t-shirt as he pumped his arms. I looked up to the tops of the trees, then back down, because he made a noise like he was about to speak, but instead he sped up and rounded a corner until he was out of my sight.

I kept on at the pace I was going and waited for him to drop back, but he didn't. He stopped altogether and I almost slammed into him. I was about to speak but then I saw what he saw.

The river had swelled into the glut of a pool. It was cool crisp blue grey water that ran slow and clear and then slithered off into a river again, dropping down on one end from a waterfall and from the other under a wooden bridge in a thin snake of rapids. He turned to me and he was grinning.

"I'm game if you are." He'd broken the silence: we hadn't said a word from getting up to this point. The whole thing had been a sort of ballet conducted by eye contact and routine. But now he'd said something and it took me a moment or two to parse.

"OK," I said. Our eyes locked, they widened, and we burst out laughing, then like kids we were whooping and screaming, and we tugged our clothes off until we were naked like kids, then we jumped.

It was freezing cold and we both screamed bloody murder, but the adrenaline was like the last time I'd done speed. We swam and paddled and moved into the middle of the pool where it was deeper, and he leaned back to tread water and I stayed with my whole torso under the water so no one would have to look at the scars on my chest. He laughed some more, no words, nothing to say, I laughed back, then he disappeared under water and I only realised what was going on when he grabbed my ankle and pulled me down too. I opened my eyes. He looked a little like a ghost. I was never going to be able to grow chest hair like him and his cock could have been tiny and it would have been more than the medical mystery between my legs. But his cock wasn't tiny, it was thick and long and I tried not to stare but oh god, it had been so long.

We swam to shore and I thought he was tossing me my clothes but he was actually pushing me to the ground, and we wrestled for a moment. It was horseplay, I think, and he was still laughing, but then he was over me and had me pinned, and it wasn't just thick and long it was hard, and there was surprise in his eyes like it wasn't his. A gasp, another one, then we kissed and kissed, and then he fucked me in the open air.

A bear could have been walking past, for shame.

long it was hard, and there was surprise in his eyes like it wasn't his. A gasp, another one, then we kissed and kissed, and then he fucked me in the open air. A bear could have been walking past, for shame.

"Well, we shouldn't have done that," he said, after.

I said nothing, just lay there.

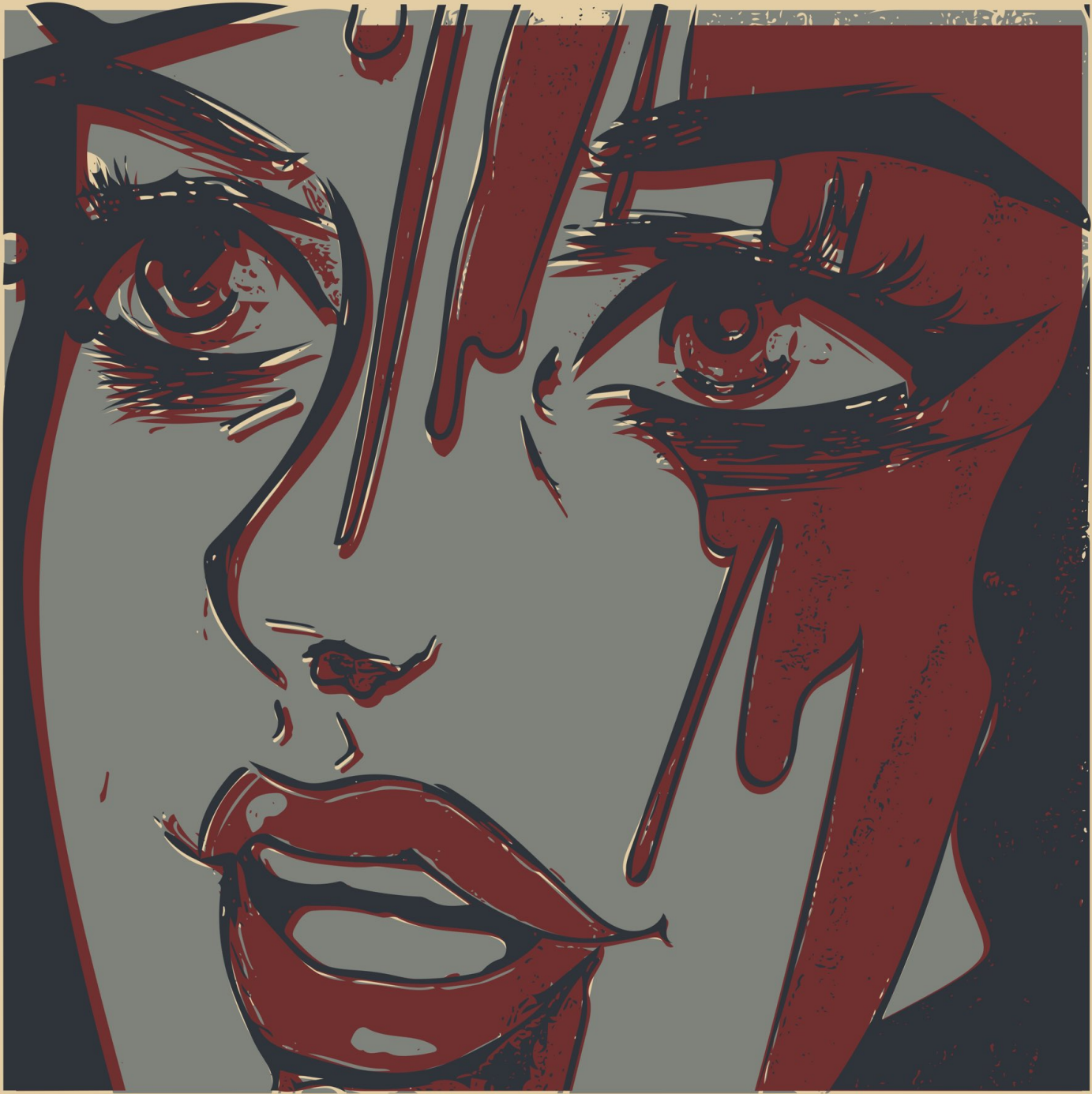
"One of us should probably go back to the UK," he said and I turned to look at him like he was fucking mental, but he meant it in all apparent seriousness. I waited for him to say something else and when he didn't I pulled my clothes back on and walked off. I was too tired to run now.

"Hey," he called after me, and I didn't look back.

I let him play the Reef tapes and even volunteered to wind them back up with a pencil when the tape deck ate them. I stopped drinking so much coffee. We went to a teapot museum in Sacramento. I went back early and I don't know what they did for the rest of the week but when they got back he left a message on my answering machine, and I was good and waited a whole half an hour before ringing him back. I am, by all accounts, a terrible influence on myself.



By Sydney Rosiak



By Sydney Rosiak

INKSTONE

By Amirah Hata

let me rest in the well; very well
the depths of my waters left untouched
not even by you who watches over the border.

nothing could be as plain as it can be
neither this stretch of distance between us
 separating me from reaching to thee.

your thick, sturdy body scoots over
dragging with you the pains and hardships
along with the impure mixture of fresh and black.

your thoughts aren't always true
for you put colour to my life; dyeing me in deep hue
now that we are tangled
 till nothing could tear us to two.

the ink wont dry until we draw
if we just remain in the heavenly well
enough for us to wait
before *ren* comes to life.

before we start on one stroke, after another.

Catechism

By Nicole Gruszka

in the throes of a homily on sin
and suffering
and a strangely gleeful anticipation of death,
the priest asks,
“have you ever felt a joy so powerful
that it threatens to tear your heart in two?
a joy so overwhelming that you wanted to embrace
strangers on the street,
run into a shop and buy every sweet they have,
just to gift them to anyone who walks by
so that they too could revel in your bliss?”

he goes on,
talking about how such a joy is only a fragment of what the
virtuous will feel in heaven
but my eyes are closed,
my jaw clenched,
his words barely registering:

I’ve felt such joy
with my back pressed against the concrete walls of some
brutalist architecture,
fingers anchored in my lover’s hair
her lipstick smearing all over my mouth, my chin, my
cheeks
or
covered in sequins and perfume
tucking my hand into her coat pocket
feeling her fingers interlock with mine
a secret gesture
kept hidden from prying eyes and bitter winds
I’ve felt joy that feels like gold glitter under my skin
the kind of crazed happiness that makes you want to
scream, vomit, pray
the closest to god I’ve ever felt hasn’t been in a cathedral
or on a pilgrimage, no –
it’s in her bed
in her impossibly soft jersey sheets,
watching her sleep for a moment,
bathed in the pale blue light of early morning
knowing I get to kiss between her shoulder blades before I
go back to sleep

The Virgin Mary would weep if she could see what earthly
ecstasy I have found –
Blessed art thou among women,
they say.
How could this be a sin
when it is the greatest blessing I have ever found?
When the golden sunlight behind her
transforms her frizzy curls into the kind of halo typically
reserved for sacred images
when the heel of her hand,
the spaces between her fingers,
fit so perfectly between my own that the only explanation
is that they were divinely crafted
all I could ask is that she pray for me,
now until the hour of my death,
amen.

First & Second Pieces

By Hannah Buchanan

never apologize for the way you love
for the intensity of your devotion
Do not say sorry for your arms
& how they hold
Or your hands & how
They caress
Do not apologize for the weight of
Your loyalty, do not say sorry
For remaining even when
You shouldn't
Your veins pumping with the desire
To desire, to be desired
I see you, lonely one, reaching out
From the corner you
Made your home once
Evicted from the heart you found
Home in before, those beams too
Unstable, wood rotten, ceilings
Bowing, soul buried beneath the
Crawl space, & oh,
I, too, see you, my own
lover & oh, In every face
to come, yes,
I see you, & I built a
new House in my
heart for you
& I'm only sorry
that you ran away
From home, & if by
Chance you return,
Decide you want one,
I will lock the doors
Turn off the lights,
Insist that I am done-
You cannot be both
A soulmate
& a prodigal son

Watching the crackheads walking their shadows
On stolen leashes
The junkies cursing god
On the porches of sleeping believers
The women in their short skirts
When the air is below freezing
Streetlights like armed guards
Like knights in suits of armor
The princess in her castle
With her lace & her tassels
& the princes by the bus stops
With their hand outs & their hustles
Yes there are dragons here but
There is no slaying it
All these white dragons here
& we spend all day chasing 'em

Shorelines & Sheets

By Salam Wosu

The full moon slithering
down to these ankles / a midnight blanket curling
around those places you once called
home. I took out the blinds because you said
us making love was the liquid dance
of primal waves swirling & thrashing
jasper ripples on a silver night.
You called our bodies merging gold brown and coal
black / a carbon climax of ornate ornaments bejeweled
around the neck of these sheets / you called the sheets us
& then you wandered off beyond the point
where water withdraws into a wavefilled ocean / you ripped
out a jewel from the neck of these sheets /straightened out
the poetic pattern of rippling rhythm / left
the song of seas & ode of oceans bare
beneath a bored moon brimming with lust.
Yesterday I took down the new blinds that cost
more than I could afford because the trader refused to haggle
& I know no language to lyric out how I was
once a precious pearl / nor when to hang up those blinds.
There is a soft breeze all night these days.
When they ripple I can feel
the shores of my eyes welcoming waves.

Controlled Burn
By Christopher Costello

1:00 AM. My bedroom faintly lit
by my cellphone, and the smiles
it showed me. Shivering
under the blankets, I refreshed
the app again: a lover
22 miles away. 43. 67.

My car shuddered
along the road, curved and looming
like a spine. I pulled into the lot,
its spaces marked by gashes in the dirt.

Even the forest was restless, trembling
leaves on branches. I found a body there.
The body was mine, and it was burning,
blood sparking on contact with the air.

I hid in the bushes and waited for a stranger.
I knew them by their small cruelties:
clawing at my back, snapping
twigs underfoot.

We found each other
in the warm dark. I pulled
the men into me and they shook,
thrumming with the music of the wind.

These encounters were more light
than heat, but there in the night,
they were enough, if only
because they had to be.

Even the absence felt like victory.
I walked home drenched
in sweat and smoldering.

Trouble Shooting

By James Stelzer

Human beings are like computers:
 beautiful, exciting, complex;
susceptible to corruption and viruses;
worthy of semi-regular maintenance
 until they break.
 Then what?

 Throw them away
and ignore the mounting landfill.
 This strategy is flawless
 and so are you.

Blood On My Dorm Room Wall

By Alexandra Parrott

People say that I am angry,
That there's this burning in my chest
that lashed out unwittingly

Fists hit the concrete
Broken skin
Red face
Letting my anger drip from my knuckles
Into the sink
Trying to calm the flames

No

I'm not angry

Fists hit the wall in agony
Red faced
Heart clenching
Letting emotions I'd thought I'd burned away pour from my
eyes
Knowing I deserve it.

Knowing I deserve waking up
Hand throbbing
Black and blue parading around
Giving away exactly what I've done

While the bruises heal
And the little red lines fade
I'm left
Staring at the places they were
Knowing that soon they shall be back
Not because I am angry
But because I deserve the pain they bring.

Nefarious Gift

By Russell Gifford

Our hands are bloody and our eyes are wide ignored is the
tumultuous nature of our plight
We struggle and struggle, nothing is new
The smoke covers the sun,
while we pretend that the sky is still blue.
We uproot the children, and cast them away
The gift they'll be given is sufficient
We tell them
There is no such reason to complain.



By Ryn McCall



By Ryn McCall

and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth
By James Stelzer

"This isn't working!"

The Book had been arguing with his soon-to-be ex-girlfriend,
the Record Player
(again).

On the horizon, The Tower of Babel stood solemnly.

"You just never listen to me!" she cried.
"Well you're impossible to read!" he fired back.

It appeared to be mocking them.

I live by the beach

By Dylan Benjamin

A whale washed up on the beach and I watched
families take their kids to see it thrash
in the shallows

In the shallows
I saw a child, unaided and off course
With families and kids to watch it thrash

This is a spectacle
To see a whale
To see a child
To see this pessimal
Sea

A province of lessons around your
Bed
Show me the collected photographs
I will name you *Marilyn*.

Some days later I watched a whale die.
And those lessons I remember.

Yosemite

By Sierra Smith

daughter set fire to our insides for fun
as the valleys burned
i took her by the hand
we danced in circles
moisturized by the ember glow
sprinkling glitter to the bones
reserved in mourning

our lows sunk into the sea
while our ashes remind us
return is inevitable
we fear not

i picture this moment often
that we carved in time
fondly remembering
The folds that hold
all we have lost

he brews grounds from the earth
in an old, rustic church
painting in a cave
mud masks my eyes
awaken my soul
his spit is holy water
i see
though i wish
i did not

soot in heel
i cross horizons
just to play bloody knuckles
with sharp rock
loss followed by remission

Can the valley ever be great again?

Stagnation & Distance
By Nova Grace

Stagnation

And sweet mother,
My monuments are crumbling
And I believe love conquers all
But I didn't realize that strength
Meant breaking your bones forevermore
Just to watch them regrow.

Distance

We stood alone on a rooftop,
Feeling the wind brush over our skin
As the smoke faded away
And became one with the horizons,
I hold the lighter up silently
Gas, flint, flame, breathe in
Hold it, keep it, never let it go
Until you absolutely can't stay
Right up to asphyxiation
And as the dark creeps inward

The edges of my sight decaying,
I drift close to a nothingness
With no worries and no anger
A bliss beyond my mind or heart
But then, at the brink,
At the precipice of the world,
Release, let it go, let it be,
Watch it all float into the nothing
And when the remnants are gone,
We wait as prisoners in a content silence,
I turn to you, sadly, innocently,
And I ask,
"Can we do that again?"

magic hour

By Adrian Whittamore

the sun hung low on the night you had to leave
but i held it like a lamp and polished it to brass
so i would have more light to see you by.

and as it cast you in amber echoes,
immortal in my mind like fossilized tree bark,
i thought of a wish that i didn't tell you.

it wasn't until we reached the airport
and the sun teetered on the rim of the horizon
that i realized the brass lamp granted wishes,

because suddenly, your flight was delayed,
and we had one more hour together,
and the sun was still pouring its honey over you.

as we drove back into town to visit the bookstore,
your hand my hand's companion and guard,
i remembered that this time of day is called magic hour.

White Flag

By Christopher Costello

Midnight rolls around the way it always does.
I feel the foundation under the building shift,
press my handprint into the spot where you laid
this time yesterday. Your scent lingers like your kiss
sweet and temperamental, battery-lick electric in my mouth
of tungsten and copper. It never sleeps, unlike the city:
that dreaming dog, spasming and secret.

You're the only one I've ever had back here, the only one who spoke
a language other than writhing, who didn't have a powder keg in his throat.
The only one I've ever missed. The clock's red numbers laugh
from the bedside table, otherwise empty. On the pillow next to me
rests an open biography of Jasper Johns. You pressed it into my hands
the second you stepped through the doorway. Like contraband.
My favorite.

We'd spent hours scrolling through images of his work:
flags of all sizes, targets, numbers, alphabets.
Icons dancing with their opposites, the barriers
between them melting in real time, thick and dripping
brushstrokes. I watched *Flag* radiate from itself, double
back and surge forward. Something in me ached.

I placed a hand on your cheek and your jaw tensed
for a split second. I assured myself it was nothing:
an involuntary reaction, like everything
that happened afterward.



By Sydney Rosiak

About the talent in this issue

Alexandra Parrott

Alexandra is an artist who enjoys long walks through the woods, drinking espresso out of tiny cups, and playing air guitar.

Christopher Costello

Chris Costello is a writer, editor, and educator from Central New York. His work has appeared in "Nine Mile Magazine," "Ghost City Review," and "Protean Magazine," among others.

Nicole Gruszka

Nicole Gruszka is a Polish-American writer originally from Brooklyn, New York. Both their poetry and their academic work centers on themes of diaspora, women, Catholicism, and precarity. They are currently researching contemporary exorcism practices in Poland through a Fulbright grant.

James Stelzer

James Stelzer is a writer and a vocalist who hails from a suburban British town that isn't quite London. Outsider art fills him with hope (and some other emotions that are weird and deeply confusing). He has recent and upcoming work appearing in Soft Cartel, Misery Tourism, After the Pause, and hopefully loads of other cool places. He is also a Prose Reader for Random Sample Review. You should follow him on Twitter at @ABadIdeaMachine

Kayleigh Wells

Kayleigh Wells, proud Appalachian, future graduate of Shawnee State University, just wants to make the world a better place.

Harper Murrell

Harper is a scientist by training but a sad girl at heart, she views poetry as an extension of the spiral-bound notebooks she hid her secrets away in as a young girl. She is a Kentucky native, growing up in Louisville but currently residing in the shadow of Northern Kentucky University, an institution of which she is an alumnus.

Ayesha Alexander

My name is Ayesha, and who I am changes so often, it is hard to put into words. I am a person, I breathe, I bleed, and I grew up in Dayton with my mother and my sister. My favorite animal are Elephants because they show us being mighty doesn't mean being unkind. I love the color green because it reminds me of being out in nature. I am inspired by random things; strangers, books, music, weird colored leaves. I went to college briefly for fiction writing, and left with a deeper love for poetry. I once met an old man who asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I told him I wanted to be a poet. He said I needed to grow up and get a 'real' job. I grew up and got a 'real' job, which, in case you didn't know, is any job that pays you money. Getting a 'real' job shouldn't mean giving up on your dreams. I am not career-seeking. I seek art, expression, and adventure. I suppose that is who I am.

Liam Malia

Liam Malia is a gay trans man and an 'adult'. He lives in Edinburgh where he studies Arabic and French and eats a lot of doughnuts. He enjoys yelling at tennis matches and getting up early. He can be found on Twitter @liamseoirse.

Adrian Whittamore

Adrian Whittamore is a gay trans man born and raised in central Kentucky. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing from Northern Kentucky University in 2019 and now lives in Lexington, where he hopes to further his writing career. Adrian would also like to acknowledge his dear boyfriend Oliver, whom is the inspiration for nearly all of Adrian's work.

Nova Grace

Nova Fay Grace is a trans woman currently stuck in the wilderness of Kentucky. An almost-graduate of Northern Kentucky University (life happens), you can find her wandering the west and probably smoking too much weed.

Russ Gifford

My name is Russell Gifford and I am a student at Northern Kentucky University, where I am currently pursuing bachelor degrees in Philosophy, Political Science, and History. My primary passions include existential philosophy, backpacking, and activism.

Sierra Smith

Sierra Smith is a writer from Dayton, Ohio. She is a former child model who is currently trying her best.

Lexie Stepro

Lexie Stepro is a senior at Northern Kentucky University. She has completed a minor in Creative Writing and hopes to pursue publication more intensely after graduation. She has won third place in the Lip Gloss Diaries slam competition in Louisville, and was also on the second place Dayton Poetry Slam team at the Meatgrinder slam in Columbus. Lexie has only recently transitioned her focus to form poetry rather than slam. She has not been published by any literary magazines, yet!

Isabelle Townsend

Belle is currently a student at Boston University with a focus in economics and political science. She has written since she was young and growing up in rural Kentucky. In her free time, she enjoys baking and spending time outside.

Amirah Hata

Amirah Hata is a hobbyist writer who enjoys creating fan works. A psychology undergraduate, she loves anything that could spark ideas. She currently resides in her home country, Malaysia.

Salam Wosu

Salam Wosu, a poet and aspiring novelist, is a Chemical Engineer from Nigeria. His works interrogate grief, depression, love, antichauvinism and sexuality. He was shortlisted for the Korean Nigerian Poetry Fiesta award 2017 & 2019. His works are on or forthcoming in Glass Poetry Press, Kissing Dynamite, The Mark Literary, Rhythm & Bones, Dream Noir, Brave Voices, RIC journal and Mounting the Moon (anthology of queer Nigerian poems). He is @salam_wosu on all platforms.

Dylan Benjamin

Dylan Benjamin is a writer living in the grim North of England and doing the best he can. His work has been previously featured at Misery Tourism and other small-press publications. You can usually find him by the beach, with his dog, Jasper.