

SPRING ISSUE

# DEFUNKT MAGAZINE

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# MASTHEAD

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# Letter From the Editor

There are so many things I'd like to say, but first, I want to acknowledge what a privilege it is to be able to bring forth pieces that highlight the mindblowing talent that is today's generation of writers. In a time when there is so much hate, it is necessary and important to uplift marginalized voices, and Volume 12 accomplishes just that. I hope this collection of queerness, identity, and resilience resonate with you and give you a sense of belonging.

Volume 12 is a collection filled with vibrant, hopeful, and gorgeous stories, poems, pieces, and music selections that will stay with you hours after spending time with them.

For this Issue, the eighteen contributors selected are sure to connect with you with their literary and artistic prowess. Truly, I am grateful for them, our Founder, our Board of Directors, our Patreon subscribers, and especially my team for having the trained eyes to spot such talent so that we can give all those we publish, specifically marginalized writers, a platform to raise their voices.

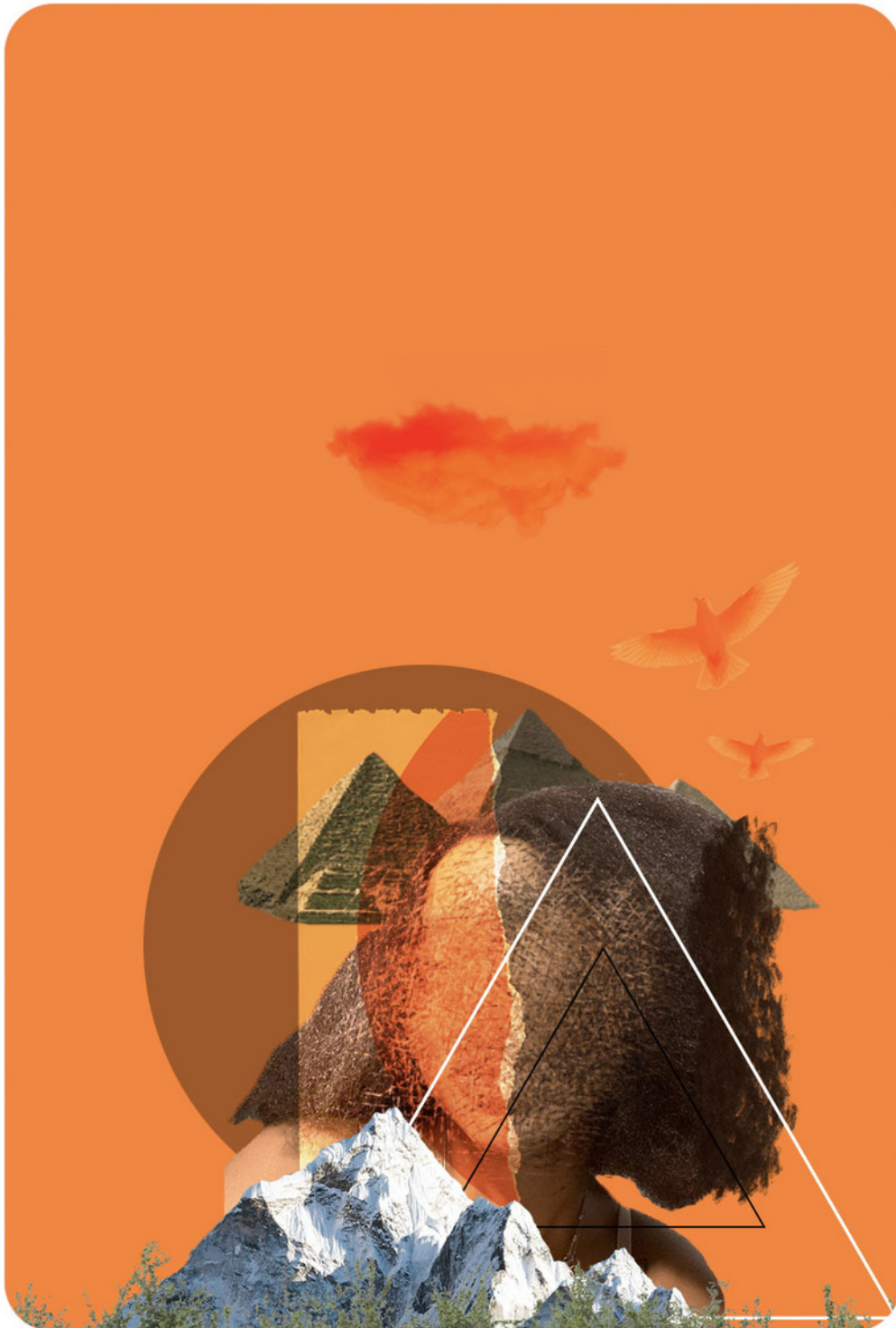
All of this to say, this will be last volume as the Editor in Chief for Defunkt Magazine + Press. I've had a wonderful time overseeing our growth and implementing new initiatives to ensure Defunkt is here to stay for a long time. Now, I have the pleasure to pass the torch to Keagan Wheat, our current Senior Poetry Editor, who is more than qualified to take on the role. I cannot wait to see all the wonderful directions Keagan decides to take the mag, and we are all in for a treat to witness everything he will achieve.

Thank you for everything. Thank you for reading. Thank you for being a part of Defunkt. I will miss writing these issue letters, however, I am moving forward with my own dreams to launch an intersectional, anti-racist press in Central, Texas where I now live. If you want to keep up with Abode Press, please visit our website: [www.abodepress.com](http://www.abodepress.com). I had to do a shameless plug. Okay, love you all Defunkt staff, contributors, and readers. We'll cross paths again soon!

With Light,  
Diamond Braxton  
Editor in Chief

# Fia

Kaloni Borno





# LONG AGO

Ellen Zhang

Sometimes, my head fits perfectly between the curves of my mother's chest.  
Echoing are the beats of longing. I picture my brother running, *returning*.

A volcano explodes in the pacific. I imagine it catapulting my brother  
back to me. And even the red sea parts for him to *come back*.

I don't know how to color white picket fences, bring back the American Dream  
turn syllables into a physical display of my soul, wax poetry.

Today, the blueberries are budding evenly like rosary beads.  
I pluck some to take home. There is no academic term for what I'm feeling.

I wrote about *breaking* at the seams, heart *breaking*,  
*breaking* down, *breaking* away. In reality, numbness.

How do you name love, hold it like a son? How to hold onto hope  
without having it melt to mix with the saltiness of my palms? How to  
say *I miss you* without having to say goodbye.

# Sunday's Meat Market

Mason Martinez

Mami tells me when I look at her, she's looking into the eyes of a dead man. It's been a month since I found Papi resting on his side for his mid-day Sunday nap. He called it a meditation, a cleansing of sorts to get his head right with God before we clambered up the hill to the Chapel. Papi didn't believe Sunday best just meant a suit and tie. "You have to be your best up here too, mijo." He'd tell me, pointing at his temple.

Mami rolled her eyes, but there was a smile tugging at her wrinkly lips, the pink lipstick already rubbing off. "I think God knows lazy when he sees it!"

"Lazy?" Papi shouted, hands on his hip as he looked down the small hall into the bathroom where she unraveled plastic rollers from her hair. "I work six days a week to support this family! You call that lazy?"

Their playful banter would go on until Mami walked out the house, waiting with her head tilted towards the sun, taking in God's affection from the freckles that blossomed along her skin. This Sunday, there was no banter when Mami called him lazy. We waited outside long enough for her cheeks to burn red and a puddle of sweat to stain beneath my arms.

"Manolito," Mami called to me as she fiddled around in her purse for her cosmetic mirror. "Tell your father we're going to be late."

I tried to keep my huffs low as I heaved myself off the front steps down the hall to the bathroom where I'd last seen him. The soft yellow light flickered to an empty room. I glossed over the signs

then—the medicine cabinet just slightly opened, a bottle of pills tucked next to the mug of toothbrushes.

"Papi!" I called, shutting the light off before I tracked down the hall to the bedroom where Papi laid with his plaid shirt tucked into his only pair of unstained jeans. His brown dress shoes freshly polished, pairing well with a matching buckle. "Papi," I said again, shaking his shoulders once I approached, thinking of how Mami was likely scolding him outside for meditations that grew more and more frequent. "Papi, we're going to be late."

I'd seen death recapped in news reports every morning, chattering like music to a preoccupied crowd. Or in television shows where actors feigned stillness by holding their breath, thinking of something peaceful, so their eyes looked to a place beyond. Papi didn't look like that so I kept shaking him.

His body was stiff to the touch, his arm flailed to the side, his head bobbed with every movement. His eyes—dark enough that they bled into the irises—were closed like it was just another nap. Another Sunday with bickering and heat and God.

It's funny, I think, how life stops for one, but continues on for the rest of us. It keeps going until the mail tray on the kitchen table piles up, one bill after the other, until the envelopes change color and there's alarming bolded letters stamped across the front to invoke the fear of God in you. But how do you know his wraith if you no longer fear Him?

Mami's hair falls out in clumps in the shower now. I find them every morning and kick them off to the side instead of throwing them in the trash. She sits in the rocking chair everyday, unmoving except for the forward and backwards, cradling a bottle of whiskey aged thirty-six years.

We don't talk anymore. She doesn't pinch my cheeks, leave lunch on the kitchen counter, or force besitos on me as I rush out the door. She just sits and rocks with her eyes closed until I leave. Every morning I think to do the same, but every morning I find my way to her, leaving one gentle kiss atop her head because she is all I have.

Slipping on my bookbag, I notice a white letter stapled to the front door. I rip it off, taking nearly half of the letters off so it only reads, *EVI*. Richie waits for me at the foot of the steps, his hands tugging at the straps of his bag as he balances from foot to foot.

"We've all been there." He says and I appreciate his attempt at comfort, but his pain is unlike mine. He has two mothers—one who leaves on benders for months at a time while the other maintains the house, but at least they both still breathe. I shove the eviction notice into my back pocket and take my place next to him for our three-mile hike to the high school. "We could skip?" He suggests, leading us towards our slow descent in the direction of the school beyond the horizon.

We skipped school the week after Papi passed, spending our days by the creek where the water got lower each year, smoking cigarettes that Richie stole from his Ma, sending rocks hurtling towards the other side of the creek. An unspoken competition that I was winning by a long shot. His Ma made it back just in time for the funeral and has been home since. She spends her days sleeping on the couch while his Mama curses her all the same.

"We need jobs." I say.

"We already tried getting jobs, Mano. No one's gonna take in a couple of kids, especially us,"

Richie pauses to kick a rock down the side of the dirt road where grass unfurls out of the ground. "Unless," Another pause. "We go down to the factory."

I stop. Richie walks a few more steps ahead of me before he notices and turns on his heels. I don't know a lot about the factory other than it being the place Papi devoted his life to. Fifteen years in that Godless place, he'd say.

When I first started getting mixed in with Richie and the other boys, Papi threatened me with stories about the factory, the place where you go to get ripped apart. A place where the rules of the law don't apply and what you did there meant you could survive for another day just to do it all over again. But he never understood, no matter how much I explained, I did things to survive too. I had to keep up or get beaten down. Papi laughed at me and told me I didn't know what it takes to *really* survive.

"So then tell me!" I snapped at him after being scolded for stealing, pulling up to the house in the back of a cop car.

I never paid mind to the details—the way he smelled like copper, the blood caked up under his nails or the distant look in his dark eyes when he pushed me up against the wall, screaming in my face with so much rage there was more to it, more than being a kid who got into trouble for stupid shit.

"I mean at least we know they have at least one open position," Richie grimaces, quickly adding, "No offense."

I nod slowly, not paying mind to Richie's comment. I still don't know what Papi did there, but I do know the factory will take anyone. "Let's go."

There's a hesitancy in the way he moves, but he quickly recovers, repeating the words, "Alright, alright," as we begin our trek in the opposite direction, leaving school in the past with the rest of the things that don't really shape us, make us, and

break us into the people we are, the people we become. I wish I could be one of those people who can make school something better, something out of the movies and tv shows, like Papi wanted me to be. He wanted me to be better, but why does that have to be the only way? He'd tell me I was naive. I can hear the scorn of his voice in the back of my head with every step we make towards the factory.

*You think you know so much that you can do whatever you want!*

*If I have to tell you one more fucking time—*

*You'll end up exactly like your tio, is that what you want?*

*Is it really that hard for you to behave and do what I tell you?*

*Can't you see, Mano? I just want you to have a better life than me.*

I grip the straps of my bag until my knuckles are white, my hands cold and numb. When we arrive atop the hill that overlooks the factory, we stand and watch the way the sky reflects against its metallic surface—clouds stretch out against a blue sky as wind whips by, the air turning ever so slightly to remind us fall is coming to free us from the suffocation of summer.

We marvel at the factory for a moment, at how much empty land it occupies, and how it looks like a place where God could rest with its evenly cut grass, the plot of brown soil that has just been plowed. I listen closely to the sounds in the air, the melody of dragonflies zipping by and the crunch of gravel beneath our boots. Ahead, there are four long rectangular buildings side by side, each connected by a short covered hall. On the left, there's another building, shorter and darker, fenced in about six feet high with a flat metal top.

"What is that?" I ask Richie.

"It doesn't look like there's anything in there," He squints against the sun, raising a hand beneath his brows. "Could be horses? They use 'em to plow, plus their shit fertilizes crops."

"Oh." I say with an uptick in my voice and with my shoulder I gesture to Richie to keep going. From here, I can see a small steady stream of workers making their way in through the front door of the middle building. We trickle in at the end of the line behind two brawly men. One—his muscles large and flexed against a too-tight black t-shirt—looks over and down at us. His caterpillar brows scrunch, but he lets out an airy laugh as he shakes his head. We move further into the building where the sun can't reach us and the light overhead is too bright.

Once we're inside, there are four lines to a clock-box, the man who laughed gives me one more look before getting on a line to the most left.

Richie nudges me with his shoulder. "Over here."

He leads me up a flight of stairs where a plaque on the wall reads, MANAGEMENT, an arrow points up to a glass box overlooking the room we're in. I see a man standing with his arms crossed over his shoulders, wire framed glasses hanging on the tip of his nose as he nods to the petite woman next to him. His eyes scan the lines, up and down, up and down, before turning abruptly. We're half-way up the stairs, in his peripheral vision I imagine, when he looks at us inquisitively. A hand towards the woman. Her mouth no longer moves and he leaves her for the door Richie and I approach. It swings open as soon as our feet land on the platform.

"Hello." He says with narrow beady eyes. He looks at the bags on our backs before he looks at us. "I'm afraid I don't recall arranging any school meet and greets."

"We're not—" I stammer.

"We need jobs," Richie says sternly. "We hear you hire anyone."

The man's brows raise, amusement sparkling in his green eyes. "Apparently I do," He laughs and steps aside. "Come on in then."

Scrawny arms give way to a spacious room of beige, brown, red, and gold. We step onto plush carpet that feels like clouds beneath our feet. Richie leans his heels into it and I can see the tension in his shoulder let out as he eyes the sectional suede couch in the middle of the room that faces a flat-screen television. The room is lit with warm lights, freshly brewed coffee wafts in the air making my mouth water.

"Monica," the man calls to the woman standing by the window. She looks up from her clipboard right at us, frowns, her red mouth agape. "I'm conducting interviews now, so perhaps we can discuss this matter at a later time."

Monica turns to him quickly. "Sir—?"

"Thank you for your time, sweetheart." His hand goes up again.

Monica's lips pursed, she dips her head. "Sir."

"I apologize for that," The man says when we're alone, letting out a rush of air, rolling his shoulders in small semi-circles. He walks to the coffee pot, pours a fresh cup. "Take a seat, take a seat!" He gestures to the two empty leather chairs in front of his desk. Richie and I exchange a glance before slipping off our packs and settling in.

"Office politics, you always have to please everyone," He raises the cup to his lips as he sits, the steam fogging his glasses. "Oh," A slurp, a wince. "How rude of me, I'm Management. Everything runs through me, the hiring, firing, disciplinary actions, yadda yadda ya, all that boring stuff. But I am curious!" Setting the mug atop the desk, he leans back into his own seat, eyes widening as pristine fingertips thrum against the armrests. "What brings you here?"

I think not to hesitate again so I follow up quickly, "My father recommended this job. He used to work here."

Management raises his finger, I learn quickly to let him speak. He jolts up, leaning forward enthusiastically as he peers into my eyes, humming little

nothings to himself as his attention darts from eye to eye. My fingers curl into the palms of my hands. "Yes," He says, nodding to himself before leaning back. "You're Eduardo's son, aren't you?"

There's something about hearing my father's name that startles me, like speaking his name gives him life again. I nod slowly. "Yes. I'm Mano—"

"Good man, your father. Sad to see him go. Heartbreaking really. He had good numbers. One of my best workers. We're really taking a hit now that he's gone. Unfortunate." Management nods again, knocking his knuckles against the desk. "Yes, very unfortunate."

A silence lingers over us as Management's attention fades away to the television that plays to an empty room. We sit like that for a moment and I think to cough to get his attention. "Look," Management returns to us. "Because your father was such a great worker, I'll do you a favor. I'll hire you both. How's that sound?"

Richie's eyes widened. "Just like that?"

"Just like that!" Management swivels in his chair to the desk drawer and pulls out two stacks of stapled documents. "Just a couple of signatures and I can get you boys started straight away, I've got a couple of open spots on the floor for you."

I can tell Richie wants to slap my arm, he looks between me and Management who licks his way through the document, scribbling messy X's beside the dotted lines. Things like this aren't supposed to be that easy.

But I keep my mouth shut, sending a little prayer of thanks up to the Heavens. With our names signed, our bags shoved into narrow lockers, Management herds us down the hall, into another before swiping a white ID card. A soft *beep* and a loud *clank* unlocks the first industrial farm door revealing a large room with conveyor belts turning and turning from a place above that I cannot see. There are people everywhere in white aprons and plastic wraps around their heads, moving their arms



in quick motions, wrapping, sealing, stamping, over and over again with the same speed as the conveyor belts themselves.

I am so caught up in the noise and the motions that I don't notice the smell of copper that lingers lightly in the air.

But Richie does, "Sir, I thought—"

"Hernando!" Management calls out with a wave towards a short, stocky man with a grim face. He looks up, but doesn't say anything, nor does he give either of us a smile. "Take a load off and show little Richie how it's done, huh?" He turns to us with the nod of a proud father, "Hernando's our best guy."

"Sir, I thought this was a farm—" Richie inserts.

"Oh it is!" Management holds his arm out to an approaching Hernando, quickly turning his body towards him. The words exchanged are fast and low over the noise of hums and belts. Richie tries to interject again, "But where are the fruits, the vegetables—"

"Don't worry Richie," Management says. "It's all very simple. Hernando will show you, you just wrap, seal, stamp. See!"

He gestures towards the room. *Wrap, seal, stamp. Wrap, seal, stamp. Wrap, seal, stamp.* I notice buckets beneath the conveyors that catch pale pink droppings.

"What about Mano?" Richie stammers. "We're not working together?"

"Oh, of course you are! We all work together here, it's a one team mindset here. When you struggle, we all do. When you succeed, we all do." Richie doesn't look convinced, and I guess I don't either so Management places his hands on both of our shoulders, leaning down so I only hear his words and not the whirling, the liquid droppings, the rip of plastic. "Think about it like this, if your Ma needs your help, you'd help her right?"

Richie and I lock eyes.

"I'll meet you out front when the day's done."

I say after another round of *wrap, seal, stamp*.

"Yeah," Management agrees. "Plus, Mano here, he'll just be up those stairs in the next room. He'll send the work down for you."

Richie is reluctant, but he nods, falling under Hernando's wing as the two walk away towards the conveyor belt. Management's arm finds its way around my shoulders and he leads me up a long flight of stairs, through another locked door, into a room where large bodies hang from hooks.

I halt. The stench fills my nostril and I try hard to not do too many things at once. Not to throw up. Not to ask too many questions. There are hundreds of bodies—cattle I decide—but I don't look too long before I tear my eyes away.

Management turns, smiling at me. "Oh, don't worry about that! You need a lot of training to get the cuts just right. You're gonna be taking over your old man's job. I figure, if he was the best at what he did, well, his son can't be any different, right?"

My body curls and I try to shield my eyes away from fleshy bodies, but the further back in the room we get, the more the bodies still have skin on them. Inside, my muscles are tightening and I feel something sour making its way up my throat but my attention catches on to the corner of the room where two men are huddled between freshly peeled carcasses, watching me.

The man who laughed earlier isn't laughing now. When our eyes lock, he breaks it immediately, looking down at the butchering knife he slides down the cattle's spine.

Management's fingers curl into my shoulder and I feel muscle squishing beneath his touch. He leads me through another door, into a room that's darker, lit only by the light between the wooden fences. It happens quickly. I hurl all over my boots as the stench of hay, shit, piss, and copper hit my nostrils. I brace myself against my knees and I think words are leaving my mouth as I try to plead with

him—God?—Papi?

“Sir,” and it’s only now that I realize I don’t know his name, I don’t know anything to make him more human. “I really think—”

“I don’t pay you to think,” His words turn cold in the dark room. “I pay you to work. Now I don’t care how you do it, just get it done. I won’t tell you again.”

I shiver at the words, *I won’t tell you again*. Papi stands at the threshold of my bedroom door, scolding me for coming home with another note stapled onto my shirt for whatever wrongdoing I committed this time.

I think to move again but sickness explodes out of me immediately, another small puddle between my legs. Management stands over me with Papi’s slitted eyes.

“Are you done?”

There has to be a way out.

But he’s walking away and I think of what Papi said when he called this a Godless place, a place where you get ripped apart. Here, there is no meaning. Here, there is no order other than the three by three stalls that cram the animals in, the men towering above them as they stand with their feet shoved between the space in the wooden walls, one hand against a pole for stabilization, the other aiming a silver rounded captive bolt piston. The room is filled with the hiss of a release, the thud of a bullet breaking skin, ripping through muscle, cracking into skull.

“Julie!” Management calls, he doesn’t have that same pride he had earlier. He doesn’t take another step forward. He stands near me, near the door, and raises his head past the violence to look at an older woman who smokes a cigarette against a short wall. “Tell Mano here how it’s done.” Her eyes are blank when she looks at me.

“Quota’s 74.” He leaves without another word.

I don’t remember walking to the pen, but I

stand four feet above Julie who nestles herself into the side of the pen, holding a metal release for the gate.

“Julie,” I say, hoping addressing her by name will mean something to her, that it will bring us closer. “Do you think—”

But she won’t look at me because she knows what I’ll ask and in that moment we have the same wants and she will not give that away, not for me, not for anyone. “Piston’s already loaded. Just aim in the space between its eyes and pull.”

The gun rests atop a barrel.

I look around the room and there’s the same repetition. *Hiss, crack, thud. Hiss, crack, thud. Hiss, crack, thud.*

“You’re Eduardo’s son, aren’t you?” She asks after I’ve listened to the sounds over and over and over again. I turn to her slowly and she’s studying me and I try to notice the features on her face in the darkness—the way she traces me, if her eyes still glimmer—but she turns, adjusting her footing. “Before you pull, watch the exit sign.”

“The sign?” The words trail off my tongue so low I don’t know if she hears me as I look to the place I’d come from.

“It’s what he used to do. Said it helped.”

Between the *hiss, thud, crack*, we both know that’s not true.

Julie tugs at the gate and the cow stumbles in, whacking its head from side to side, the left side of its ear pierced with a yellow tag and number.

“If it helps,” Julie tries. “It just stuns them.”

I shake as I reach slowly for the piston. I didn’t hesitate when I shook Papi, and I didn’t stop even after Mami came in, her body draped over his as she wailed. I look into the cow’s wide glistening eyes and I hold her gaze. I kept waiting—waiting for Papi to open his eyes so I could see them one last time, even as his body was heaved into the casket, even as my knees pressed into the hardwood floor of the Chapel, I waited.

The piston is ice cold against my damp hands.  
So were his.

I look into her dead eyes and I know now as  
soon as the clicking starts, the hiss releases, and the  
thud sounds, so are mine.



# CONFESSION

Caitlyn Alario

my abuser too could inhabit my mind.  
sometimes it felt we shared it together, my  
grey matter containing those secrets i kept  
even from myself—

scooped like a spoonful of my great-grandmother's  
orange & marshmallow jell-o, jiggling &  
uncertain on the bed of my tongue. see, she'd  
prompt me, it was there

all along. my wrongness was obvious, my  
sin unoriginal. she created small  
cubbies for my faults to live in, & if i'm  
honest, it was nice

letting someone else think for me sometimes (though  
mostly it was cramped & confusing & i'd  
have to lie down & be still a while). i  
found some comfort in

emptying myself of all affect—comfort  
in the whistling void of self-abandonment.  
once, i used to touch myself without shame, traced  
the same five-pointed

star into my palm, my chest, my bellybutton,  
repeating the motion like an invocation—  
each part accounted for, anointed. here are  
we, lord. take & eat.

# Four Ten Minute Poses

Donald Patten



# Anything You Want, But Not That

## Megan Stories

### SPACE

*What do you like*, my girlfriend asks. She pauses before the word *like* and looks over her shoulder, away from me, so I understand that she is talking about sex.

We are sitting in my girlfriend's bedroom, in the half-light of drawn blinds. Posters and magazine cutouts litter the walls. A fuzzy gray UFO that she tells me comes from the X-Files. A blown-up Ani DiFranco album cover, making steady eye contact from a face nearly as wide as the bedroom door. Natalie Portman, in her sleek Star Wars regalia, peering down from on high, just below the crease where the wall meets the ceiling.

It has been four months since our first date, two months and three weeks since we first lay naked in bed together and I willed myself to follow her lead. For the first three years of high school, I longed to fall in love. First I wondered why I never had crushes on boys; later, after I came out, I resigned myself to being alone. Having found a girlfriend in my small town still astonishes me. And yet sometimes I worry I don't love her enough.

My girlfriend looks back at me, and I shift under her gaze. A frizzy wisp of hair, still growing out from when I chopped it off a year ago, frees itself from my bandanna, and I push it away, my cheek itching. Every time she tries to talk about sex, my lips feel glued together. Isn't it enough that I do it?

Maybe I say I don't know, or maybe I tell her I like every part equally. I know she wants me to be

specific, but when I think about sex, I tend to avoid details. I remember the idea of it—*the closest you can get to someone*, my girlfriend once said—but not the moment-to-moment.

Not the way that sometimes, with her clothes off, my girlfriend looks like a stranger. Face washed out against an unbroken stream of skin, pale chest with fish-pink nipples, blond hair so white it's almost translucent. When she opens my legs and ducks her head, her face disappears behind a curtain of fine, ghostly hair, and I feel like the last survivor of an ice age—numb and desperately alone.

There's no headboard on my girlfriend's bed, so she leans against the wall. She's starting to chew on her lip, square front teeth overhanging the side of her mouth. Some queer youth guidebook said you're supposed to talk about what you like—what you *like*—but I still can't think of anything to name.

The last time we did it, we rubbed against each other's thighs. Feeling built and then curdled in a heartbeat, pleasure turned to rust in my mouth. That's been happening lately, as if my brain is lined with barrels of whatever chemical makes you feel suddenly wretched, and one springs a leak that geysers out into my abdomen, my crotch, my chest. *How can you just stop like that*, she asked, after I jerked my body away. *I don't know*, I told her. *I just can*.

What I don't tell her—what I don't yet know myself—is that the questions are wrong. She asks what I *like*, not whether I like sex *at all*. She asks what I want to try next, when what I want most is

to throw open the blinds, to keep our clothes on, to turn back time to before she started pushing me for a yes.

Later I will come to understand that I am asexual, though it will take me years to see it. I will assume at first that sex with my girlfriend felt wrong because she pressured me into it, which is true, and because I wasn't ready for it, which is also true. But the simplest explanation—that sex felt wrong because I *simply didn't want sex*—will elude me.

If this were a different kind of story—if this were a lesbian coming-out story and the partner who pressured me for sex was a boy—the problem might be more instantly recognizable: I was gay all along and didn't know it. But I *was* gay all along, in the sense of loving girls, and I *did* know it. What I didn't know was you could love girls and not want to fuck anyone.

## TRANSCENDENCE

Another bedroom, five years later. My partner's first New York apartment is minimally furnished: a futon mattress on the floor with hand-me-down sheets; a clock radio; a bedside lamp, long since turned off. It's been only a week or two since I helped them move in, just around a month we've been dating at all.

*What do you want*, my partner whispers into my ear. The weight of their slight body presses my hips into the mattress. My cheek lies flat against a thin pillow; over the futon's edge, a streetlight's glow illuminates a dizzying parquet. The numbers on the clock glow green beside me. 1:26. Past our bedtimes. They've been teasing fingers up my thighs, studding my neck with kisses. I am eager and pliable and, now, frozen.

The problem with sex is I'm bad at it. It's not my fault—my high school girlfriend hurt me; later, my urge to fix what she'd done to me scared lovers away. There were a few months of thrilling one-off encounters, then two empty years, and now here I

am, too old to be this ignorant, to have so little to offer.

What do I want? I want to shake the curse of my inexperience. I want to master sex, to tame it. I want to know what I want, but how can I know until I've done it, and how can I do it until I know?

A Tumblr post I will read over a decade later asks which kind of asexual you are: the kind who thought everyone was exaggerating their interest in sex, or the kind who thought that you and you alone were broken. When my partner asks what I want in that sparse Brooklyn bedroom, I am certain that I'm broken. My silence in the face of their question mortifies me, but I can't make myself speak.

My partner doesn't understand what's wrong with me and sex, not entirely. I told them once I was on a revenge quest, that sex hurt me as a teenager and I want to hurt it right back. Two weeks ago, in my Alphabet City loft bed, they wiped their fingers on my sheets and looked up from between my thighs, grinning impishly under their mop of curly hair. *How's that revenge quest coming?* It was true: they'd fingered me and I'd come away unhurt, but somehow I didn't feel any closer to whatever I was looking for.

Time elongates. My partner sighs into the darkness. The clock face reads 1:37, and as soon as I've glanced at it, I squinch my eyes shut into the pillow. This moment is everything that is wrong with me: I finally have a chance to do sex *right* and I'm ruining it.

The warm, gentle weight of my partner's hand presses against my shoulder. *Hey*, they whisper. *We can just go to sleep.* But I don't want to. I don't want to keep being broken. I drag from my throat a phrase that feels plausible, if not true: *I want you to fuck me.*

What I want, though I won't realize it for years, is a kind of asexual tautology. I want sex to feel the way I'm told it's supposed to feel, and I want that feeling to come easily, effortlessly, the way I'm told it ought to. In this longing, I am insatiable.



ble—not like a sponge, but like a sieve. Everything I try—the afternoon in my loft bed; tonight, my partner reaching into my underwear, my voice catching as they touch me—fails to fill me up. I won't hate myself in the morning, but I won't feel any closer to what I'm seeking either.

It is one of the last times my partner and I sleep together.

## POSSIBILITY

*What are you into?* my new acquaintance asks. She leans in close to let me hear her over the party din. Electro beats thump through the black-walled Brooklyn basement. A cane whooshes through the air, and a sharp yelp follows. Someone's wailing orgasm crescendoes.

I hear this question at every kink event. *What are you into*, as we mill around after a class on flogging, waiting our turn to inspect a display of luxurious leather flails. *What do you like*, from a butch who swaggers up to me in the corner by the party's entrance. I am supposed to answer with a laundry list of acts: caning, bondage, needles, knives. But all I know is that coming here is essential to a quest I still can't articulate.

Looking back, I will see my early days in New York's queer BDSM scene as its own asexual journey. I am drawn to this community where the rules of engagement are clear, where no single act is considered central to intimacy. It seems more possible to navigate this world where I might choose a partner out of a shared desire to experience something, not because I am supposed to feel attracted to them. But when I'm asked what brings me to BDSM in these early days, I always disappoint.

*I'm not sure yet*, I answer the first people who ask me, but they quickly lose interest. Tonight, I tell my new acquaintance, *I just love the way this community handles consent*. She leans away from me, her nose upturned. *If you think about it that way*, she says, *you're missing out on all the fun parts*.

I am missing the fun parts, and again, my inexperience is to blame. Sometimes, before parties, I lose myself in fantasies—walking a menacing circle around a wide-eyed stranger; someone I met at a friend's birthday party kneeling before me, hissing as I pull their hair. I imagine these moments, and a dozen subway stops rush by before I come back to myself, breathless and hopeful.

But as soon as I enter the playspace, my confidence falls away. I don't know how to translate the feeling of the fantasies into words that make sense here. I don't know if I want to cane or tie or pierce or draw a blade along flesh, and if I did want to, I wouldn't know where to start. I am ashamed of my newness, ashamed of wanting to top despite my newness, ashamed that I can't answer a simple question.

A stranger with a mullet and a sharp-toothed grin rests a thick-soled boot on the bench where I am failing to make conversation. *Does anyone want to make out?* Her eyes scan the bench and stop on mine.

I go with her immediately, so relieved there's something to say yes to that I don't stop to consider whether I like making out—doesn't everyone?

There's a mattress on a platform at the back of the playspace, lined with thick vinyl, and the grinning stranger takes me there, leaves the privacy curtain half-open. She doesn't mind that I don't know what I want. She offers to spank me and I agree. She runs her hands up my sides and I sway into the touch, grateful to be feeling something, anything. Her breath stinks of whiskey, and I tell myself I like the way her hands grab at me. I don't know what to do with my own hands, but it doesn't seem to matter.

She lies me on my front and slaps me through my pinstripe pants. The fabric dulls the impact, and I don't know if I'd rather the sensation were sharper. Her free hand spiders up my thigh, tracing my pant-seams, and some traitorous part of me wants those fingers closer, higher, though my gut twists at

the thought. I don't quite trust the grinning stranger. I'm not sure that what I'm looking for can be found here.

There is a strange dissonance to unwanted sexual touch. Her fingers wriggle up into my crotch, and my hips arch up into the crude pleasure of it. At the same time, an alarm bell starts clanging in my gut, muted but growing stronger. My consciousness peels away, narrating the experience instead of feeling it: *there's her hand; the vinyl is sticking to my cheek; this feels good; there's no reason to leave*. I've felt this dissonance so many times, and yet each time I fail to imagine it as a possibility. Each time, I'm certain that this time, the touch will be wanted.

It's not the spanking I mind—the spanking is just noise. It's the gulf between my crotch and my gut. Pleasure keeps me complacent, keeps my face disappearing into the mattress's comfortless vinyl. The alarm inside me grows louder, but sensation drowns it out. Those brain barrels I once imagined spilling chemical wretchedness are poised once again to burst open. I hate myself for not wanting this after all but I don't, I don't.

She lifts her hand, readying another slap, and I roll gracelessly off the bed, legs shaking. *I'm sorry*, I tell the grinning stranger. *I have to go*.

## DESIRE

My new girlfriend's house is brightly lit, a second-floor walkup with big windows that overlook an alley. Her roommate painted the walls a cheery aqua, and riot grrl posters and Renaissance nudes hang framed and level in her bedroom.

My new girlfriend has a Nintendo Wii, and we spend giggly afternoons battling each other at virtual tennis. She buys a fondue pot, and we burn our mouths on boozy, molten cheese.

When it comes to sex, I tell my new girlfriend I need to take things slowly, and she doesn't push. We kiss for the first time outside the 1st Avenue L train station, and my body twinges afterwards, less

settled than I'd like. That melancholy ache grows when we finger each other for the first time, but after a while, I stop noticing. She massages my back, and I feel pampered and deserving. I pinch her nipples, and I enjoy her breathless pleasure at the pain. I wanted to have sex without it hurting me, and here I am, mostly unscathed. And yet the more we do it, the more I find myself unsatisfied.

My internal goalposts keep moving. First, I thought it would be enough to prove I could have sex without it harming me. Later, I thought I just wanted sexual experience, so I wouldn't have to feel lost or ashamed. But with my new girlfriend, I feel impatient and bewildered. Surely the thing we're doing now is just a stepping stone to the real thing. Surely somewhere on the horizon is something that will actually feel intimate and transcendent, the way I still, against evidence, expect sex will someday feel for me.

*I'm up for anything*, my new girlfriend tells me. *If you want to try something, just say so*. She tells me this in bed, winded from finger-fucking, but she tells me other things too. She thinks toys are underwhelming, and kink is pretentious. Anything I do to her body, she wants to do to mine. And so I once again stay silent when she asks me what I want.

I have said this is an asexual story, but it is also a kink story. The more I consider what I want, the more forgotten desires come back to me. I picture hurting my new girlfriend more, harder, imagine a world where my pinches, twists, and slaps give her the same hazy glow I used to envy on the faces of bottoms at play parties. I picture giving her orders she won't just turn around and give me—to strip off clothes, to stay still, to make herself vulnerable.

Sometimes, waking from these fantasies, I feel an old self-loathing rise in me. My new girlfriend is *up for anything*; what is wrong with me that I can't admit what I desire? And yet I'm certain that her *anything* can't quite imagine me asking to top without bottoming, to be dominant without then

submitting, to play with power and pain without also playing with sex.

Some people are innately drawn to submission and masochism and take pleasure in a partner who wants to hurt them, to call the erotic shots. I understand without being told that my new girlfriend is not one of those people, that the part of me that wants these things is not welcome here. I understand too that I can't keep having our stepping stone sex knowing that something more is possible.

In our breakup conversation, I confess that what I want to explore is a partnership where I'm always the top. *You're right*, she says. *I don't want that.* It's the last time I see her.

## RECOGNITION

Despite being an institutional conference room, the meeting space is warm and lively. I've been going to kink classes again for the past year, and sometimes parties too, though I am more cautious now about what I agree to.

We are discussing the ways fat liberation and sexual liberation intertwine. The instructor is a new friend of mine, a fat activist and community educator who has, for the occasion, shaved their head clean and shined their leather boots. They stand at the butcher paper easel pad with a steady yet gentle posture, greeting friends and strangers alike as we enter.

In the center of the room sits a circle of wide, armless chairs, meant to assure every attendee a comfortable seat. Friends of the instructor have brought decadent home-baked goods to share: buttery, salt-topped cookies with thick chocolate chunks, some sort of gooey bar that bursts citrusy bright on the tongue.

The intention is to ground us in our bodies through comfort, pleasure, and ease, and it works. The workshop begins with an invitation to rest our feet squarely on the ground, and somehow, just before my friend invites us to do this, my feet find

their way there unprompted. I may not have words yet for everything I want and don't, but this is the kind of space where it feels like I could be or not-be anything.

In the Q&A session that follows, a young gay man raises his hand. He doesn't enjoy penetration, he tells us. How can he tell this to his partner?

My friend has astonishing empathy and insight. Of course sharing a boundary is hard, they say. There is always the risk that our boundary won't be respected. And in this case in particular, there's an idea that penetration is central to gay sex; it makes sense that it feels difficult to tell people that this thing that's supposed to be central is something you don't desire.

The young gay man nods in recognition; the room holds its collective breath. My friend suggests some phrasings for conveying the boundary, and then they make a final, gentle suggestion. *Also, think about what you do want.*

It will be another decade still before I use the word asexual to describe myself. But everything the word will give me, I feel in this moment. For the first time, I imagine a world where my high school girlfriend hears my no. I only have to say it once; there's no pressure, no hands roaming past the limits I've set, no repeated asks, no insistence that sex is something everybody must do. I imagine someone giving me this same invitation: *think about what you do want.*

As a child, I thrilled myself at bedtimes with stories about domination. A sharp-clawed cat hunting down mice. Armies of feral children capturing each other and sending their prisoners through byzantine torture machines. I told myself these stories in secret and never questioned why they compelled me, why sometimes, at the tensest points, I would squeeze even tighter the pillow I kept between my legs to sleep.

*Think about what you do want.*

If I could have thought long enough, I like to imagine that my mind would have drifted to

those old stories, to their proto-erotic thrills. I like to think I would have recognized that those stories pointed to something fundamentally true about me and my desires. I like to imagine something inside me settling into place. And I like to think that forever after, I could hold those childhood bedtime stories like a smooth stone in my palm. Then, whenever anyone asked me what I wanted, no matter what they expected, I could feel the cool, solid weight of my memories and know I had an answer.



# Mary Ball Washington

Candria Slamin

*For the students of University of Mary Washington's 2014 Student Transition Program*

Mary, do you remember when us Niggas was in Paris? Paris was everywhere we went: small ass dorm rooms, cobblestone roads. Paris was smoking behind slaver named buildings on slaver named campus. Us Niggas found Paris sitting around dining tables circled with wings. A prayer of Niggas being Niggas. You 'member the way us Niggas' brown skin tricked your white ass out that summer? All the multitude of shades of beautiful Black, running 'round free to be just a bunch of young Niggas in our new Paris. 'Member how our loud ass, run away laughter rang through your empty bones? We made every square inch of you gold when we was in Paris.

Mary, you probably don't really remember. But, us Niggas do. We remember that summer and we remember the fall winds coming through. We remember blowing apart, spreading thin across your sea of white. Us Niggas remember the first one of us to drop out. Damn, us Niggas remember counting each other every midterm just to see who was left. Niggas remember the way we rubbed you wrong, the silence that came with your fall. Niggas remember holding our own selves cause you won't gonna do it. We got left in the night with your local swastikas close behind.'

Us Niggas remember our Parisian summer when your president scooped us up. Welcomed us into his slaver's home. Smiled his politician smile and did not say "this is where my ancestors beat yours."

# October Love

Aliyah Cotton

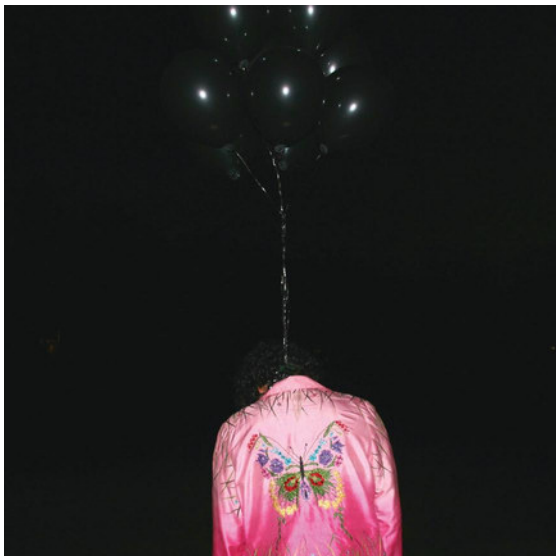
Aliyah Cotton is a queer poet of color from Reston, VA. She earned her MFA from Boston University where she was a recipient of the Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Poetry Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rust + Moth*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. Aliyah lives in Charlottesville, VA where she creates music under the moniker October Love.



## About “tulips”

“tulips” was written with the help of producer Anthony Leana in the summer of 2022. It is about love and depression.

Scan the code to listen to  
“tulips”



## About “buoy”

“buoy” was written with the help of producer Chutes in winter of 2021. It is a reflection on covid isolation and depression.

Scan the code to listen to  
“buoy”



# Please, When You Get This

Lisa Piazza

The woman behind me is desperate. Her voice is pill blue. Cup of water clear. She whispers into her phone: *Send my medicine*. Then again, each word punctuated with a swallow. Each word a dose she doesn't have.

Outside the shuttle, the desert rolls by: mesas, saguaros. Everything is brown, red, gold. Dry heat, blue sky. Later: clouds, then rain. A rainbow. But we'll be at the airport by then.

After two minutes, the woman tries again. *Send. My. Medicine. Overnight it*. Is she calling the same number? A son? A daughter? Spouse? She leaves the same message, then, at the end: *Please, when you get this...* her voice is the thin rustle of pine needles. Her voice is a dry tumbleweed.

I give her my "it's okay" smile. My "don't worry" nod. Back in the classroom, my students name all my looks. But it's summer now; this isn't my classroom and the woman isn't my student so she ignores me. She's older than I am, wearing slacks and a sleeveless blouse. Her hair is white. When she boarded, she looked at me in the middle row then chose a seat in the row behind. The only other passenger is a young guy in his twenties with his earbuds in, mouth open, eyes closed. We are two hours from the airport.

How many times will she call? Who will get the message and will they respond? None of this concerns me and yet—

*Why do you care so much?* That's what my students say when I stop a story or a poem we are reading to ask them questions. When I take my glasses

off that's what they call my "time to discuss" look.

The woman whispers again. *Please, when you get this...*

I scroll through the photos on my phone: sunset over Zion's Cathedral Mountain, sunrise over Checkerboard Mesa, hearts in the slick rock, branches like dried bones. Petroglyphs. I have already decided to project them on my wall in September as a first assignment. Spirals in red rock. Human figures. The squiggle of a snake. *But what do they mean?* I can hear the kids ask already.

Pictures as language. The necessity of communication. Story, I'll say and raise my eyebrows. They'll give that look a name; I'll cross my arms and they'll name that one, too. I'm imagining a future studying the past, crafting the lesson in my mind when the shuttle suddenly sputters and the driver pulls over to the shoulder of the highway.

The woman behind me lets out a small gasp.

The driver says: *Well, folks. Luckily another shuttle's behind us. Won't be but a few*. He hands out bottles of water from his cooler. The sleeper wakes up, gulps his down. I press mine to my head. The woman holds her phone out like a walkie-talkie, repeating her message: *Please, when you get this...*

Her voice is the crumble of sandstone.

Her voice is a dust cloud.

It feels like my job to reassure her — if only because I've been listening to her repeated calls. I want to narrate a version of her future that makes everything okay: yes, your daughter will get your message. She'll call your prescription into the near-

est pharmacy. It will be ready by the time you land.

But who knows? I am about to say something conciliatory, at least, when the driver slides open the door. *Might as well stretch your legs. Stand in the shade, though. Don't want anyone fainting from the heat. Ha ha.*

Outside the warm air soothes. I lean against the bus and kick at the sticks on the side of the road. I could pick one up. Scratch my own message in the shoulder of the highway: *Please, when you get this...* But what comes next? Who would read it? And when?

In the end, it's the young guy who helps the older woman. He takes her arm as she gets out of the bus. Stands with her on the side of the road, shaded by the shuttle. *There's an app for that*, he tells her. *You can get anything anywhere anytime now. See?* Pulls out his phone and brings something up on the screen. I want to lean in, learn more. But it feels intrusive to finish something I've never started.

When the next shuttle pulls up, the two of them get on together. I am outside, alone in the desert sun. I stand there long enough for the new driver to ask: *you getting on?* And I remember then that I am flying home, back to the fog of the Bay Area, where graffiti art replaces petroglyphs and concrete stands in for sedimentation. Back to my apartment – silent, still, empty. To a stack of final papers I never graded and an unopened book a student loaned me to read. I will start the new school year as the same old person: meaning well, seemingly well. Learning like the rest of them how to read the signs before it's too late.

On the new bus, the woman's voice is soda sweet: she's found her pills. They were in the side pocket of her carry-on all along. I would ask for one to see me through, too. But—

The bus glides onto the highway and I am back to staring out the window: mesas, saguaros, the gold of the desert soothes me. Dry heat, blue sky. Later: clouds, then rain. A rainbow I'll never see.

# The Day I Went Cold Turkey on Smoking

Gretchen Filart

- My daughter quipped, You have been saying that since last year.
- Capitalism enslaved me while washing its hands off with cigarette packs bearing pus-filled tumors, skinned throats & fleshy wounds.
- My temple throbbed from chain-smoking four cigarettes with lager.
- Like all mornings, a cold splash of water on the face before I muttered *ugly panda eyes*. Eyelids shut in rapture as brewed coffee & nicotine lorded over the sinews.
- For each smoke break, a toothbrush, mouthwash & citrus spray to keep my nose from complaining.
- My tongue searched for places to touch, but worried that few men won't whine, *I can taste the cigarette against the mint*.
- For every sore, I thought of writing a last will.
- I have tended to chemo patients & laid flowers on their coffins. Sometimes I imagined my palms, bone-white, receiving the garlands.
- Death has not frightened me as much as my kid not knowing she was loved the most.
- Seventeen years ago, our Anatomy professor came to class, shaky hands beaded with sweat. *I'm sorry, I'm late*, he said. *My nephew accidentally ingested cyanide while cleaning his rings. I was his attending doctor. I've seen this happen before. But it's not the same when it's someone you know.*
- I dreamed of him, only it was my daughter in a white coat, holding the mic. Eyes swollen, 10-year-old voice a fissure in the hollow halls. *I'm sorry, I'm late. My mom ingested cyanide for 23 years. I was her attending doctor. I've seen this happen before. But it's not the same when it's her in the casket, knowing she loved suicide more than me.*

# A Guilty Hindu

Chandra Persaud

The first time I felt different was in my fifth grade classroom, an overcrowded space housed in a four-storied brick building in Brooklyn. The girl who sat next to me—my best friend—saw a picture of Durga Maa in the back of my black and white composition book. Our English class was winding to an end. The room was filled with the excited murmur that rises when a bunch of eleven-year-olds spring back to life. I was part of this excitement too, buoyantly chatting with my friend. Entirely forgetting the grammar lesson we just had, we eased into speech patterns common to inner cities. Our teacher, Mrs. Maycher, walked over to check the day's assignment in our notebooks. Then, I felt the walls closing in.

One night, a few weeks back, my older sister printed out Durga Maa's image. It was my mother's request and an act of affection. It was also one of necessity. I was a sensitive child, easily bothered by loud noises, stern voices, strong scents, new situations... I would have much rather preferred to stay home, snuggled on my mother's lap watching the latest Bollywood film or follow my father around like a loyal puppy. I pleaded and cried nearly every morning for *all* of us to stay home, despite knowing that this was simply not feasible. Yet, my anxieties were real and my mother knew just what I needed: Durga Maa. The fierce warrior goddess. Slayer of the buffalo demon. A symbol of strength and protection for Hindus everywhere. As I watched the white edges fall away under the snip of my mother's scissors, she told me, "Durga Maa will protect yuh and watch ova yuh and help yuh do good in school."

A warmth flooded my body as I watched her tape the picture of the Goddess into my composition book. I felt as though I was given my very own shield. My chest swelled with comfort and hope. Things will be different now. I was sure of it.

But if Durga Maa was the lifeboat, that day in English class, I grew hot with shame for needing to be rescued. When Mrs. Maycher opened up my notebook, she happened to land right on Durga Maa's picture before turning to the white, lined sheets that contained my completed assignment. I felt my heart quicken, an indication my body knew I was different from my classmates even if my mind didn't believe it yet.

You must understand that I did my best to blend in with the Hispanic and Black students that mostly filled the seats in my fifth grade classroom. I didn't necessarily hide the fact that I was Hindu, but I didn't proclaim it either. I glossed over my cultural identity because I didn't know how to talk about that part of me. I couldn't explain that I was Indian but from Guyana, a country in South America which boasts a Caribbean, not Latin, culture. I didn't know how to explain that the voice of India's Lata Mangeshkar was soothing as a lullaby and Anand Yankaran's *chutney* tunes made me jump to my feet and curl my hands, yet I couldn't translate the *Hindi* or *Bhojpuri* spoken by either. I didn't want to admit that *sanaying* a homemade meal somehow made it taste more flavorful, your fingertips working to mix the food into small mounds that then reached your lips. I didn't know how to explain that



although English is the official language of Guyana, what really rolls off our tongues is a creole fused by the influences of African and Indian languages, an act of preservation by people dislocated from their motherlands. I didn't know how to explain these truths then. It was all too complex to be understood by my eleven-year-old brain.

Unlike my first generation peers who proudly clothed themselves in their hyphenated identities, I didn't emphasize the first part of mine. I was not Guyanese-American. I was simply American. My clothing and accessories matched my classmates. I stayed up-to-date with mainstream shows and music. I talked like them, imitated their mannerisms, gelled my hair like the girls in my class. Even when my fingertips smelled of curry from last night's dinner or earrings shaped like a bunch of grapes hung from my ears, I was still American.

But Durga's Maa image was too vivid, too bold to be ignored. Here was irrefutable proof that I was different from my peers, and that difference made me feel as though a horn just sprang from my head.

"Who is that in the back of your notebook?" my Puerto Rican-American best friend asked, her head tilted to one side, eyebrows pinched. Mrs. Maycher left our table and some students were stuffing books into their backpacks.

I lowered my voice so as not to attract attention. "Oh, it's just a picture my mom put there," I replied. I tried to sound cool but I heard my voice quivering.

"Let me see it," she said. I froze. I never anticipated anyone in school seeing my Protector, but I didn't see any way out of this. She was my best friend after all and she already saw the picture. I couldn't think of a good reason to not show her. So I did.

"Is that a person? Why does she have so many arms?" my friend asked curiously, but before I could answer, she already beckoned over two classmates standing nearby. In a classroom filled with

mostly Spanish and African American students, I knew this moment was not going to get any better. I sat still, heart racing, hands poised at each end of my notebook yet unable to close it. I stared down at Durga Maa, taking in the weapons she wielded. My eyes zeroed in on her trishul and lotus, the epitome of the One who wears a soft, omniscient smile while sitting majestically atop a lion. Unlike the night Durga Maa's image was taped into my book, a different kind of warmth pooled in my stomach, spreading to my face and arms. I no longer had my own secret shield. I was too exposed.

Two boys walked over. They looked at the image of Durga Maa splayed on my desk. "What the hell is that? Yooo, do you worship the devil?" one of them mockingly shrieked. They snickered and slapped their hands boyishly over each other. My best friend's eyebrows shot up, panic dancing in her eyes.

"It's a Hindu Goddess. My mom is Hindu, but I'm not. I'm Christian," I blurted out. The words hung in the air thick and heavy like wet clothes on a line. In that moment I did more than just lie. I was stuffing parts of me into tight spaces. I was denying that the smell of *agarbatti* washed over me like honey as my grandmother chanted her Sunday morning prayers. The burning incense accompanied by the stirring chime of a handbell to mark the end of her offerings. I was denying the *bhajans* I knew by heart, my mouth easily taking shape to produce Hindi devotional songs whose meanings I knew only loosely based on my grandmother's understanding of them. I was denying the religion that comforted my ancestors as they sailed from India to Guyana as slaves on British ships carrying both promise and decay. The religion that comforted me too, but which I was openly rejecting in front of eyes that did not look like mine.

My claim to Christianity was an attempt to remain despite the dust storm that was rolling my way, rumbling with my classmates' judgments and

assumptions. I could see no further than the wall of bodies enclosing my desk, yet I knew my *otherness* was on full display for all to see. In a whirl, my classroom transformed from safe grounds to dangerous territory. Their eyes grazed against my face like jagged debris. I gripped the sides of my notebook as though anticipating to be uprooted and swallowed whole without warning. The silence mounted. “I’m gonna stay away from you,” one of the boys finally said as he and his friend slowly backed away, covering their mouths but not stifling their laughter.

I closed my notebook quickly. Warmth blanketing my face.

“So, you’re not Hindu, right? You don’t pray to *that*?” my friend asked, her chin lifting ever so slightly to indicate Durga Maa.

The concern painted on her face was palpable. While I was desperate for refuge, I realized right then that *I* had become a terrifying storm. Another wrong move and I could disrupt balance and order in my fifth grade classroom for good. My best friend needed assurance that my *otherness* would not get in the way, that it would remain confined to an eight-inch black and white space. I needed someone to lean against the schoolyard fence with, to share lip gloss with, to pair off with at lunch. I knew what happened to those on the lowest rungs of fifth-grade hierarchy. So I replied, “I promise you. I’m not,” and just like that, I took Durga Maa—the One more powerful than any of Hinduism’s male divinities, Liberator of the oppressed, Source of my protection and fortitude—and hid Her away.

...

A few days later in our English class, my friend handed me a small box wrapped in layers of red tissue paper, corners sealed with tape. “A late birthday gift,” she said, a smile pursed on her lips. I held the box silently. “Open it!” she exclaimed impatiently. I looked at her, matched her smile, and tore

open the gift. I knew immediately it was a piece of jewelry. My anticipation grew. My best friend and I were always hunting for stylish earrings, necklaces, and rings to accessorize our outfits. Most of our jewelry was cheap, hanging off a rotating rack near shelves of nail polish in a beauty store a few blocks away from our school. I lifted the top of the white, rectangular box and found a gold necklace inside. Dangling right at its center was a thin cross pendant. I moved the box around slowly in my hand, watching it gleam under the fluorescent light.

“Do you like it?” my friend asked, eyeing my face. “It’s *real* gold too. I convinced my mom to buy it for you. I have the same one,” she said, lifting up the identical cross that rested on her chest. It resembled the ones many of my classmates wore, an anchor of similarity in a sea of shades of brown. “Now we can match,” she said with a satisfied smile. “Here, let me put it on you.”

I dutifully handed over the box and lifted my hair. The necklace felt cold around my neck and when my best friend’s fingers fastened the latch, goosebumps traveled down my arms. Now, I was anchored too.

“Take out your notebooks,” Mrs. Maycher’s voice boomed from the front of the room. I reached in my backpack and pulled out a new black and white composition book. The old one resting on my bed. A part of me left safely behind closed doors. I lifted the notebook’s cover and heard the spine break. Halfway through the lesson, the taste of rust coated my tongue.



# Fool's Gold

Marie Recalde



# To the Girl Who Just Found a Lump

Sascha Cohen

Wear all your favorite perfumes now:  
your Serge Lutens and your Frederic Malle  
Soon you'll smell just like the hospital  
The top notes are saline and alcohol  
The base notes are soiled linens and decay,  
waste leaking from wounds,  
everything unlovable

Braid bows and ribbons  
into your long hair  
Pile the curls up like a layer cake  
on the top of your head  
Bat your lashes like an angelic doll  
Soon you'll turn from woman to worm,  
ordinary and featureless,  
and no one  
will behold you with desire

Show off your teardrop breasts  
every chance you get:  
wear pasties seashells sequins  
or wear nothing, take photos and send them  
to strangers, spill yourself  
into the lucky mouths of lovers  
Soon you'll have silicone globes  
sewn tightly onto your chest, bloodless,  
numb, and never warm  
in anyone's hands

Now say it,  
you poor, doomed beauty.  
Say it like someone is clutching you by the jaw.  
Say you're so grateful to be alive.

# An Open Letter to Dr. Frankenstein & Company

Carson Sandell

bluestone flesh stitched alive,  
mullers enameled in mica, he watches  
you dance on the concept of death with a stare  
glazed in graveyard fog. his fingers, pitchfork

stiff, sought guidance from townsfolk  
who prayed for convention and preyed  
on whoever defied it. oh, Victor, he craved warmth,  
not flame to fascia: you maimed hope. a hermit

sutured his decay, led his tongue to language,  
taught him to break bread, not necks.  
he chose life with another man. and you chose  
to create life with one. if townsfolk found this truth

your heart would taste crucifix splinters.  
his loneliness was cured, after all, a monster's  
love is still love. oh, but you equated conformity  
to comfort. electrified another corpse to consciousness.

upon rebirth, she rejected him. it's vile how you created  
a woman for the pleasure of man. how evil  
the narrowness you assign to desire. you tore him  
from the one man who didn't want his skin seared

on the stake. though at the climax of his sorrow,  
he electrified all, except you, Victor. he won't  
be the last lover of shadows. from windmill, wedding,  
to wake, he surrendered warmth.



# Between Fall Leaves and Mountain Streams

Owen McCall

## 1. Brevard, North Carolina

Brevard is a town of around 7000 people, 85% of whom are white. Brevard does not have many activities. The mountains stretch high, and Baptist churches dot the landscape like sheep. My father takes me out into the mountain trails and shows me how to find a clean stream to drink from. The trick is to find a stream that originates nearby – the closer the spring, the cleaner the water. Brevard, and to a larger extent, North Carolina, feels clean. It feels blue, sharp, clear, like the cold water in those streams. The air is crisp and the wind brushes past harshly, leaving red noses and ruddy cheeks like you see in the movies. The mountains are tall, but gentle, with sloping curves and lush forests. The gentle atmosphere of Brevard is marred when I meet my uncle and his family – they live in a log house on the side of a hill, fortified with metal edges and a metal roof. They are harsh people, with drawling accents and as many beards as possible. They ask my mom strange questions about “her country” and make remarks about my “shiny hair.” They enter and exit rooms with guns and rifles in their hands, in their bags, across their backs. Their living room is adorned with deer heads and stuffed racoons. As a child, I imagined myself as one of those heads, stuffed and hung above the mantle with glass eyes and dead skin. The gruesome picture stayed with me every time I entered their home, and the air around me turned dark, a little violent. Crisp, still, but malevolent.

I am a little boy with long hair and my grandfather is teaching me how to shoot a rifle. We are standing in the side yard looking up at the hill and I hold the rifle with my small hands. My father comes out of the house to help. He shows me how to brace the gun against my shoulder so it doesn't hurt me. The scrappy tin cans sitting on the make-shift brick wall stare me in the eye as I lift the gun at them. My grandfather pushes the gun to the left.

“That's not gonna hit it,” he grumbles.

“Dad, you've only got one eye. How you gonna tell where to aim?” my dad says. He regains his country accent when we visit my grandparents.

My grandfather shot his eye out when he was nine, along with three of his right fingers and two of his left. When he grasps my shoulder I think about the chameleon in the book I'm reading. I look down the barrel of the gun and line up the end with the glinting green can in the distance. I think about the hanging heads in my uncle's home and I feel afraid, singularly and all at once. My finger tightens and nothing happens. I take a breath, ignore the image of the hanging heads, and steel myself against the cold metal of the gun. I squeeze again, harder. I hear a pop and the can is no longer on the brick wall. I feel a rush of giddiness and I can barely breathe.

This is the first time I ever felt like a boy. I wonder what it means that my first experience of boyhood is holding a gun.

“I'm gonna go inside, see if Francis's cookin' up anything good,” my grandfather says, and leaves

my father and I alone.

Francis was never cooking anything good. I liked visiting their house because there was always a half-eaten box of glazed donuts on the kitchen counter. My grandparents only ever ate glazed or jelly donuts for their daily meals. My dad buys them fresh vegetables, packaged sausage, and ground beef and organizes their fridge. The next time we visit everything is in the same place we left it. Regardless, the creamed corn my grandmother made remained one of my favorite meals as a child. It wasn't until I was sixteen and my grandmother long gone that I realized she just emptied the can into a bowl and placed it in front of me. My mom told me once that Francis wasn't a very good homemaker.

"You should be better," she told me. "You should know how to clean a house and cook a good meal. All women need to know how to do that. Men, they don't know. It's just a part of them. They don't know. You have to learn for them."

I spent a summer in North Carolina learning how to cook and do laundry. My mom stood next to me chopping carrots or broccoli or potatoes and I stood at the ready, watching her every move in order to learn how to chop my own carrots or broccoli or potatoes and feed my own apparently-helpless husband.

## 2. Baton Rouge, Louisiana

My father gets a job offer in Baton Rouge, where I spend the next 14 years of my life. We arrive in June of 2005, and Katrina hits that August. I spend my third week of school at home, huddled on the couch, learning to identify the helicopters flying overhead by sound. I learn, eventually, that the traffic in Baton Rouge is new, that the destruction is new, that the world is not populated with fallen trees and flooded swamps and broken doors. I learn, eventually, that the brown leaves and rotted trees are exactly, typically normal for the world I live in.

The trees in Baton Rouge don't change color. Every autumn, my father told me he was disappointed I'd never know true fall colors. "What true colors?" I'd say. He'd show me pictures of Brevard: bright oranges and vibrant yellows, shades of multitudes contained in one single tree, one single leaf, even. I knew trees to have only two colors: green and brown. I told this to a friend recently, and she pointed to some trees in the distance and protested, "those ones are yellow!" They were a yellowish shade of brown. The trees were dark and shadowy, and their leaves were the same. In the fall, the leaves turn from green to brown in the span of a week. There is no middle color. Baton Rouge is a city of binaries.

Baton Rouge is not dark. Nor is it bright. Baton Rouge is a landscape of beige. On my morning commute in high school, I pass eleven gas stations and twelve grocery stores. My mother has to drive 30 minutes to reach an Asian grocery store where she can buy her spices and sauces. There are no two-story grocery stores, or any two-story stores at all for that matter, a fact which shocks my friends from larger cities. The city spreads, sprawls like a tiger, across the land, reaching its paws almost past the river. There is no need to build up – only out, out as far as possible; turn the fields into JC Penny's, the ponds into retirement homes, the forest into orthodontists' offices. Everything in the city feels stagnant, although in reality it's constantly growing, like a living organism that gradually sweats and groans its way into adulthood. The air itself is stagnant – a stifling sort of wet heat that drowns you in your own prolific boredom.

There is an invisible line drawn almost through the exact center of the city, a little above I-12. North of the line – Black. South of the line – White. There is no middle color. The city is in the top 25 cities in America in terms of racial segregation. My Baton Rouge is not everyone's Baton Rouge. My Baton Rouge is the white-beige Baton

Rouge. I do not know what the Black Baton Rouge holds. Might there be excitement? Might there be brightness? There is nothing unique about my Baton Rouge – the heat, the Shell gas stations, the ever-changing pizza/seafood/italian restaurants, the big chain grocery stores. Every place in my Baton Rouge, you can find in another city. In high school we look at the racial map of the city. I scan for any little flashes of red indicating Asian, and I see none. I see the blue of White and the green of Black, and I look for my house and wonder what I'm classified as. None of my classmates must wonder. I attended high school with no one of my same racial makeup. After eighth grade, the girl with the closest match – half-Japanese, half-white – left to attend public school. My graduating class had approximately 45 students; six were non-white.

In elementary school, the kids used to call me chink and zipperhead, racial slurs I'm positive nine-year-olds shouldn't know. I'm also positive their parents – the same ones who handed me snacks at carpool and sang at my birthday parties – were the ones to teach them. And I'm sure their parents taught them to push me off benches and throw chairs at the Chinese teacher. I was still in elementary school, or maybe middle school, when I learned zipperhead referred to how, when white people shot Asian people, their heads split open like zippers. I remember imagining my own head splitting open every time I heard the metallic zip of my jacket. I often wondered if I was the only child imagining such things. But even this can be found in other cities.

On my winter break, home from college, I see the only laser tag place in town has closed. "It's going to be a church," my friend tells me. I nod, and wonder if they'll integrate the pews into the laser tag landscape. I think of the church where I spent my childhood Sundays asking God for transformation – small, relatively, and deeply Catholic in design. That is to say – stained glass windows,

deep-brown wood pews, an attached Elementary school in which to teach young children the sin of their existence. There is not much to do in Baton Rouge save laser tag and Catholicism. Well, now just Catholicism, I guess. I wonder how many cultural markers of white-beige Baton Rouge will turn into churches by the time I am old. Will the Waffle House on Airline eventually house a crowd of white worshippers? Will the Italian restaurant on Jefferson transform into a Baptist megachurch?

I like to imagine in two hundred, maybe three hundred years, how the concrete city will have changed. I like to imagine the roads, cracked and bleeding, maybe underwater, maybe overgrown. The buildings stretch for miles and miles, beige and a little brown and a little sad. It's mostly quiet, because it always is.

I'm not sure why I always imagine the city as if it has been deserted.

### 3. New Orleans, Louisiana

I move to New Orleans in Fall of 2018 for college. I am eighteen years old and I am attending the college last on my list, and I'm upset. New Orleans is not a city I enjoy. Growing up, I visited at least once a year for various reasons – field trips, showing family around, visiting a certain restaurant or museum. New Orleans feels dirty, feels like the color grey, a green-brown sludge of a city. As a child, I walked around the French Quarter with apprehension – I hadn't yet learned which streets are home to pictures of naked women and flashing lights. My parents walked me past the posters, and I shielded my eyes, filled with a deep sense of New Orleans-colored shame and embarrassment. It is only later I realize I only ever experienced the fake New Orleans, the tourism New Orleans, and I am sure the real New Orleans is colorful and bright. Nonetheless, I think of the city as a trash-filled swamp, and I am angry I didn't get a scholarship to

Emory or Virginia or Chapel Hill. I spend the first year of college in my dorm room, with brick and white stone walls and one window.

My first year roommate spends her time outside the room, in bar bathrooms and frat house backyards and in fields of yellow-brown beer. We don't speak to each other. The city is new to both of us, but she takes to the environment much better than I. The city is a great big party, constantly moving and yelling and throwing confetti, and I am depressed and tired and never speak. In most of my classes I am the only person of color, in every one the only trans person, and I am pigeonholed into The Other in every class discussion. I dye my hair bright blue, green, pink, trying to distract from everything else about me.

Our dorm room becomes a pit of trash, with clothes flung about and wrappers clinging to the bedsheets. Lila's side of the room is more frenzied, as if someone has rummaged through the drawers in a hurry, as if someone has tossed schoolbooks aside to make room for drinks and makeup. My side of the room is a sinking, slow mess, with piles of dirty laundry and takeout containers abandoned on the desk. Together we create such a chaotic environment that my friends offer to clean the room for free, just to get us out of the mess. We agree, but the room returns to its tumultuous state within a week.

The second year of college, I live in the honors dorm, which is far cleaner and calmer than the freshman dorm I lived in previously. The walls are a stark white and the floors are carpet, again, but cleaner. I bunk my bed and attach a small TV underneath, in order to play video games. My roommate this year is a clean and quiet boy I know from a club I attend infrequently. Jace and I divide the room into two sections, but his closet is on my side of the room. I attempt to keep my side clean, but eventually I populate my desk with dishes and papers and cups. We have one window that looks out to another building, brick and sidewalk and one sin-

gle tree. I travel the city only occasionally, heading to locations such as Texas Roadhouse or Barnes and Nobles. Now, the city feels almost like Baton Rouge, beige and grey and boring. I, again, only see the beige-white part of the city.

Half-way through year two of college, I move into my girlfriend's dorm room, because the pandemic sent everyone home and we've been dating for five months. We live in the room for another three months, and afterwards, we move into a house together on Plum Street. The house is kind of ugly, beige-brown and stucco and shaped like a tall box. The street it sits on is messy, with trash cans littering the sidewalks, grass growing through the streets, and tree roots growing through the pavement. The trees stretch over the sidewalk and give a nice shade, mottled and dark. The sidewalks are covered in mud every time it rains, and the gaping pothole in front of the house becomes dangerously filled with water. Regardless, the street feels safe, lively, and friendly, and there's a house with a rainbow flag across the street. We put up a little rainbow flag in our window to match.

New Orleans becomes a little less beige, after moving into that house on Plum Street. I start testosterone, and I walk back and forth to the university clinic every two weeks to get my shot. I let my hair grow back without bleaching it. We walk to the little deli/grocery store down the street, and there, they have the best fried chicken sandwiches in the world. The Chinese owners smile every time we pick up quick lunches on weekdays, but I still don't know their names. The snowball stand on the corner fills the street with people, families and children arriving after 3 for a mid-afternoon treat. Me and my friends walk through the streets, noting every colorful house we pass, noting every beautiful door we like. The dog that lives a few blocks down lays in little holes he digs himself in the ground, and he follows us down the block if we don't pet him. The city feels yellow, a little warm, a little calm. I

don't know most of the city. But mostly, my little world, it feels mine.



# Orca Raccoon Crow Anole

Ners Neonlumberjack



# Hyperobject

Chase Cate

“The assumption that Derrida always knows what he is talking about is not Derridean.”  
- Timothy Morton

How to map  
the underside of weeping  
the permeant fingerprint  
he left on my amygdala

We are photographs  
taken            in a mirror  
a kind of  
inverted inversion  
pulling the veneer  
from our fingernails  
when we can't speak

The memory of my brother  
-’s genitals sticks to me  
and suddenly I am  
    In the shower  
    I am    outside  
    I am under the bridge  
        I am in the branches  
                the tree in our father’s yard    the one that isn’t there anymore  
    I am between    my third and fourth rib  
    I am above            not a body  
I am only            impermanent

How to make    salient  
what can’t be    aggregated  
tell me at least  
how do you think            about rain  
how do the drops communicate — why  
did he do it?

God was right when  
 he said I am fearful ~~by created~~  
 and why shouldn't I be

Do you remember the day  
                   she told me to brush my hair  
 and a leaf fell on my chest while writing?

Do you understand?  
 Good  
 we never were  
 for understanding

I only wish  
 I could grieve everything  
 at once

I only know  
 a wound is a wall



# Where the Pavement Ends

Kathleen Frank



# contributors

# poetry

**Caitlyn Alario** is a queer poet from Southern California. A Teaching Fellow at the University of North Texas, her work has appeared in *Third Coast*, *Vallum Magazine*, *Annulet*, and elsewhere.

**Chase Cate** is a first year MFA student in poetry at Colorado State University. Their work is interested in the cosmic, the mundane, the moving, and how we create meaning amidst it all. They have been previously published in *Beyond Words* and *Literary Forest*. When they aren't reading or writing, they love to watch movies, drink tea, and steal back small pieces of their time from the capitalist machine.

**Sascha Cohen** is a writer from Los Angeles.

**Gretchen** resides in the chaotic comfort of the Philippines, where she writes poems and creative nonfiction about motherhood, love, grief, nature, and intersectionalities. A finalist in phoebe's 2023 Spring Poetry Contest and second place in Navigator's 2017 Travel Writing Competition, her work appears in *Rappler*, *Maudlin House*, *Rejection Letters*, *Defunkt*, *Door Is A Jar*, and elsewhere. Connect with her on Twitter or Instagram @gretchenfilart, or via her website, [ourworldinwords.com](http://ourworldinwords.com).

**Carson Sandell** (they/them) is a queer trans poet from San Jose, CA. They are a 4th Creative Writing undergraduate at University of California, Riverside. Outside of academia Carson is also Poetry Reader for Split Lip Magazine and Poetry Editor at Poetry is Currency Magazine. Most nights you will find them at home reading or writing over a glass of wine.

**Candria Slamin** (she/they) is shaking and baking from Virginia, USA. When she's not being a poet, they're busy being a giant nerd on the Internet. Find them on Twitter at @candyslam\_.

**Ellen Zhang** is a student at Harvard Medical School who has studied under Pulitzer Prize winner Jorie Graham, poet Rosebud Ben-Oni, and poet Josh Bell. She has been recognized by the 2022 DeBakey Poetry Prize, 2022 Dibase Poetry Contest, and as 2019 National Student Poet Semifinalist. Her works appear or are forthcoming in *Rappahannock Review*, *COUNTERCLOCK* journal, *Hekton International*, and elsewhere.

# fiction

**Mason Martinez** (they/them) is a Latin, queer writer and traveler from nyc. When they're not writing, they're spending time getting lost in the woods and spending countless hours on the road. Their words have been awarded the Ginny Wray Senior Prize for Fiction and featured in *Gandy Dancer*, *The Institutionalized Review*, *Yuzu Press*, and more. You can read more of their work at: <https://masonmartinez.carrd.co/>

**Lisa Piazza** is a writer, educator and mother from Oakland, Ca. Her stories have been nominated for Best Small Fictions, Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.



# creative nonfiction

**Owen McCall (he/him)** is a genderqueer trans man living in New Orleans. He enjoys reading and playing TTRPGs. He's planning on attending law school beginning the fall of 2023. He currently works at a preschool, where he has been described as "bad at standing" but "good at snacks."

**Chandra Persaud** is a New York State licensed speech-language pathologist. In her spare time, Chandra enjoys writing on topics such as love, grief, identity, and self-actualization. She was born in Guyana, traces her roots to India, immigrated to the United States with her family as a child, and fully embraces her multicultural identity. She writes from Brooklyn, NY.

**Megan Stories** has been writing about the intersections of kink, trauma, asexuality, queerness, and generally being sex-weird since the early 2000s--longer if you count those childhood compositions about Rainbow Brite "nibbling" Strawberry Shortcake. She has been published in *Electric Literature* and *The Establishment* and appeared as an invited storyteller at Outfluenced: A Night of Queer Storytelling.

## art

**Kaloni Borno**, Kaloni believes her pieces of art display a good range of colors and vibrancy. There is no recipe for how she makes them, but she believes that's what makes it a great collective. It could be described as one creative melting pot. Most of her artworks were inspired by various things that include emotional intimacy, explorative identity, mental health, and euphoric nostalgia. When creating these pieces, feedback and viewer's interpretation of what it means to them, is what she hopes to invoke.

Santa Fe artist **Kathleen Frank** travels throughout the Southwest/West, seeking landscape paintings vistas. Using vibrant hues, she captures light, pattern and a glint of logic in complex terrains. Exhibitions include Northwest Montana History Museum; UNM Valencia; International Art Museum of America; MonDak Heritage Center| Art & History Museum; St. George Museum of Art; WaterWorks Museum; Sahara West Gallery; La Posada de Santa Fe; Roux & Cyr Fine Art Gallery; and Jane Hamilton Fine Art. Press includes LandEscape Art Review, MVIBE, Art Reveal, Magazine 43 and Southwest Art. Art in Embassies/U.S. State Department selected her work for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

**Ners Neonlumberjack** was born in a tiny town in central Indiana in 1986. Having lived throughout the Midwest and Southern United States, the variety of landscapes in which they have lived informs a wealth of variety and interest in plants and animals in imagery as well as material choice. After graduating Herron School of Art and Design with degrees in Painting, Sculpture, and Art History in 2009 the longing for a sense of place and being conscious of the fragile nature of mortality has been a current within the works.

**Donald Patten** is an artist from Belfast, Maine. He is currently a senior in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Maine. As an artist, he produces oil paintings and graphic novels. Artworks of his have been exhibited in galleries across the Mid-Coast region of Maine.

**Marie V. Recalde** is a writer, artist, translator and California native living abroad for the last decade. Her art has been featured by Las Laguna Art Gallery in Laguna Beach, CA.

# music

**Aliyah Cotton** is a queer poet of color from Reston, VA. She earned her MFA from Boston University where she was a recipient of the Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Poetry Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rust + Moth*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. Aliyah lives in Charlottesville, VA where she creates music under the moniker October Love.

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