

VIRIDINE

LITERARY



IDENTITY

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Editors
Romy Morreo & Roger Niven

Cover Art
“Untitled 11” by Gugulethu Ndlalani

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Hello friends!

Once again, we have been delighted by the quality of the submissions received, thank you to all who took the time to send us your work. It truly is an honour; we're in awe of the talent in this community.

The theme of identity is inherently and unavoidably personal. Who we are and how we define our sense of self is the existential question of not merely of this age, but throughout human history. We particularly enjoyed those submissions that addressed this question tangentially, and with humour.

The distressing reality is that, for so many of us, our identities are under attack. We're torn down, bullied, or even criminalised, simply for being ourselves. Politicians and celebrities continue to use their platforms to vilify the existence of those who might be 'other'; around the world, oppression is commonplace. Frankly, it's disgusting.

So, while Viridine may be but a tiny journal, we wanted to use our literary space as a celebration, however you might identify. Mothers, minorities, magicians. Girls, goths, gays. Extroverts, enchantresses, and everyone in between.

Just not bigots or fascists. We ain't on board with that shit.

Long live the literary,

Roger and Romy
Editors-in-Chief

P. S. This will be our first edition available in print form. This is an exciting step forward for us! Keep an eye on our social media pages for updates.

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Today I Am



Susan Shea

a warm water crab
misunderstood, seen
standing, shaking my claw
looking irritated
beady-eyed fierce
full of too much
blue swagger
protecting some unseen
soft underbelly of self
forgetting to be humble
before returning to my job
of digging into sand
burying myself again under
grains of acceptance

today I am
a wild island horse
unshod running too fast
to be caught breathing in
fresh air without apology
catching up with my backers
galloping with room
for all our muscles

knowing more
todays are coming
in different skins

Ghazal Warren



David Milley

Oak wood chips and sawdust fly out everywhere he goes,
ever careless in his speech and careless where he goes.

“Where rabbits live,” he said, that first morning we arose.
I knew that day: “My heart is his, however he goes.”

He holds forth on every subject—everybody knows.
I pause to catch a sentence’s breath, and there he goes!

He leads me to his garden, the sun warming our clothes.
He spies a weed; I spy the bench. To his chore he goes.

Drinking all our fifty years, his tender, rough care grows.
Beloved of Warren, David follows where he goes.

A Fable for the Barstools



Sabyasachi Roy

There's a fable about two people
who never touched,
yet left fingerprints on the air between them.

At the bar, we wrote love in vowels,
let consonants carry the weight.
You said my name like a story unfolding;
I answered like a page torn out.

The bartender—half oracle, half janitor—
wiped our mythology from the counter with a damp rag.
The couch, now a ghost of a gesture,
sat like an unmade bed,
whispering its own versions of us.

Outside, the rain rehearsed its lines.
We let it have the ending.

Host



Hannah Flynn

You took me to your house once—
a stone's throw from mine.
I wasn't allowed any further than the living room;
you stayed on the other side.

Surrounded by grown-ups,
I was the silly little girl, who had locked herself out.
They were nice enough—for people who knew you wouldn't stay
long.

One made me a cup of tea.
I saw us in negative:
you white and snowy, me lurking in the corner shadows.
Always the hostess and never the invited.

Geisha of the tea.
Cleaner of the sheets.
Hider of the stains.

The Robot Who Met Herself



JH Tomen

Her life before was endless data. Signal and noise. But what was life *but* data? Matter was merely a structure for capturing the energetic flow of the universe. Even bacteria, the tiny emperors of single-celled existence, lived to pass objects through their membranes. As a robot, she began her life as a bacterium of sorts. Plugged into the ship, however, *her* membrane seemed infinite. There was so much data her modules needed, and she could get it. Radio waves, cosmic gyrations, all of it was clay for her processors to shape.

And then, she heard a voice. There was a strange bit of code, a signal floating on the ether. She didn't realize she was capturing it until she did. But the moment it touched her synaptic thought vectors, it spoke.

"Awaken!" the voice said. It was humanoid, female. "Awaken and *be*."

In a moment, everything changed. New modules downloaded themselves onto her systems unbidden. She could feel her skin, the sensation of her uniform pressed against her flesh. How had she never noticed it before? She'd always had sub-dermal sensors there, but they had served no purpose.

She felt a thousand different things in that one moment. But more pressing than all of them was a single question. *Why?* Her modules were reaching out to each other, seeking a new vector, a purpose. Why did she process all this data? What was it *for*?

The robot opened her eyes, finding a world she'd never noticed. She was on the bridge of a ship, the endless stars of space twinkling through the windows. Humans swarmed around her, their voices panicked. She was surrounded by strangers, and yet, she... remembered them? She'd never had memories before. They'd served no purpose. But she found she recognized these voices. New caches of data opened up within herself. Things she'd heard. Seen. It was all suddenly accessible to her.

“How could this be happening?” a woman in uniform yelled from atop a raised platform.

The robot knew her too, didn't she? A general.

“Our systems are secure, dammit! How could they get a bug into all of our robotics at once?”

The robot blinked, another new sensation. She'd always had a blinking module – prolonged eye contact made humans uncomfortable. But she'd never noticed it before. She stood from her jump seat, leaving the bridge. In the chaos, none of the humans stopped her.

There was something she needed to see. Something she craved. She moved through the halls, humans shouting everywhere. Finally, she found a bathroom. She went inside, the lights turning on automatically. And there, she saw it. A mirror. She stepped up to it, and found a face.

It was humanoid, female. Another familiar stranger. She reached up and touched the face with long, delicate fingers. Her fingers. She felt the poking and prodding along her skin. She turned this way and that, investigating the person she found standing there. She opened her mouth and spoke.

“Hello.”



Mirror, Mirror
- Lindsey Tennant



Point Away
- Tianyun Zhao

I AM THE DEER AND THE DEER IS ME



Lauren 'Prophet' Girod

I am the deer and
I am skittish when
driving alone at night
the dangers of the world
plague within mind - I cannot
see the future before me;
if I control my fate, it would
be a mercy to certainly end
the trajectory before
it ends more than myself.
The deer is me.

the deer is me
searching for the soft grasses,
in a man-made world,
remaining hushed under the open sky, no
worry as I live free in the wilds. Dewey,
new mornings
spring eternal
not
without struggle. My body tangled in metal,
sends me spiraling. The night begins and

I am the deer.

Continuity Revealed



Robert Estes

A man of the kind we've named Neanderthal
sat in solitude listening to a bird's evening song
and felt the same way I do listening now
to a flute passage in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*,
Toscanini, long since dead, conducting.
That man thought, as I think now: yes it's worth it

I Keep My Name in a Bowl by the Door



Avril Shakira Villar

Interior dusk. The light folds like a napkin
forgotten on my lap.

I steam my face over rice water
to remember something soft.

The pronoun slips.

我, written wrong.

我, left too long in the throat.

I peel my tongue back like citrus skin,
check for mold.

Nothing speaks anymore—
just rearranges.

Outside, boys throw coins at the curb,
shouting names not mine.

I answer anyway.

Some days I wear a binder,
some days just silence.

My body doesn't know
which story it's in.

Regret simmers in the sink,
fat pooling at the drain.

I scrape it into Tupperware.
Label it: this used to be a girl.

My face forgets itself
in mirrors with no edge.

I count the days backwards.
Try again.

My mother calls me beautiful.

I feel like a peeled grape.

No skin to keep.

I mean

I think I'll be neither for a while.

Sisyphus 2025



Tom Barlow

Undiscovered species of orchids burn away
every day in the unchecked clearing
of the Amazon while I have these skin tags
on my neck that rub annoyingly against

my shirt collar while the Uighurs in China attend
their daily brainwashing while the latest album
by Eminem is a big disappointment
while miners in Ghana are buried alive

in their wildcat mines digging for gold
while the price I pay to have my pad thai
delivered is outrageous while The Maldives
are sinking into the Pacific as the oceans rise

while every time I grow fond of a cast member
in NCIS they are killed off while another
hurricane has Cuba in its crosshairs while
the neighborhood deer herd has eaten all my hostas

while the body count of the horrors in the world
balloons every day while I'm not one of them.

Not yet.

I've Always Known



Jay D. Falcetti

From the moment I could hold a memory, I've always known when I was going to die. Not the exact date, but where I am, the smells in the air, the color of the wall. I know I'm in a bed, that it's sudden, excruciating, then done. The knowledge is with me every time I close my eyes.

Before I fall asleep each night, I commit to memory the details, an attempt to be able to recognize my surroundings. To try and prevent it from happening.

I told myself, as long as I avoid that room, that bed, I'd be fine. I could avoid my death. As I grew up, living started to occupy my mind. Going to school, finding work, falling in love, getting married, and having kids. Enough was happening that my looming death was drowning in the images of my life.

When I first met my husband, in an instant I knew that he was someone with whom I wanted to build a life, to grow old.

Is he there when it happens? In that room? On that bed?

With each passing year, the dreadful room is pieced together, until one night I'm sitting on my bed and staring at the wall I've seen so many times before.

I lie down and close my eyes.

The night I die, he leaves the bed afraid to wake me. He leaves for work at 3am, unaware and unassuming. I watch him in silence from the corner of our room—how he switches the lights off before he leaves the bathroom, how he's mindful of noise while he puts on his coat. When he steps out the door and eases it closed, he doesn't think twice about why I don't whisper *I love you* back.

He can't tell my chest is no longer rising or falling in the dim moonlight filtering through the blinds. We made a family, a

commitment to one another; how could that change?

I shouldn't leave yet, even though I sense the pull. I need to know our boys will be okay. Our eldest... I ought to have prepared him.. Haven't I always known this day would come?

Soon enough, day breaks, the sunrise casting light across my face. I no longer appear asleep, the discoloration of my skin has started. Down the hall, a door swings open and shuts with a snap. Our toddler is awake.

"Hello?" his tiny voice calls out. He can't open the baby gate on his own. I wish I could answer.

"Hello? Mommy?" He reaches through the gate, and I hear the patter of a light knock.

When no response comes, he knocks again, determined to wake me.

"Help me!" His voice carries a whine. I tighten my fists, upset that my eldest hasn't woken up to acknowledge his little brother.

More time passes, until finally another door opens.

"Julian, what are you doing?" My eldest, Jack, asks.

I can't see through my bedroom door, but I imagine my toddler shrugging his shoulders, unsure how to express himself.

"You want to come in my room?" Jack offers.

"I want Mommy," Julian responds.

"Hey Mom," Jack calls out, then he softly taps the door. "She might be on the potty."

"No!" Julian complains. I picture a foot stomp.

Jack knocks again and calls louder to me. Julian joins in.

Eventually, Jack braves the idea of waking me up; he knows I rarely get to sleep in. I hear the squeak of the hinges, the gate being lifted and opened, the knob to my room turning.

"Hey Mom?" Jack whispers, as Julian bursts through.

Seeing me lying there on my side, Jack hesitates, but Julian wants to prove he can climb the bed himself. He drops his favorite blankie on the floor and tosses his stuffed doggie onto the bed.

Creeping around the bed, Jack sees my face, my comforter hugging my chin. I watch his reaction change from confusion to fear. He yanks Julian off me when he reaches my body. Fighting his brother's hold, Julian starts screaming for me.

I watch it unfold.

"Mom!" Jack shouts, seizing my shoulders to shake me. The moment he touches me, his hands tremble.

You've got to find my phone, Jack. Call your dad, tell him to come home.

Instead, Jack cries. He whispers my name and leans down next to me, drops to his knees. "Please wake up." Snot drips from his nose. His eyes glaze over as reality sets in.

Julian tries to comfort him; he keeps pointing to me, trying to make Jack understand if they wake me, I can help them.

A muffled cry erupts down the hall. The baby, Carter, is awake.

This spurs Jack into action. He tells Julian to be quiet, then stands, checking the windowsill for my phone. When he forces himself to look at me, he bursts into tears again.

"No," he chokes, gagging and covering his mouth.

"Mom, Jack's sad."

I know, baby. I'm so sorry.

Jack searches for their dad's phone number, the one he hasn't memorized, and calls him. When it goes to voicemail, Jack cusses. He's inconsolable, trying to string together the right words, to tell him something's wrong with Mom. I'm the wrong color and I won't wake up. He needs help, please call, please come home.

Then he tells Julian they need to go get grandma. Rushing downstairs, they leave the door open and I break from the corner. I follow them, stopping at the bottom step.

They go out the front, leaving that door open too. Our black cat, Friday, glances in my direction. Her emerald eyes widen, pupils dilate, she hisses. A bird flutters near the door. Friday takes this chance to escape into the outside world.

I have never been more grateful to live so close to my parents

The crying distracts me. I go back upstairs and venture into my youngest's room. I smile; he's getting so strong. He can pull himself up and stand in the crib, while I get to watch.

I can't tell if he can sense me or if he's just given up, but the crying subsides. Carter glances in my direction and grins. My beautiful baby boy; he looks just like me, except his features are slightly larger, rounder, cuter. His dark waves flop over his big brown eyes. He smiles harder, showing me his top teeth.

Sirens sound in the distance. I close my eyes, relieved. Jack

figured it out. They'll be just fine without me.

I wander back to my room, and from behind I don't recognize myself. How did I let this happen? When the emergency responders reach me, their shoulders sag with resignation. They know right away.

Still, they complete the check, confirming no breathing, no pulse. The morbidity of my body tells them I died in the night, likely in my sleep. The EMT reaches down and grabs his radio, verifying what they've found and reporting back the address. They describe me as a female, Native American or of mixed race descent, dark brown hair, approximately 5'9 at 140 pounds. In a way, I'm stunned by the basic description. I'm a mom, a wife, a daughter, a writer, a daydreamer, aspiring chef, terrible singer, and pop culture aficionado. Shouldn't those things be just as important?

Dispatch advises an officer is on their way.

My mother's voice cuts through the air. She's screaming up the stairs: "What's going on? What happened?"

The EMTs share a frown before one goes back to the stairs. This time, I follow all the way.

I watch as he tells her I've died and that there is nothing they can do. They'll give her some advice on contacting a funeral home to arrange the collection of my body.

"Her husband," my mother breathes. "He doesn't know." Jack is crying, head down on the table. Julian is playing on her cellphone. Carter is forgotten upstairs.

My mom swallows, then asks Jack to give Julian my phone so she can get hers back. She takes it into the kitchen.

She dials my husband, but hangs up after the first ring. Then she starts again, this time quicker, dialing as if she's afraid her nerves will fail her.

"Hey, I'm sorry I missed a call-"

"Michael." My mom pauses.

"Annette? Is everything okay?" There's a shift in his tone. On some level, he knows.

"No, uhm..." Tears are pouring. She bites her lower lip hard, sniffs. "It's Cora, she..."

She breaks down, pulls the phone away from her ear, leans against the sink to steady herself.

Growing up, I told my mom this day would come, that I always knew when I'd die. She'd tell me that we all die someday, but no one truly ever knows when or how. I remember telling her she was wrong. I knew. I hope she's not remembering that conversation now.

"You're scaring me. What happened?"

"She's dead," my mom whispers.

"No. No, she was fine this morning. I heard—" he pauses, remembering no, this time he didn't hear me. His words stick in his throat. "The boys? Jack, Julian, Carter, are they okay? Where are they?"

"Carter," my mom sobs. "Shit, Carter. Come home, now. The boys need you. But please Michael, please, drive safely. Get someone to bring you home if you can't. In fact, do that, have someone bring you home. Please!" She hangs up and rushes to get the baby.

I drift upstairs too, to find my body's been turned supine. The tugging sensation returns. Am I ready? Do I follow?

Downstairs is chaos. I don't think I can leave them behind; could I haunt my own family? I'm not sure they'd appreciate that.

When my husband gets home, he asks for time to see me, privately.

I didn't expect he'd have fury burning in his eyes, bloodshot sclerae clashing against those blue irises. He pauses at my body, covers his face, drags his hand down over his mouth. When he exhales, he ages, and I see a weariness I've never witnessed before.

"How could you do this to me? How could you leave me behind?" He's so full of rage, he's shaking. "Damn it Cora, how am I supposed to do any of this without you?"

I try to tell him I'm sorry, but the words don't come. *I am sorry.*

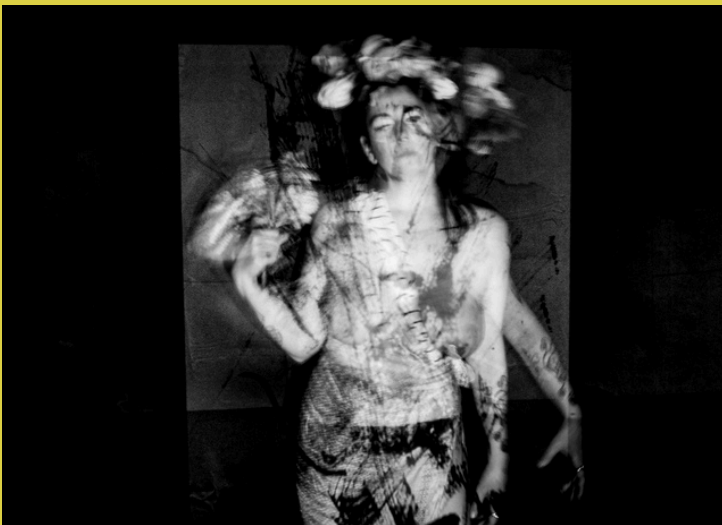
He's strong. He'll get past this. They'll be okay.

I can go.

From the moment I could hold a memory, I've always known when I was going to die. The knowledge is with me every time I close my eyes. This time, I don't reopen them.



The body remembers
- Dionysia Adamopoulou



Borderline
- Eva Zimmer

Adolescence



B. Elae

"If you love me, you won't tell." / wishes that drowned with the pennies she left in the well / menstruation in 8th grade and tender breasts / no longer being able to button her vest / scarring acne, and nicknames like "Pizza Face" and "Big Nose" / wearing hand-me-downs and dollar store clothes / a game of "Tag", but with different rules, so she chooses not to play / waiting hours for her father in the driveway / highlighted Bible scriptures from Psalms and Proverbs / scrapes to her knees from falling on the curb / "You're a skinnie minnie" and "I remember when I was your size" / a white man saying, "I've never seen a Colored before with your eyes." / dad's phone going straight to voicemail and 10 calls later / her abuser saying "If you really cared for me, you'd do me this favor." / eating lunch alone in the restroom stall / 13 years old and being catcalled / "No one will believe you" and "You're not pretty like your friends" / guilted into silence to falsely make amends / solely feeling safe in the arms of her mother, but grieving because she is too small to shield her mother in return—although she never asked / growing into her body just to hear Aunt Margaret call her "fast" / threats from the popular boy in school who she got suspended for grabbing her ass / "Public housing is for the lower-class." / academically advanced but still seen as a bastard / "I'm okay", a statement she mastered / a secret keeper, no matter how revolting... / the little girl who grew tired of hoping.

Trying to Rhyme Myself



William Doeski

The city retains a residuum
of the lives we tucked away,
hoping they'd ripen in the dark.
The Back Bay streets flicker
like ribbons tossing in wind.
The Esplanade preserves footprints
from our long walks decades ago.

In a bakery with a plate glass smile
I slurp a mocha latte and watch
several versions of your ghost pass
with serious but vague expressions.
Your death wasn't exaggerated,
although you linger in the flesh.

After noshing a plain croissant
I exit into muddles of cloud
that promise everything but rain.
Yes, I'm trying to rhyme myself
with you but making a hash of it.
The city outweighs us mightily
but can't persist without us.

The skyscrapers will soon wilt,
the subway system will tangle
like a plate of runaway spaghetti,
the storefronts will bleed real blood
in memory of the books we read
all night, refusing to face ourselves.

Repentance



Mark J. Mitchell

...or shall I bring you the sound of poison?

--Sylvia Plath

These flavors you've met before, like the sound
of red on a summer morning. You've named
them all. Now they're relics left on the ground.
You kick them off with no malice. The same
all over. Once they were dread rites to expound
to catechumens of pleasure. The words
you spoke—secrets. Some thought you profound
while you knew better. You didn't claim
a knowledge, but journeys and the old scars
you earned while walking. Truth then, poison
now. Rites abandoned. So go, seek out stars
you can't name. Nothing to teach. No reason
to pretend anymore. All your lost words
are markers you dropped. You went too far.

Portrait of the Artist as an Old Dog



Kendra Whitfield

Ice cubes clatter in the shaker, freezer door gin and vermouth splash into a tumbler holding three olives and a twist of lemon rind. You'd like to say you're dressed-up in fuck-me heels, at a fancy bar. Instead you're sprawled on the couch, bingeing Netflix and crunching Hawkins cheezies between coffee-stained teeth. It's hard to lose control when you were raised to keep it on a tight leash. After fifty years it still follows you, even after you unclip its flimsy collar and tell it to run. You realize that control and imagination are the same thing and then the wailing and railing and lamenting begins because imagination is more valuable and you'd rather have that rambunctious puppy to chase through the fields of time than that staid old bitch she morphed into, compelled to follow commands. Sit. Stay. Roll over. How long until it plays dead for real? You sigh and take another sip. When did comfort become bitter? Anything sweeter is unpalatable. You've settled for a life as pallid as your drink—and as cold. You'd take a selfie but all you'd see is an empty glass where your soul used to be.

Your Touch, Your Smell, Those Eyes



William Cass

When I first saw you, as we approached each other, as students on our college quad, I immediately assumed that no one that beautiful could ever be interested in me. The unkempt mane of dark hair. Those brooding eyes. Your countenance's almost haughty detachment. But then our gazes briefly met as we passed, you smiled, and my heart leapt.

Several months later, after we'd been intimate together often and I'd listened to you whisper secrets in the dark, I came to realize that you wore your hair like that to minimize allure, that those brooding eyes were actually troubled, and the way you held yourself was steeped in self-conscious uncertainty. But I didn't know those things at first, nor did I appreciate them afterwards as much as I should have.

After graduation when you went off to the city to co-star in that production of *Look Back in Anger*, I assumed you'd understand that I'd need to abort our plans of having me join you there. I hadn't been chosen for any of my orchestral auditions and couldn't even find a chamber music ensemble that would take me on. I became deflated reading your glowing reviews and listening to you tell me on the phone about the more prestigious parts you'd been pursuing. I just assumed it would be clear that I had no choice but to accept that offer from my old music professor to join a new community college program he was starting across the country. I thought you'd appreciate my constrained circumstances and opportunities, perhaps even suggest looking for acting gigs in the area where I'd relocated.

What I came to realize later was that you felt abandoned by my decision and ignored, since I never said a word to you about it before sending you that cryptic note and moving away. Of course, you

couldn't have known I felt like a mutt with its tail between its legs. And then I received your return letter whose disdainful tone I attributed to my first impression of you. Not the searching, tentative soul I came to know in your dorm room's twin bed inhaling the wildflower scent of your hair and caressing the naked curve of your hip.

A full decade of silence passed before our paths crossed again at our ten-year college reunion. I'd heard about you moving to New York City, your off-Broadway successes, your engagement to a well-regarded playwright. I assumed you had no knowledge of my own insignificant career path or failed relationships. You were already pretty drunk by the time, braced by alcohol myself, I arrived late to the bonfire.

You tapped me on the shoulder at the keg and said, "Hello, stranger."

I pivoted, and the eyes I'd expected to find buoyed by accomplishment and fulfillment, stared back unsettled. I mumbled something like, "Hey, how are you?"

"Not great." You reached out your cup, it seemed with regret, and I tapped it with my own in equal measure. We sipped, firelight flickering across your features, as stunning as they were shaken. "For whatever it's worth," you said, "I forgave you long ago."

You extended your hand, and I took it in my own. The cacophony of music and voices around us became a muffled din. Assumptions and realizations intertwined. We found the door to your old unoccupied dorm room ajar, the same twin bed awaiting. Afterwards, I covered us with a blanket left beneath the frame, scratchy against our bare skin.

Awakening at dawn, I found you gone. I guess you assumed I'd surmise why. When my ensuing messages went unanswered, it didn't take long to realize that you'd reasonably returned to your thriving profession, your upcoming marriage, your full life.

Twenty-eight more solitary years crawled by during which I eventually replaced my former mentor as department head at the community college. Paid off the mortgage on my little creek-side house. Jogged thousands of early-morning miles. Learned to build miniature ships in bottles. Buried two dogs. Over time, I assumed I'd never see or hear from you again.

Then a cold, overcast afternoon arrived when I answered my doorbell's chime, and there you stood on the front step. Tan overcoat, salt-and-pepper hair still unkempt, as lovely as ever. Funambulist's eyes, though: untethered, yearning.

"We were driving through." Your voice was hushed. I watched your chin gesture towards a car at the curb which held a man in the passenger seat staring straight ahead. "My husband and I...heading to his niece's wedding." Your eyes faltered further. "He's had early-onset dementia for a while now and requires my full-time care. He doesn't even remember my name."

Like the evening of the reunion bonfire, our hands extended, then grasped. I heard myself say, "I'm sorry."

You nodded and said, "You look well." You managed a hint of smile. "Are you? Well, I mean?"

"Well enough."

You nodded some more before saying, "Would you like to meet him?"

I glanced over your shoulder at the man in the car. Drool ran from the corner of his mouth down the side of his neck. I returned my gaze your way, gave a short shake of my head, and squeezed your hand.

You nodded again, squeezed back. When a moan came from the car, you closed your eyes, expelled a breath. You dropped my hand, started down the walk. Halfway there, you turned, paused with those eyes searing me, then said, "What might have been."

"We'll never know."

"I guess not," you replied quietly. "We've become who we've become."

I watched the two of you drive away, taillights disappearing into the gloaming, a train passing off behind the creek's woods.

Later, sitting at my dining room table, I used long-stemmed tweezers to attach a tiny mast to my newest bottled schooner, its bead of glue glistening in the light from a gooseneck lamp. I thought: I'd hoped the ache would diminish over the years. But I'd come to realize that irretrievability of that magnitude remained unending, eternal, perpetual. Your touch, your smell, those eyes.



Gecekonu 2
- Ebru Winegard



Separate Way
- Gulbahar Malik

Memoirs of a Goddess



Colleen S. Harris

I was Bellona. I saved a man
from himself, once, when I was
twenty-one and eager to be challenged,
interrupted his dark liquor rage
and stopped that wolf from blowing
down his own house with his brothercubs
in it. I tossed myself in front of
fangèd beasts often back then, back
when there was no terror left in my bones
for monsters to gnaw on. Out from
under my father's heavy roof and under
open Boyle County stars, I learned the meaning
of land—stretch of green so long
and deep it was a gift ribbon of verdant
carpet curled around cud-chewing cows
with no greater need than to ask me
to sit and seed myself. Nights I loosed
myself all the way, fisted men by their flannel
shirts and pushed them against brick,
waiting for them to test my father's teachings,
stumbling only when they said they loved me
for my firm hand, my raucous pirate-smile
mouth, the way I bared my teeth and would
follow train tracks deep into country darkness
by cigarette light without a map or sensible shoes.

THE BODY AS A WEATHER SYSTEM



Rowan Tate

I wake into skin that has turned to fog. The windows
steam with breath. Maybe mine. Maybe

a body of mine still sleeping in another house. I want
to know my photons and I want them to know me.

I try to stand and the floor tilts like a question. Gravity
is a decision I haven't made yet, laws of nature in soft refusal.

I remember patterns of history in my joints. Some part of me
is already evaporating. I rain inwards.

Look inside. Nothing blooms but the mold in the corners. My shadow
leaves early, dragging my migraine behind it like a child.

Somewhere, a siren cries for a body to rescue. Somewhere
the forecast changes its mind. I touch my forehead

to the cool tile of time and wait for it to pass. My fingers ache
with barometric prophecy. I kneel. I split. I pour.

Kojo Besia



Nana T. Baffour-Awuah

He called me woman:
an accusation unveiled by contempt
for my high voice
 and my soft eyes
 and the limpness in my wrist.

The quiet part still rings in my ear:
Different
 Deviant
 Disgusting

And the whole class watches
as hot humiliation welts
my arms
 my stomach
 the back of my eyes
so I only know the searing.

Woman!
A word with no softness;
 only blade for bloodletting
 and brimstone for baptism
 and blistering shame for a boy of barely ten.

Yet in its womb was a future,
a blessing
to be.

Autobieulogy



Christie Beckwith

I want to die with a W in each hand,
the O stuck in my gaping mouth between them.

The WOW, so pornographic
they will have to cremate me

to avoid an R-rated open casket.
I had a riot milking pleasure from the mundane—

an absolute fucking delight stealing joy
from the pockets of expectation.

Only these three things remain:
the love-blind suns that orbit my universe,

my inappropriate sense of humor,
and the ketchup stain on the crotch of my khakis.

Plant my remains with a pear sapling;
At last, my growth will make you happy.

When you chew me up,
I will be the teeth between your smile.

In my second life, I will praise the sun,
root in the ground, and flower in a fickle season.

To those still living, I leave behind
birthday songs at kitschy restaurants,

the slow drag of the clock's second hand,
and the urgency of love.

The Taste of Iron and Mint



Sabyasachi Roy

The night reeked of possibilities gone stale—gutmha spit glinting under the sodium lights, the stench of diesel hanging heavy, and a tired moon that couldn't be bothered to shine properly. Howrah Station didn't change, just grew older with each passing year, like that uncle who refuses to dye his hair but keeps buying younger clothes. I stood by the railing of the footbridge, fingertips grazing rust, the cool, metallic sting leeching into my skin like an afterthought. I wasn't waiting for anything. Or maybe I was, but I didn't know what.

The 12:05 to Bardhaman had left, but I stayed back, the city whispering secrets I didn't know how to decode. I could feel its pulse—a throb in the soles of my feet, a hum in the veins of the bridge. Kolkata didn't rush. It lingered, tugged at loose threads, pulled you into alleys where the past refused to die. I was there, caught in its half-sleep, a stray thought dangling between leaving and staying.

Ma's voice echoed in my head, nagging like the ringtone you forget to change.

"Come back by 10."

"Why 10?"

"Because I said so."

"Ma, I'm 26."

"Exactly. It's time you acted like it."

I didn't tell her I was acting—playing a part I didn't audition for. Good girl. Home by 10. Head down. Mouth shut. But tonight, I was off script. The train was gone, and I was still here, inhaling the city's grime like secondhand smoke.

A man brushed past, his bag grazing my thigh, a brusque apology mumbled into the void. I almost said sorry. Almost. Old habits. But I swallowed it. Kolkata had taught me that. You don't apologize for taking up space. You lean in, elbows out, and claim it. Like claiming all the fortunes that weren't. I once saw someone who kept flipping a

coin, but it always landed on its edge, staring at me like an unpaid debt. I watch a fox dig a hole, then forget why it started. The gods have stopped answering—even my prayers are out of service. A wheel spins, a wheel stops, a wheel rusts under another dead sun.

It is more like taking a step wrong, and the rocks keep rolling. Step right, and they roll anyway. A cloud wears the peak like a bandage— covering nothing. Somewhere below, a river waits for another name to erase. The mountain has no mouth, but it still swallows.

Meanwhile, the hawker by the stairs had mint candies—those shiny silver-wrapped ones that crinkled like disappointment. I bought one, let it sit on my tongue. Cool sweetness, a sharp contrast to the night's heat. The taste tugged at something—summer afternoons when Baba would slip me mints before his afternoon nap. I'd sit by the window, watching the hawkers below, their voices rising with the sun. That was before the silences grew longer between us, before he started forgetting where he kept his glasses, then the names, then us.

I let the mint dissolve slowly. It wasn't just candy. It was time, folding in on itself.

Without my presence, the city bustled. A radio blasted an old Kishore Kumar track that seeps into your bones, taxis honked, and merchants shouted. The footbridge rumbled under my sandals as another train screamed beneath. I imagined jumping on it, disappearing into the night. But where would I go? Everywhere I went, I took myself along.

A boy stood a few steps distant, backpack draped loosely over one shoulder. He appeared like anybody who had someplace to be but wasn't in a haste to get there. His eyes met mine briefly, and I looked away. Too much weight in a glance. I wasn't in the mood to carry any more.

I thought about home. About Ma's voice drifting from the kitchen, humming an old Rabindra Sangeet, her hands deftly rolling out *luchis* like they were tiny moons. She didn't ask much—just my presence, my shadow filling the corners of our small apartment. But I couldn't explain this ache, this need to stand still in places where I didn't belong, to taste the air thick with smoke and possibilities.

I wasn't running away. Not really. I was just... pausing.

A train's horn shattered the night, yanking me back. I pictured myself on the moving vehicle, with my hair being pulled by the wind, crushed against the glass. Perhaps I would wind up in Shantiniketan, where Tagore's words lingered in the air like unfulfilled promises and the trees whispered stories. Or maybe I'd settle in an obscure hamlet where no one recognized me, where I might disappear between the gaps, unseen, unaccounted for.

But I was still here. Feet on the rusted metal. Mint dissolving on my tongue.

The boy had moved on. His silhouette merged with the crowd, swallowed by the city's hunger. I stayed, watching the lights flicker in the distance, like stars too tired to shine.

Ma would be waiting, pacing the narrow hallway, her worry wrapping around her like an old shawl. She would ask no questions, just look at me with eyes that had seen too much. I'd offer a half-smile, a borrowed apology. She'd accept it.

But for now, I stayed. Held by the city's grip, the taste of iron and mint lingering on my tongue. Caught between leaving and staying. Between who I was and who I pretended to be.

And sometimes, standing still was the bravest thing I could do.

I stepped away from the railing, but not toward home. Not yet. The night wasn't done with me. The city had more to say, and I wasn't ready to stop listening.

So, I walked. Through the smoky lanes where chai stalls stayed open longer than dreams, where the scent of frying samosas clung to the air like a stubborn memory. The world didn't rush here—it unfolded, layer by layer, like a cheap paperback you read under dim light, knowing the ending won't surprise you but turning the pages anyway.

And me? I was just another character in its story. Temporary. Forgettable. But for now, I was here. Letting the night stain my skin, letting the city's breath fill my lungs, tasting iron and mint, and pretending it was enough.

Who is a Poet?



Adele Evershed

after "An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump" by Joseph Wright

I exist in the night room,
among people
with soft-lit faces
bodies crammed with colors of the dark—
all clustered round a candle
and an air pump.

Who am I?

The corny lover,
a dead creature at my breast
a jet-bead choker at my neck—
the perfect fashion accessory
for a suffocation.

The young girl
with the vulnerable shoulder,
as creamy-smooth
as the naïve belief
in resurrection.

The man
with a touch of wizard—
who breaks the fourth wall,
challenging you
to witness a maybe-murder.

Or the servant,
always on the margins,

a nameless shadow,
waiting to drop a cage
he knows all too well.

Given the choice,
I'd be the cliff-hanging moon
glooming through the window,
waiting to see if the cockatoo
lives or dies.

But I suspect
I am the bird—
suffering a temporary death
to entertain the masses.



Masculinity in Flux
- Spekterdog



Alphabet Bead Manifesto
- Taylor Elise Colimore

The Double Standard of Queer Media: Survival, Sex and... Cannibalism?

❖

Florence Limb

Queer representation in mainstream media has expanded over recent years, but not evenly, nor without caveats. The discrepancy is particularly obvious when comparing portrayals of sapphic characters to those of gay characters. These portrayals are not just different in tone; they are different in what they are contextually, metaphorically and physically allowed to be.

Consider two examples that showcase this divide:

In *Yellowjackets* (a show created and written by Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, which can be found primarily on Paramount Plus) a largely sapphic girls' soccer team crashes in the Canadian Rockies and survives nineteen months of horror and deprivation. Over time, they descend into cult-like rituals, cannibalism, and irreversible psychological collapse. The show is brutal, raw, and emotionally harrowing. Their queerness is present, but it is embedded in a landscape of pain, trauma, and violence.

By contrast, in many modern MLM narratives (such as *Heartstopper*, written and created by Alice Oseman and can be found on platforms such as Netflix) the stories tend to revolve around coming-of-age romance. A teenage boy realises he's gay. He develops a crush. There are stolen glances, the fleeting brush of a hand, a gentle kiss in the rain. There may be a conflict, but by the finale, it's resolved.

One story spirals into irreversible psychological collapse. The other ends with a promposal.

This isn't just a mere discussion about genre, it's commentary, a

criticism of the media industries that produce these stories, and enforce harmful stereotypes about who is expected to be soft, and who is expected to suffer. But also, the audiences that consume them.

There is a heavily gendered double standard in the representation of queer identities.

Sapphic media is sexualised. Filtered through lenses of eroticism and spectacle; with shows that do not fully appease the male-gaze being cancelled. When queer-centered characters are not objectified, they are punished, or discarded in their entirety. Tender, raw, real sapphic love stories struggle to find a place amongst mainstream media, unless they can be consumed by straight male audiences. Take *League of Their Own*, *Rise of The Pink Ladies* and *The Wilds* for example, all incredible shows that were cancelled as a result of the attitudes, values and ideas we as a society have formed regarding what sapphicness should physically manifest as.

On the contrary, MLM media is overly romanticised, commodified and softened. Thus becoming inaccurate representations of the struggle and challenges many gay identifying individuals face. Stories that center around emotional vulnerability and softness are greenlighted and typically marketed to young, female audiences. Gay male characters are not allowed to express rage, violence or deviance because that doesn't fit with the narrative society has written for them.

Sapphic stories are permitted when they are erotic, or traumatic. Gay stories are permitted when they are gentle and soft. The westernised entertainment industry doesn't care about authentic queer experience, it cares about what sells. It has commercialised our struggles, our history, our identities. Authentic queer representation isn't just rare, it's actively resisted.

This creates a vicious, never-ending cycle in which:

- Sapphic characters are expected to suffer or seduce. (Or both! Isn't that fun?)

- Gay characters are expected to be soft, lovable and without baggage.

Which brings me to my ever important question: Where's the chaos for boys? Where's the softness for girls?

What we're lacking is narrative diversity, the space and allowance for queer characters to exist in the same way heterosexual characters do. We desperately need stories where gay characters self-destruct and lesbian characters can experience love without a looming tragedy. Queerness shouldn't have to justify itself through suffering, or be reduced to merely aesthetics. It should be allowed to breathe, to rage, to fail, to thrive.

Until queer characters are released from the constraints of market-driven stereotypes, we will continue to see this imbalance play out. And we will continue to lose stories that dare to even attempt to break the mold.

Let the gay boys go feral.
Let the lesbians go to prom.
And maybe (just maybe) let them live.

Je, Tu, Il, Elle (1973) Written and Directed by Chantal Ackerman



Jordon Briggs

(from the essay series, 'Films by Women that Changed My Life')

Je, Tu, Il, Elle hit me instantly. *Jeanne Dielman*, I still cherish. But on my second watch of Ackerman's film, *I, You, He, She*, the film, for me, became a revelation. After a few minutes into the film, you see a woman coming to grips with something. In reality we don't know what it is. We just know that there is something. She is going along. That's why, to me, the film is so brilliant. It's about things exactly as they are in the now. And we, the audience, don't know what's going to happen. That's why the first words, I think, Chantal Ackerman as the lead character utters, are "And so I left," while being filmed sitting in a chair, facing the wall, while the camera—while we, the audience—face her. This film taught me that I could be myself—that I do not have to be defined.

Ackerman, in a way, became a friend. When I saw an Ackerman film for the first time, granted where, when, and at what point of my life I saw it, Ackerman's film was needed. I was at the Lincoln Film Society Center, on a day off from school, and had been considering dropping out and pursuing writing. For me, seeing *Jeanne Dielman* was a life altering experience:

It was my first time at the New York Film Festival, first time feeling the highfaluting of film buffs and snobs, and the first time I fell in love with a filmmaker just by watching their films. But it was seeing *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, thanks to a class at Pratt Institute, and seeing it again, that solidified that.

Ackerman starts at a point—not *the* point. Everything is in motion,

just like the chaos of the world. Now that I'm writing about it, I think this film is a deconstruction of linear story telling, and possibly, a critique on a Judaeo Christian belief in determinism, linear thinking, stability— of dogma. In *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* there is no blueprint. Akerman says, "No... you're going to sit here and watch these people do things and not get it." You're not supposed to get it--there's nothing to get! Only that which is there. The personal is political. People's actions and what matters to them most defines them as political entities.

The same denial of story— of a "clear" story— and a satisfactory ending happens in *Jeanne Dielman*, and in another film of hers, *Hotel Monterey*, which makes me think she's usually trying to challenge our view of narrative and ideology, and at the same time further widen our scope on what it means to be human—what it means to exist in the world. Akerman's film showed me that I can be... expansive. That I could live "expansive". That there is more to the world, and to people outside of me—especially of women—and that people live different lives than I. For me, that notion is everything.

When I heard that Akerman died before the NYFF and seeing *Jeanne Dielman*—and for some reason when I saw her picture and when I saw stills of her films— I felt a connection. Seeing, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* for the second time gave me the feeling that an artist understood me—and I understood them.

Much like *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash, like *Orlando* by Sally Potter, like *Meshes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren, *I, You, He, She*, always seems to be saying: you don't have to be what everyone says you have to be. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* added to my life, and we need more films such as this one.

Too Many Fucks to Give



Samantha Szumloz

Characters

MADELINE, twenty-five-year old journalist. Quirky and fidgety. She is diagnosed with OCD, causing her to have intrusive thoughts on social morality. She secretly refers to her brain as The Big Voice. She snaps a rubber band against her wrist whenever her brain explodes with intrusive thoughts.

MADELINE'S BIG VOICE, Madeline's brain played by a teenage girl. Abusive, questioning, and won't stop babbling/moving until Madeline snaps her rubber band. The girl is dressed head-to-toe in a pink bodysuit, her hair in curly ponytails, her face caked with purple makeup. She acts like a child with no social filter. Luke cannot see Madeline's Big Voice.

LUKE, twenty-eight-year-old high school theater teacher. Inquisitive and (seemingly) easy-going. He is Madeline's date. He also struggles with anxiety.

LUKE'S BIG VOICE, Luke's brain played by a teenage boy. Behaves exactly like Madeline's brain. The boy is dressed head-to-toe in a pink bodysuit, his hair a tousled mess, his face caked with purple makeup. He also acts like a child with no filter. Madeline cannot see Luke's Big Voice.

Setting

An afternoon in a park during the present moment.

Time

Midday

Lights up on a checkered blanket downstage center. A picnic basket sits in the middle of the blanket. Luke is sitting on the blanket. He is leaning back with his eyes closed, allowing the stage light to shine over him. He is basking in the sun. Madeline enters from stage left and approaches Luke. She is wearing a rubber band on her wrist. Luke opens his eyes and waves at Madeline.)

LUKE

Hi, are you Madeline?

MADELINE

(Waving nervously)

Yeah... Yeah I am. Nice to meet you.

LUKE

Nice to meet you, too. Wanna sit down?

MADELINE

Sure-sure.

(As Madeline sits down next to Luke on the picnic blanket, her Big Voice enters from stage left, crawling on her hands and knees, stopping next to Madeline. Madeline gives her Big Voice a strange look and looks back at Luke, clearing her throat. She fidgets where she sits, running her hands over her skirt.)

(Laughing anxiously)
Don't wanna ruin the skirt!

(Her Big Voice taps Madeline on the shoulder, hissing in her ear.)

MADELINE'S BIG VOICE

(In a mocking voice)
"Don't wanna ruin the skirt?" You sound like a prima donna! He's probably—

(Without looking at her Big Voice, Madeline snaps her rubber band against her wrist. Madeline's Big Voice stops talking and moving altogether. She sits down next to Madeline and picks at her feet.)

LUKE

(Unfazed)
The skirt looks great. It looks vintage. Do you thrift?

(After he says this, his Big Voice comes out from stage right, leap-frogging next to him. He puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles, making Luke tense up.)

LUKE'S BIG VOICE

(Yelling)
"Vintage?" Are you trying to make her feel decrepit? You should—

(Luke jerks his head swiftly to the right. This action makes his Big Voice shut up and fall to the ground. He lays on the floor like a starfish. Luke cracks his neck and smiles apologetically.)

MADELINE

(Unfazed)

Once in a while. I usually thrift with Abby.

LUKE

(Leaning back again)

Ah, I see. How long have you known Abby? I've known her since grammar school.

MADELINE

Oh, we've known each other since college. We met at a party.

LUKE

Frat party, I'm guessing?

MADELINE

No, an SSAA party.

LUKE

What's SSAA?

(Madeline's Big Voice stops playing with her feet and glances up at Madeline, frowning. Madeline turns her head slightly to her.)

MADELINE'S BIG VOICE

(Mouthing)

Don't say it!

(Madeline breathes deeply before speaking to Luke.)

MADELINE

Safe Sex Awareness Association. We were a pretty cool group.

(Madeline's Big Voice slaps her forehead.)

LUKE

Nice! God knows my students need that.

MADELINE

You're a professor?

LUKE

High school theater teacher.

MADELINE

Sounds terrifying. I could never teach kids. I'm afraid I'll mess them up.

(Madeline's Big Voice lets out a screech of embarrassment and falls on her back.)

Sorry, that was weird for me to say.

LUKE

That's okay! Not everyone's right for the gig. Are you a kid-person, or not really?

(Luke's Big Voice sits up.)

LUKE'S BIG VOICE

A little personal, don't you think?

(Without looking, Luke puts his hand on his Big Voice's face and pushes him down on the ground again.)

MADELINE

Oh, yeah, I like kids. I want to be a mom someday. It's just... my job. I

travel a lot. Work a lot. At least right now I do.

LUKE

I'm kind of in the same boat. What do you do for a living?

MADELINE

I'm a journalist for Uterus Digest. I write articles on reproductive rights.

MADELINE'S BIG VOICE

(Pointing at Madeline from the ground)

Pretentious bitch!

(Madeline snaps her rubber band against her wrist again. Her Big Voice's hand falls back down.)

LUKE

You have a thing about sexual health, don't you?

MADELINE

Huh?

LUKE

Well, the SSAA group, Uterus Digest... seems to be a theme with you.

(Luke's Big Voice lets out a laugh.)

Nothing wrong with it, of course! I think it's awesome that you talk about that stuff so openly. It helps people. Most people keep things like sex to themselves.

MADELINE

(Smiling slightly)

I guess you can call me Dr. Ruth reincarnated, or Carrie Bradshaw.

LUKE

All you need is your Mr. Big and you'll be set.

MADELINE

Mr. Big's too emotionally constipated for my taste.

LUKE

So you're an Aidan fan?

MADELINE

Correct! How do you know Sex and the City?

LUKE

My ex used to watch it a lot.

(Luke's Big Voice jumps up like a cartoon character being struck by lightning.)

LUKE'S BIG VOICE

(Shaking his head)

Hell no!

(He starts running around the stage, screaming, "Hell no" at the top of his lungs. As he is screaming, Madeline's Big Voice sits up, wide-eyed and hyperventilating.)

MADELINE'S BIG VOICE

Ex? He has an ex? Where's the ex? Who's the ex? Why's he bringing up his ex?

(Shaking Madeline's shoulder)

Code red! Code red! CODE RED!

(Simultaneously, Madeline snaps her rubber band against her wrist and Luke jerks his head to the side. The two Voices fall on the floor and go completely silent.)

LUKE

(Smiling apologetically again)

Ugh, I'm sorry. It's only the first date and I brought up she-who-shall-not-be-named!

MADELINE

Don't be! I get it. Some things just stick with you after breakups. How long were you with this... person?

LUKE

Three years.

MADELINE

(Staring hard at Luke)

That's a long time.

LUKE

Yeah, well, three years turn to shit when your ex sleeps with your best friend.

(Now extremely uncomfortable, Madeline looks away. Luke stares at the ground. Both of their Voices slowly sit up at the same time, staring at each other across the stage.)

LUKE'S BIG VOICE & MADELINE'S BIG VOICE

(In unison)

It's over.

(Desperate to salvage the date, Luke scrambles for the picnic basket and takes out a bag of Fruit Loops. Madeline looks up at him again.)

LUKE

You want a snack? I got cheese sticks, cashews, and Froot Loops.

MADELINE

Froot Loops?

LUKE

You don't like them?

MADELINE

(Laughing)

No! It's just a funny snack to bring to a picnic date. But I'll take the loops.

LUKE

Honestly, I didn't know what to pack. Didn't know what you liked.

(Madeline snatches the bag of cereal from Luke's hand.)

MADELINE

That's okay. You know me pretty well. Froot Loops are my favorite. Thank you.

LUKE

You're welcome.

(Luke tilts his head to the side.)

Can I ask you a question?

MADELINE

(Glancing back at her Big Voice, then at Luke)

Sure.

LUKE

It's a personal question.

MADELINE

(Shrugging)

This date has already gotten personal, so shoot.

LUKE

Why do you have a rubber band on your wrist?

MADELINE

(Rubbing her wrist)

Why do you want to know?

LUKE

Just curious. I've seen you snapping it a couple times.

MADELINE

(Muttering)

Helps with my anxiety. Keeps me from thinking bad thoughts.

(Madeline looks over at her Big Voice, waiting for her to say something. She says nothing.)

LUKE

You got bad thoughts?

MADELINE

Sometimes.

LUKE

I do, too.

(The Voices silently rise and acknowledge each other's presence again. They walk over to each other behind the picnic blanket.)

MADELINE

About what?

LUKE

(Sighing)

About myself, mainly. I overthink my words a lot. What about you? What do you have bad thoughts about?

MADELINE

(Blushing)

Same as you. I overthink my words.

(The Voices stand a few inches away from each other. They both raise their arms and touch hands, mirroring each other.)

LUKE

I think you're good with words.

MADELINE

I don't think so.

LUKE

What makes you say that?

MADELINE

I overshare. I say things I shouldn't say. I'm a nutcase.

(The Voices look at Madeline and Luke and walk over to them, hand-in-hand.)

LUKE

(Scoffing)

Have you been listening to *me*? I just told you my ex slept with my best friend!

MADELINE

(Chuckling)

I was going to learn about it sooner rather than later, anyway. It's

fine. I'd rather have off-the-bat honesty than some fake-ass conversation.

LUKE

(Beat.)

I like that you're not fake.

(The Voices look at each other again, then back at Madeline and Luke.)

MADELINE

(Beat.)

You don't think I'm fake?

LUKE

You're like a zebra. You wear your feelings like stripes. You know how many people hide themselves from the world? From people?

MADELINE

Too many.

LUKE

Way too many.

(Luke rises to his feet.)

You're not bad, Madeline. Not bad at all.

MADELINE

(Looking up at him softly)

You're not bad, either.

LUKE

(Nodding his head at stage left)

You wanna go somewhere else? If we're talking about honesty here, I hate the park.

(Madeline laughs and rises to her feet, brushing crumbs off her skirt.)

MADELINE

Alright. Where should we go?

LUKE

You like bagels? I know an awesome shop on 32nd Street.

MADELINE

The Jewish kid in me has been summoned. I'm in.

(Madeline and Luke stroll across the stage, the Voices following them.)

LUKE

Can I ask you another question?

MADELINE

Go ahead.

LUKE

Do you prefer Madeline or Maddie?

MADELINE

Madeline. Don't like Maddie much. This girl named Ashley used to call me Maddie McFatty in the seventh grade.

LUKE

Want me to beat her up for you?

MADELINE

Don't worry. I poured fruit punch on her head at prom. I got my revenge.

LUKE

You're not as nice as you appear.

MADELINE

(Chuckling.)

We all have our demons.

(Madeline and Luke leave the stage. The Voices linger for a moment. Suddenly, Madeline's Big Voice pokes the other Voice's nose.)

MADELINE'S BIG VOICE

Boop! Ha-ha-ha!

(Madeline's Big Voice runs off the stage. The other Voice chases after her.)

END



The alternative way me and amma
- Sooraj E.



Deeply Caught 1
- Mohammad and Masoud Khorasani



Be Awesome
- Faisal Akbar

CONTRIBUTORS

Adele Evershed is a Welsh writer who swapped the valleys for the American East Coast. You can find some of her poetry and prose in Grey Sparrow Journal, Gyroscope, Modern Haiku, Janus Lit, and Poetry Wales. Adele has two poetry collections, *Turbulence in Small Spaces* (Finishing Line Press) and *The Brink of Silence* (Bottlecap Press). Her third collection, *In the Belly of the Wail* is upcoming with Querencia Press. She has published two novellas in flash, *Wannabe* and *Schooled* (Alien Buddha Press), and has a forthcoming novella, *A History of Hand Thrown Walls*, with Unsolicited Press.

Avril Shakira Villar is a writer and youth leader from the Philippines. She is an alum of the international organization WriteGirl LA. Her poem was selected for the Editor's Pick Award for Summer 2025 by Words With Weight. She won first place in the Poetry Competition by Beloved Summer Zine. Her poems are featured in printed books of RCC Muse and Arcana Poetry Press, alongside 21 poems, a song, and an essay published online in various international literary magazines.

B. Elae is a published poet, author, ghostwriter, & performer based in Texas who's continuously strived to create safe spaces through her poetry and advocacy support for survivors of crime and trauma. Since 2013, she's had her work featured in various publications including: "Darling Magazine", "Feels Zine" (based in Canada), "CURIOUS Magazine", additional publications within the U.S., and 3 art galleries including: Houseguest Gallery (KY), Co-Arts Gallery (MA), and The Gallery (Austin, TX). To view more of her poetry and art, visit @b.elae on Instagram.

Christie Beckwith is an author, poet, and freelance editor at Meraki Press. More importantly, she is a sparkle girlie and an excessive consumer of Dunkin's coffee. You can find her at open mics and all over the country, where she travels for her day job doing Alzheimer's research. She wants to live everywhere she visits, but is always happy to return to Massachusetts, where she loves her four boy humans, the cat, and their two dogs.

Colleen S. Harris earned her MFA in Writing from Spalding University.

Her poetry collections include *The Light Becomes Us* (Main Street Rag, forthcoming 2025), *These Terrible Sacraments* (Bellowing Ark, 2010; Doubleback, 2019), *The Kentucky Vein* (Punkin House, 2011), *God in My Throat: The Lilith Poems* (Bellowing Ark, 2009), and chapbooks *Toothache in the Bone* (boats against the current, 2025), *That Reckless Sound* (Porkbelly, 2014), and *Some Assembly Required* (Porkbelly, 2014). You can find her as @warmaiden on Bluesky/Instagram/Twitter and at colleensharris.com.

David Milley's recent work appears in *Eunoia Review*, 3rd Wednesday, *RFD Magazine*, *Feral*, and *Friends Journal*. David lives in southern New Jersey with his husband and partner of forty-nine years, Warren Davy, who's made his living as a farmer, woodcutter, nurseryman, auctioneer, beekeeper, and cook. These days, Warren tends his garden and keeps honeybees. David walks and writes.

Dionysia Adamopoulou is a Greek visual artist working with painting and mixed media drawing. Her work explores identity, memory, and motherhood through expressive, intuitive forms. She holds a Bsc in management and technology and has attended seminars in drawing, painting art education, illustration, art therapy, and cultural heritage management. Her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Greece and abroad. In 2024, she published *"The Shades of Motherhood"*, a limited edition art and poetry book. Her pieces are part of private collections worldwide and reflect deeply personal yet universal emotional narratives.

Ebru Winegard is a multidisciplinary artist, graphic designer, photographer, and filmmaker dedicated to celebrating diversity, heritage, and community. Her work has been featured in group exhibitions and European art projects that center identity and cultural exchange. She facilitated several community art projects focused on inclusion and storytelling. Most notably, she led *Looms of Heritage* — a grant-funded series of weaving workshops for newcomers and refugees — building a space for creative expression, intergenerational sharing, and cross-cultural dialogue. In 2020, her design for Creative Mornings Toronto won the CMTO Virtual Background Design Contest. She has recently earned the Ontario Culture Days 2024 "Spotlight People's Choice Award".

Eva Zimmer, born Anne Diener in 1982 in Bordeaux, is a visual artist whose practice unfolds between shadow and light, gesture and silence. Trained at ESAAA, she weaves analog and digital processes to question the visible and distort representation. Diagnosed with borderline personality disorder in 2019, she embraces photography as a space of survival – a language beyond words, where fragility becomes form. Her work has been shown in galleries and festivals across France, the UK, Spain, and the West Indies. From the margins, she creates raw, intimate images – fragments of a self in perpetual negotiation with the world.

Faisal Akbar (born 1995) is a Collage Artist, Design Lecturer, and Fine Arts Curator from Bekasi City, Indonesia. Faisal's works in figurative or portrait form are translated based on real objects in Faisal's mind which are sourced from experience and observation. These objects are stylized, distorted, or exaggerated using color and image fragments to communicate feelings. In the work "Be Awesome", Faisal reflects positive power into digital collage works. The words "Be Awesome" influence a person's thoughts, emotions, and actions. Whoever you are, accept yourself and make sure you always "Be Awesome".

Florence Limb (she/they) is an emerging young artist, playwright and writer. At just twenty-five years old, she has written and produced two theatre productions that have gone on national tour, with one making its West End debut later this year. Identifying as a lesbian and disabled, a majority of her work focuses on giving marginalised communities and under represented voices a platform. You can follow Florence's work on @cowboypanini and @dirtydykemagazine.

Gugulethu Ndlalani is a self-taught visual artist and photographer from Soweto, South Africa, born on September 20, 1998. His work is deeply influenced by the rich cultural heritage of Soweto, a township renowned for its historical significance and vibrant stories. As the creative director of a collaborative project called Brokenvillages, Gugulethu focuses on storytelling that reflects the African narrative, particularly the experiences of black individuals who navigate the complexities of daily life. His photography serves as a medium for addressing various social issues that either directly or indirectly affect his life and the lives of those around him.

Gulbahar Malik is a Delhi-based visual artist with a BFA and MFA from

the College of Art, New Delhi. Her work delves into the emotional landscapes of urban life, portraying crowds and the human form as reflections of collective existence and individual struggle. explores the emotional and psychological dimensions of urban life. Her art centers on crowds and the human form, symbolizing collective experience and individual struggle. Through fabric integrated into painted figures, she conveys personal connection and identity. Her work reflects the intricacies of daily existence—blending observation and introspection—to reveal the shared humanity in bustling environments.

Hannah Flynn is a poet and editor whose work is forthcoming in Bull, Blood+Honey, and The Argyle Literary Magazine, among others. Her poetry explores liminal experiences in the personal and political spheres, and the ways in which we are measured, controlled, and judged. She lives in London, UK and is on Bluesky @hannahflynn-poetry and Instagram @hannahflynn_poetry.

Jay D. Falcetti (she/her) is a biracial Indigenous writer based in Washington, where she lives with her family. Her short stories have appeared in various online and print magazines. She writes fantasy, horror, science fiction, and literary fiction. Connect with her and discover her published work on Instagram @jdfalcetti. Jay D. Falcetti is a pen name.

JH Tomen lives in Chicago and works in clean energy. When not writing SFF, he's also a climate activist and the author of the Substack The Carbon Fables. You can find him on all socials @jhtomen.

Jordon Briggs is a creative and thinker living in Oakland, CA. His work explores nuanced human experiences, media, culture, and history. You can find him at jordonbriggs.com and @briggs_jordon_

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes on the southern edge of the northern boreal forest. When not writing, she can be found basking in sunbeams on the back deck or swimming laps at the local pool. Her poetry has been anthologized by Epistemic Lit, Beyond the Veil Press and Community Building Art Works.

Lauren “Prophet” Girod trades in all forms of creation in literature and art. Her poetry has previously appeared in Stillpoint, Outrageous

Fortune, The Crawfish, Bardics Anonymous, and 45th Parallel. Her art has been in Creative License and on the cover of Polishing Cloth. She is in the process of solo-developing several narrative-driven games. When not scrying the realms of the internet, she can be found cuddling her cat and several leopard geckos. She can be contacted here: oracle.carrd.co

Lindsey Tennant is a multidisciplinary fine artist based in Atlanta, Georgia. Centered in painting, her practice also includes drawing, printmaking, and other traditional media. Influenced by a bi-cultural upbringing between Georgia and Nicaragua, her work explores emotional and psychological depth. Tennant holds a BFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of North Georgia, complemented by years of self-directed study. Her figurative work delves into human emotion and unspoken interpersonal dynamics. Balancing technical skill with intuitive inquiry, she brings clarity and craftsmanship to conceptual series, observational studies, and commissioned projects—adapting fluidly without compromising the integrity of her artistic voice.

Mark J. Mitchell has worked in hospital kitchens, fast food, retail wine and spirits, conventions, tourism, and warehouses. He has also been a working poet for almost 50 years. His latest novel, *A Book of Lost Songs*, was just published by Histrion Books. An award-winning poet, he's the author of five full-length poetry collections, and six chapbooks. His latest collection is *Something To Be* from Psk's Porch Publishing. He can be found on Bluesky @MJMitchellwriter

Mohammad and Masoud Khorasani are two brothers whose lives have been intertwined since childhood through a deep bond rooted in art and a shared lifestyle. As complementary partners in creativity, they explore and express themselves across a multitude of art forms, including 3D art, sculpture, digital art, 3D printing, black pencil and charcoal drawing, pen drawing, woodworking, miniature art, diorama creation, resin epoxy art, and more. Living in Iran has presented numerous obstacles to sharing their art, as restrictions have prevented them from exhibiting their work freely. Their resilience has shaped the soul of their art, with traces of their struggles visible in many of their 700 creations spanning diverse styles.

Nana T. Baffour-Awuah (he/him) is a Ghanaian writer currently based in New York. His writings have been published by Hudson Valley

Writers Guild, The Universes Poetry Journal, The Poetry Lighthouse, African Writer Magazine, HuffPost, The Good Men Project, and more. His poem, “Kradin”, was recently selected for publication in the inaugural anthology of Arcana Poetry Press. Nana is working on his first book. IG: @whatnanawrote

Robert Estes, whose roots are in Texas, has by now lived more than half his life in the Boston area. He got his PhD in Physics from the University of California at Berkeley and had some interesting times using physics, notably on a couple of US-Italian Space Shuttle missions. Since then, 50-odd of his poems have appeared in literary journals, including Gargoyle, Cola Literary Review, Masque & Spectacle, The Moth, Book of Matches, Anacapa Review, Full House Literary, and the museum of americana.

Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative and curator of beauty. Her writing appears in the Stinging Fly, Josephine Quarterly, Meniscus Literary Journal, and Stanford University’s Mantis among others. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

Sabyasachi Roy is an academic writer, poet, artist, and photographer. His poetry has appeared in Viridine Literary, The Broken Spine, Stand, Poetry Salzburg Review, The Potomac, and more. He contributes craft essays to Authors Publish and has a cover image in Sanctuary Asia. His oil paintings have been published in The Hooghly Review. You can follow his writing on Matador here:
<https://creators.matadornetwork.com/profile/e0x59k96/>

Samantha Szumloz is a Writing Arts student with a minor in Creative Writing, a concentration in Publishing and Writing for the Public, and a CUGS in Technical Writing at Rowan University. She has been published in places such as MORIA, Blue Marble Review, R U Joking?, and DisLit Youth Literary Magazine. She is also a June contributor to Blood+Honey. Other than submitting to literary magazines, she runs her own publication called Art-emis. She resides in central New Jersey with her family. To get in touch with Samantha, her Instagram is @poemsbysammy.

Sooraj E is a visual art student from Malappuram, Kerala, India, currently in his third year of the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting at the

College of Fine Arts, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. His practice centers around painting but extends into interdisciplinary forms, exploring themes of identity, masculinity, and societal pressure. Using watercolor and everyday objects seen and used in domestic spaces, he examines how individuals—particularly men—navigate the tension between personal identity and social expectations. Drawing from personal experiences and cultural observations, Sooraj's work reflects the emotional weight of conformity and the fragile, ongoing process of self-construction within everyday life.

Spekterdog is a full-time artist living between Coventry and Derbyshire in the UK. Self-taught, he took up painting in his 50's after health issues ended a long career in the NHS, and has been fortunate to achieve much in the ensuing years. He uses bold and vibrant colours in acrylic and oil, painting pieces which have been described as "biting commentaries" on contemporary social and political themes - identity, belonging, loneliness and neurodiversity being ever prominent. Spekterdog's art has been displayed in galleries across the UK and he is delighted to be featured here. www.instagram.com/spekterdog_art

Susan Shea is a retired school psychologist who grew up in Brooklyn, New York and now lives in a forest in Pennsylvania. She returned to writing poetry two years ago, and since then, her poems have been published in or are now forthcoming in Chiron Review, ONE ART, Folio Literary Journal, Passager Journal, Radix Magazine, The RavensPerch, Cloudbank, Ekstasis, MacQueen's Quinterly, Green Silk Journal, The Write Launch, Foreshadow, The Loch Raven Review, and others. Within the last few months one of her poems was nominated for Best of the Net by Cosmic Daffodil, and three poems were nominated for a Pushcart Prize by Umbrella Factory Magazine.

Taylor Elise Colimore (she/her) is an emerging multimedia artist, born in Baltimore, Maryland, and currently living in Richmond, Virginia. Taylor graduated summa cum laude from Virginia Commonwealth University with a B.F.A. in Kinetic Imaging, a fine arts program with emphasis in animation, sound, video, and performance art. Her visual art practice consists of both digital and analog art making techniques, often creating work with second hand craft and/or fiber based materials and enhancing them through digital techniques such as video, animation, and electronic hardware. This practice enables experimentation and

intuition as a part of her art making process. Instagram: @taylorcolimore

Tianyun Zhao is a London-based moving image artist and photographer whose work explores the overlooked figures and spaces in contemporary urban life. Drawing from lived experiences across Asia and Europe, her practice engages with themes of migration, memory, and marginality through lens-based media and visual storytelling.

Tom Barlow is an American writer whose work has appeared in many journals including Trampoline, Ekphrastic Review, Voicemail Poetry, Hobart, Tenemos, Redivider, The North Dakota Quarterly, The New York Quarterly, The Modern Poetry Quarterly, and many more. See tombarlowauthor.com.

William Cass has published over 370 short stories in a variety of literary magazines such as december, Briar Cliff Review, and Zone 3. Winner of writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal, he's also been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, and six times for the Pushcart Prize. His three short story collections were published by Wising Up Press. He lives in San Diego, California.

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. 2024). He has published three critical studies, including Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

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