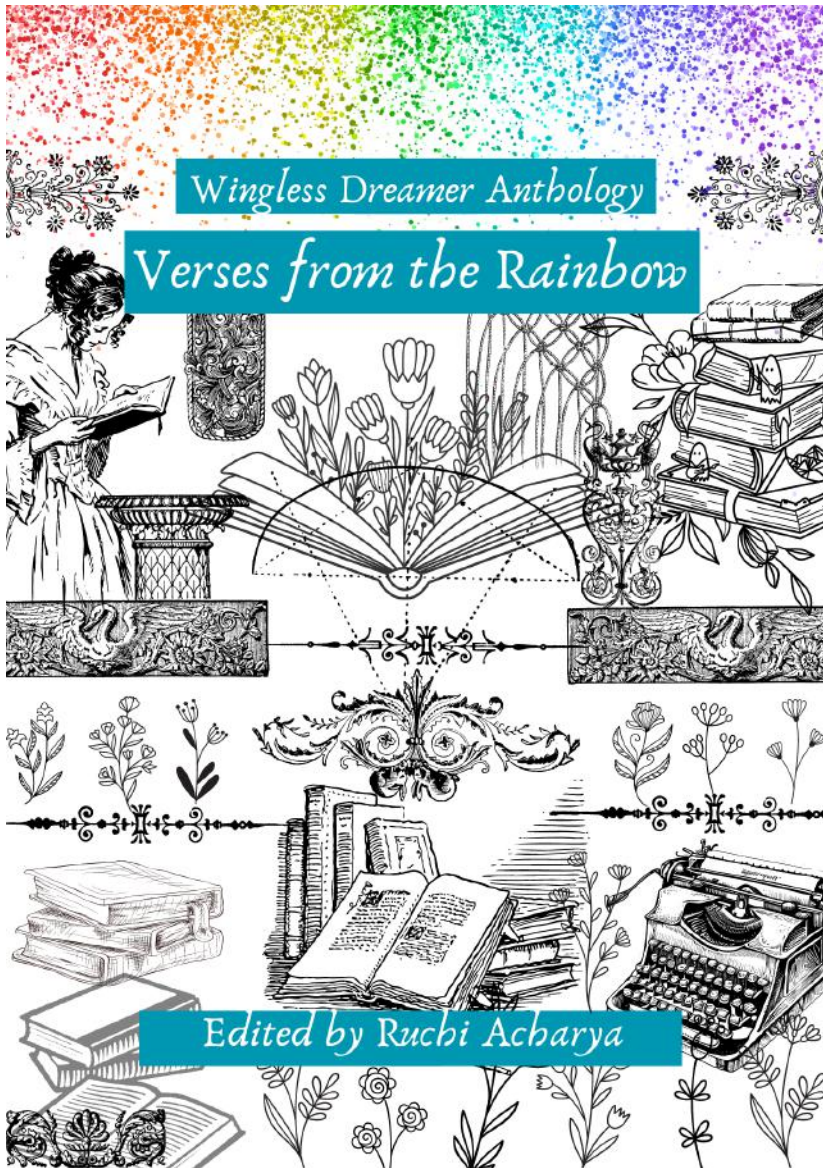






**UPLIFTING WRITERS AND ARTISTS THROUGH
OUR CREATIVE COMMUNITY**



Thank you so much for all your efforts and support that you gave to me in past few months. I'm very happy to receive the book as it is my first time when my poem got published and I want thought to show my gratitude to you through this mail. Hope we get to work together again in the future and wishing you all the best for future endeavours.- Mitali Prasad

I'm literally in tears right now, oh my God. Thanks you @winglessdreamerlit !! The books arrived and are AMAZINGLY FANTASTIC! The cover art is beautiful, the collections stunning! I am filled with such surprise and honor my pieces were published with you, it makes me the happiest lassie in the world. Thank you so much!! If you want to support on of the best publishers EVER, go to Winglessdreamer.com or search their books on Amazon! So grateful. -Gratia Serpento

Hi there, I just wanted to say that after reading some of the poetry on Wingless Dreamer, I feel inspired and in awe. I've been writing on and off as a hobby for a few years now but seeing what you've done and how you've built this whole community of writers, I'm really inspired and impressed. You've given me just a bit more inspiration to keep working on my projects and for that I thank you.- Ryan

Best of afternoons! I am simply sending this email to first thank you for this as I am truly humbled by your decision to accept this poem for publication. I wrote this poem after many nights of night terrors and panic attacks due to my looming anxiety over the pandemic and instant changes the world is going through seemingly overnight. Your validation of this poem is received by such validation and a feeling of triumph that I cannot put into words, so genuinely, thank you. -Arnaldo Batista

I am most excited to receive this new book, and I have already shared your various publications with many friends and family! I am very happy to have come across your publication and look forward to reading many more of your other contributor's pieces!- Natalie Kormos

I shall be anxiously awaiting the book's arrival. I always appreciate your editing efforts. They have always been terrific in the past. More book graphics sounds great, I'm excited to see what they are all about. I'm going to your website now and check out what else you have going on, I know you always have a lot going on. You folks are a great publisher in my book, and I'm not just saying that because you've published some of my work, I sincerely mean it and my family and friends agree. Keep up the great work that you do, I know you will.-William David

Keep up this excellent work. Poetry truly connects the readers with poetic souls across countries and cultures – Amita Sanghvi

It is a great joy for me that a kindhearted editor of a journal like you has liked my poem. Thank you again. Be happy in life this is my heartfelt wishes to you.-Sandip Saha

There is such a positive vibes from Wingless Dreamer, unlike any other publisher. -Gavin Bourke

It's an honor and a privilege to be part of the most eminent Literary Journal of the young minds 'Wingless Dreamer.' This is a place where dreams becomes reality. Wingless Dreamer has made possible for all poets & readers to flap the wings of dreams, imagination & aspiration into the deep blue sky of peace, progress & prosperity. You may prosper like the locket of Apollo. You may win unnumbered hearts of poet lovers in future. – Mr. Saheb SK

VERSES FROM THE RAINBOW

Edited and Compiled by

Ruchi Acharya



ABOUT US

In 2019, Indian author Ruchi Acharya dreamed of a literary community that could bridge the gap between fellow, emerging writers with a fervent passion to create and the world of traditional publishing. She envisioned a place where writers and artists are allowed to publish based solely on the merit of their creative skills. Her desire and inspired vision culminated in the design of Wingless Dreamer Publisher, a forum providing aspiring and experienced creators alike the opportunity to share their love of English literature and art on a global platform.

Throughout the year, our Wingless Dreamer team offers a multitude of themed writing contests designed to stimulate fresh ideas and present an opportunity for talented authors worldwide to contribute perspectives through creative expression efforts. We select the best of the best submissions and stream together the components of writing, editing, and illustrating to result in publications of beautiful literary anthologies that we promote in the marketplace. Our commitment to providing this single platform and process allows our authors and artists to bypass challenges and obstacles associated with the traditional publishing goal, and instead maintain their focus and devotion to creating works of art.

Most meaningful is that Wingless Dreamer community members become part of a family, and are guided, encouraged, and supported as they take each step toward cultivating a successful writing or art career. Non-native English-speaking authors are also granted access to free reviews, critiques, marketing, and, in some cases, funding for their work. Our community has slowly, but steadily, grown to become a prominent stage featuring well-known professional writers and artists from all over the world.

Finally, we at Wingless Dreamer are devoted to publishing poetry, fiction, and artwork reflecting the entirety of multiple perspectives and varied experiences extracted from the deep well of soulful human existence. As such, BIPOC, LGBTQ, disabled, minority, and other marginalized voices are especially invited to join in the sharing. Our ultimate goal is to uplift the human spirit through a diverse creative community. At its core, the human spirit desires connections through expressions. We ardently endeavor to gift wings to these heartfelt dreams.

FOUNDER'S PEN

Being a writer can sometimes be solitary and quiet. A writer can understand how it feels to fall in love with every single character, battle with dialogues, work with vivid poetic devices, endeavor for perfection, and build an entire universe from scratch. Guess what? You're not alone. We understand the efforts you put every day into your work. Since we are a team of writers and artists too.

The writing industry is always considered as something obscure and profound by the public in general. It has become so difficult to stand alone and to stick with a writing career in the commercial society we live in today. Compared to other financial and economic-related jobs, things related to writing are the minority.

Writing is a terrific passion, and writers work in a hard industry, one where success is often sought and little received. Writing is not merely something we do, but something we are, and that makes it one of the most challenging of all pursuits in life.

I never got the right support to become a writer at the prime youth of my life. In the place where I come from writing is considered a cute hobby instead of passion - a commitment that writers made to themselves. Writers don't receive the same respect that other professions do. It's quite condescending. That sort of mentality is also so harmful to amateur writers' confidence. From my past experience, I realize that this issue needs to be addressed.

People need to understand that writing is a hard business. It is time-consuming and after dedicating late-night hours, a roller coaster of emotions to finally produce a piece of literary work that might be read around the globe.

So, I come up with this publishing company and yeah I am proud of it.

In the end, I would like to urge all the people who are reading this to never ever give up on your dreams. Seize the day. Every day counts. I hope you will support us and encourage our team efforts. More power to your pen. Cheers! -*Ruchi Acharya, Wingless Dreamer Founder*

WHY DREAMER'S CHRONICLES IS IMPORTANT?

The poetry anthology "Dreamer's Chronicles" evokes a profound sense of catharsis and healing. At Wingless Dreamer, we firmly believe that reading or writing poetry can facilitate healing, regardless of the negative influences that may surround an individual. The primary goal of this book is to help readers resonate with its verses, providing them with the fortunate opportunity to immerse themselves in the realm of imagination crafted by talented writers through their mastery of the written word.

In the 21st Century, our mission is to safeguard the culture and heritage of English Literature by combatting superficiality and embracing the intricate essence of poetry. This book aims to empower writers to express their thoughts and emotions in distinct and imaginative ways. "Dreamer's Chronicles" vividly illustrates the allure and potency of creative expression, encouraging others to tap into their own creative potential.

The book "Dreamer's Chronicles" transcends time, leaving a legacy that resonates with both current and future generations. By capturing a snapshot of emotions, thoughts, and insights from a specific era and perspective, "Dreamer's Chronicles" contributes to this enduring legacy.

-Ruchi Acharya, Founder and CEO, Wingless Dreamer

OUR JUDGE'S MESSAGE

When the weight of the world seems too heavy, find solace in your craft. Pour your heart onto the page, whether it's filled with joy or heartache. Writing is not just about capturing happiness; it's about releasing pain, finding catharsis, and letting your soul breathe freely. Your words can be your sanctuary, a safe haven where you can heal, transform, and soar.

I just want you to remember that you are never alone in this journey. There is a community of fellow writers as such Wingless Dreamer who understand your struggles, who have walked the same path, and who are cheering you on. Reach out to us, share with us your experiences, and be open to receiving the support and encouragement you deserve.

Celebrate your small victories. A single sentence written is a step forward. A rejected manuscript is a badge of courage, showing that you dared to share your voice with the world. Every time you pick up your pen or type on your keyboard, you are declaring that your story matters.

So, my dear struggling writers, hold onto your dreams with unwavering determination. Let your setbacks fuel your ambition, and let your moments of darkness inspire your words. You have the power to rise from the depths, to turn your struggles into stories that resonate with others who may be facing similar challenges. I hope you're getting me.

In the end, keep writing, keep creating, and keep believing in yourself.

With unwavering support and endless admiration,
Ruchi Acharya

ABOUT THE JUDGE, RUCHI ACHARYA

Ruchi Acharya, hailing from India, is a distinguished English Laureate. Over the past two years, she has gained immense recognition for her remarkable publications, with her works appearing in more than 100 renowned platforms. Ruchi's true passion lies in supporting fellow writers and artists, evident through her establishment of Wingless Dreamer Publisher, a company dedicated to empowering and promoting creative individuals.

With a profound interest in Shakespearean and Medieval Literature, Ruchi delves deep into the intricacies of these literary realms. Among her cherished literary treasures, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen holds a special place in her heart.

Ruchi Acharya has become a prominent figure in the literary world, having made appearances in numerous interviews spanning the globe. During these engagements, she passionately advocates for the appreciation of poetry, emphasizing that human emotions are at the core of our existence. She urges others not to take this profound aspect of life for granted.



CONTENT

S.NO	TITLE	AUTHOR	PAGE
1.	INCARNADINE	RAYMOND LUCZAK 🏆	17
2.	OF FLOWERS AND THREAD	LAURA ISRAEL 🏆	19
3.	ETERNITY	KATHLEEN CHAMBERLIN 🏆	26
4.	FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE	ALLISON CHORATH 🏆	27
5.	STAY WITH ME	ALIZA DUBE 🏆	32
6.	SO MUCH TO GIVE	GARY ROSE	35
7.	THE RINGING IN YOUR EARS	AMY MONAGHAN 🏆	37
8.	ON HAIR	SOPHIE SUSANNE	42
9.	TRANS MEN IN LOVE, HAIBUN	JH GRIMES	44
10.	UNIVERSAL	WILLIAM T. BLACKBURN	45
11.	SIGNED ANONYMOUS POEM	WILLIAM SWIFT	46
12.	A HOMETOWN NEVER STOPS BEING HOME	RAINE GRAYSON	48
13.	THE LADY WITH CAT EYES	MONICA VIERA	53

14.	AN EAGLE, AN OSPREY AND AN ANT	KARL MCOMBER	54
15.	BECOMING	JULIANNA BALMER	56
16.	MEN, APPROACHING	MARISSA LAPORTE	57
17.	CHAIR	AUGUST REYNOLDS	59
18.	IT ALL MADE SENSE	MRINZ ELLIS	61
19.	PERFORMATICE POLLINATION	JAWN VAN JACOBS	63
20.	ALONG THE FLOWER GARDENS	BRANDON SHANE	64
21.	BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY	ANGELA MILLER	65
22.	T-SHOT TUESDAYS AFTER AN OIL CHANGE	JOELLE SIMEU	66
23.	COMING OUT LATER IN LIFE	LYNSEY PATTERSON	68
24.	FINER DAYS	ZACHARY KLEBANER	70
25.	BEYOND THE HORIZON	LUNA FLOYD	72
26.	A WALK FROM FUTILITY FOR NO REASON	ERIC GOODCHILD	74
27.	AUTUMN COMMUNION	KATHLEEN DEYER BOLDUC	82

28.	SNOW & NOSTALGIA	SABRINA JULE	84
29.	A CAPTIVE HEART	WILLIAM DAVID	85
30.	WITHOUT YOU	A.J. CHILSON	87
31.	MOON	ANGELICA LIU	88
32.	NOT-SO-SMART WATER	BRYNN TESKE	90
33.	THE REAL PLAY	TAJENDER SINGH LUTHRA	91
34.	THERE'S NOTHING ABOVE AND BEYOND	CAITLIN DUNN	92
35.	TIED TOGETHER THROUGH MEMORIES AND THINGS	DAVID NEJEZCHLEBA	94
36.	DISASSEMBLED	DIANNA MORALES	96
37.	I HAVE A LIGHT IN MY CHEST	MORGAN ROUTH	98
38.	OUR DANGLING CONVERSATION	JOHN HAYMAKER	99
39.	BEFORE MR. BAKER AND MRS. MCCONNELL	JEFFEREY SPIVEY	105
40.	A SCULPTURE, NOT JUST MY OWN	SHADOW OBSIDIAN	107
41.	THE ONE HOLDING THE KNIFE	ARBEN ALOVIC	109

42.	THEIR HELL	KATIE O'CONNOR	112
43.	BUILDING A CITY AND BUILDING YOUR LIFE TO COMPLETION	TIMOTHY PHILLIPS	114
44.	SENTIMENTAL CREATURES	SOPHIE HOSS	117
45.	THE MILKY WAY PERAMBULATES	DABIN JEONG	119
46.	MOM DRESS	MATTY HEIMGARTNER	120
47.	WHY WOULD I DO IT	TANNER SQUYRES	124
48.	IN SUMMERTIME	NORAH MAE CLIFFORD	126
49.	SINGLE FOREVER	CODY DRACO	128
50.	HOME	ANTHY STROM	129



- Grand winner of the Verses From the Rainbow Writing Contest 2023



- First runner-up



- Second runner-up



- Top Finalists

Believe in yourself

“I want to use this opportunity to thank all the participants and Wingless Dreamer team to make this publication possible. Every poet has unstained spirit and spotless soulfulness that rests at their very center. Embrace it. Thanks for your support and always remember,

Never give up on your dreams.”

—Ruchi Acharya, Wingless Dreamer Founder

1. THE RAINBOW ARC AND THE POT OF HONEY

The ocean
at sunset

is a pair
of pursed lips

gloss-shimmered
in pink-red,

a full blush
of delight.

The harlot sun
is a chanteuse,

always up
for another

farewell boo-
hoo onstage

while embittered
contenders die

underneath
the waves.

It's a diva-
eat-diva world.

Yet hunger,
when sated,

nourishes strength
for copulation.

Every sunset is
a savage conception.



RAYMOND LUCZAK

Raymond Luczak is the author and editor of over 30 books such as *Far from Atlantis: Poems*, *A Quiet Foghorn: More Notes from a Deaf Gay Life*, and *Widower, 48, Seeks Husband: A Novel*. An inaugural Zoeglossia Poetry Fellow, he lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. [raymondluczak.com]

2. OF FLOWERS AND THREAD

The cool night air clung to the back of Eurus's throat as they emerged from the treeline, a chill running down their spine in spite of their white tailcoat's enchantments. The unseasonable cold ought not be able to touch them - an unlikely culprit, they reasoned. No, what they lay past the woods must be the source or their unease.

They stood before an expanse of vibrant wildflowers, breathtaking even in the moonlight. Here, they believed, one might see every color mortals were meant to know. And should the butterflies be out in abundance, one may even find hues yet unwitnessed by human eyes.

Stepping out among the swathes of petals, they were taken in by the spirals of violets and thistles scattered all around. Every once in a while, a cricket or moth would flutter away as their footsteps disturbed its slumber. Pollen tickled their senses, and a bout of sneezing interrupted their dreamlike musings. As their fit echoed through the woods, they reflexively looked over their shoulder, offering a hurried prayer to the night sky.

"May my associates be free from worry of me, and may I be free from my obligations. If only for this night."

Eurus opened their mouth to say more, but words failed to follow, as though the meaning they sought had been trapped in stone and hidden away. *And may he not find me here. Gods forbid - how shameful.*

Gene knew the place well, but he had no reason to be in The Rainbow Fields now of all times. No, he would be reveling. Drinking the night away, even. He was never the type to fall into such terrible reminiscence. He had served his all-too-short sentence, and he'd want to take part in the conspicuous consumption so often afforded to those whose convictions seemed in poor taste.

A sting just under their jacket's breast arced through them, and they grimaced as they rubbed it away. The wound he'd inflicted had long

since healed, and the scar had faded to a clean white line below the collarbone. Its phantom pain would still visit every so often, when visions of that horrible night took hold.

The memory of his attack always began with a chuckle. Had his knife missed by a few more inches, he may have hardly served a year. Considering who he'd been smuggling for and the strings his allies could have pulled, he might never have seen the inside of a cell. But of course, their tear-stained declaration of enmity, that even if he walked free they'd never love him again, wouldn't have had him considering the numbers. Their vow to expose his crimes, that he'd never hold their trust again, that they'd have him in a cell for the rest of his life if it was the last thing they did, would not have had him skirting around extra charges.

The soft trickling of water jolted Eurus back to reality, and they found themselves by the stream on the field's far side. Their foot hung mere inches above the water's surface, nearly plunging into its serene, shallow edge. As they eased it back toward the shore, a falling droplet sent ripples across the brook, carried away by its lazy flow. *Rain? How odd. There was hardly a cloud in the sky when I left.* They reached up to rub their eyes, only to find the very same tears that had dripped down just moments ago.

Eurus groaned. They'd planned to come to terms with his release through this little excursion, not wallow in self-pity. They ran a sleeve across their eyes, turning toward the slanted rock that lay by the stream. Sure enough, it rested right where they remembered it, the perfect size for a couple to sit by the shore and admire the scenery.

They sat upon the rock and laid back, casting their eyes toward the stars. *Two and a half years. We haven't spoken for two and a half years.*

All the times they'd come here with him, lounging hand-in-hand in this very place, flowed into their mind. They could never keep straight which day had been which – a touch from one and a gasp from another would meld seamlessly into each other, the lines between each blurry and imprecise. Staring listlessly at the night sky, they tried to pick

out one thread of memory and follow it, but found themselves entangled in another two or three no matter where it led.

That is when their eyes turned away from the sky and to the earth below. Their mind may have been muddled through a decade of love and heartbreak, but the earth held no such attachments. A half-buried rock along the shoreline came to their attention - small enough to pry free, and old enough to have witnessed what they sought. With a flick of the wrist and a whispered rune-word, they conjured a pair of ethereal hands above it. They worked the ghostly fingers around its width, prizing it out from the dirt below. Soon enough, the hands floated over to them, resting the weathered bit of stone in their palm.

Eurus laid back again, pressing the small rock against their chest as their eyes closed. An hour of rhythmic chanting seemed to pass in an instant as their mind wandered into daydreams and diversions. When the time came to conclude their spell, they looked back to the stars and hesitated for just a moment. *What am I hoping to see? What is it that I want to find?* While they had no true answer, they knew a near foolproof request.

Eurus lifted the stone into view, staring at it as though fixed on the eyes of a suspect. "Show me the first time you saw Gene and myself here together."

The stone seemed to hum with energy, light streaming off of it and sparkling across the water to unveil some of the flowers' majesty. As suddenly as it began, the glowing ceased, casting the field back into little but starlight. Eurus closed their eyes again, cradling the stone in their hands, and a crystal-clear memory formed in their mind.

They saw the wind blowing grasses all about, petals drifting this way and that. They saw their younger self laughing, still half in disbelief, latched onto Gene's arm. He grinned as he stole glances down at them, looking like the happiest man alive.

Eurus shook themselves out of the memory, squeezing their eyes shut harder. "No. After that." The stone seemed to shudder in their grip.

They saw his hands at work as they patiently watched the water trickle past. He kneeled behind them as he gently wove their hair into a braid. Every few folds he would reach down and pluck a flower from the ground, slipping them into the knots as he worked down its length.

Eurus shook the scene away again and spoke through gritted teeth. "Later that same day."

He held the finished braid in his hands, gently twisting it around so they could appraise his work. It was beautiful. Tears filled their eyes and a stunned silence held their tongue. They threw themselves into his arms and gave him their first kiss.

Eurus leapt to their feet, throwing the small rock as hard as they could.

"Stop it!" The splash of stone striking the water echoed throughout the woods alongside their shout. A stray droplet struck one of the violets on its far side, and a young butterfly hastily fluttered off its stem. Eurus fell to their knees at the brook's edge, staring through its rippling surface at the rock, newly nestled into the silt.

"I-I'm sorry," they said.

As they stared down at the water, tears filling their eyes again, their inner voice turned sharp and cold. *Who are you apologizing to, the rock? This is ridiculous.*

Just as they'd nearly convinced themselves the voice was right, a compulsion came over them. All of their training would tell them to resist, that no good outcome could follow such a feeling. At best, an enchanted critter could be playing some trick on them. At worst, a predator could be drawing them to their doom. This time, though, Eurus couldn't help themselves. As the impulse commanded, they ran a hand through the stream, letting its cool waters dance across their fingertips.

As it soothed their skin, the bubbling froth and gentle waves seemed to form words. "It's not your fault," the brook whispered.

Eurus blinked, rubbing their eyes with their dry hand as they hesitantly pulled the other back from the water. *Either I've well and truly lost my mind, or I've earned some spirit's pity, it seems.*

They stood and turned to leave, but hesitated, watching as the water lapped against the ground at their feet. They waved an arm and muttered a charm under their breath, conjuring the same pair of ghostly hands to fish out the small rock they'd thrown in just moments ago. Their magic lifted it into the air, placing it back into its original resting place as they gingerly pushed the dirt back over its sides. Their work finished, they looked to the stream.

"Thank you," they said.

With that, Eurus turned away. *Enough of this. I have to be back before anyone asks after me.*

A chill came over them again, and they hugged their sides to ward it off. With their shoulders hunched over and their eyes cast downward, Eurus strode across the field, slipping back into the woods.

Gene whistled quietly to himself as he strolled through the old woods. The luxury of good, fine cloth on his skin was all too unfamiliar compared to the travesty they'd called clothing in that musty old prison. All the more reason not to get caught again.

Eyes peeled for any flash of white through the underbrush, he wandered the dusty roads outside the settlement, careful not to cross any woodland ranger's night time route. That sentimental fool would surely be skulking around out here tonight. He just had to figure out where.

He and Eurus still had some business to attend to, you see. Given his old flame's newfound calling as a freelance investigator, he had to ensure that they'd turn the other way when it came to his *very legitimate* dealings. Few in their position could resist the call of coin or favors, but knowing them, things could get complicated real fast.

Soon enough, he stumbled upon the old trailhead that he and Eurus had passed through so many times. It even had fresh footprints.
Oh-ho, not so crafty today, are you?

Gene slipped onto the offshoot from the main road, ducking around the loose foliage that had grown over top. He'd been down this way too many times to count. Once he found the turn, he could make it all the way to The Rainbow Fields with his eyes closed.

Strolling along the familiar twists and turns, he went over all of his excuses, all of his cover-ups in the event that they came at him again.
A wild hydra finally got them. It was an unrelated robbery. It was a hit organized by one of my old friends, but I had nothing to do with it. I did it, but it was self-defense.

That last one lodged itself in his mind, and he couldn't get it out. It had worked wonders at the trial, so why did it suddenly feel so... *off*?

Then he realized. That last one, he might actually believe. It hit too close to home. He cursed under his breath, but just as he was about to call it quits, he heard the *tip tap* of feet along the old dirt road. On instinct, he darted into the nearby brush, kneeling among the scraggly ferns and holding his body still.

Moments later, Eurus came into view. He first caught a glimpse of that short haircut they'd sported at the trial. He'd figured they'd keep it - it looked cute. Then he saw their puffy red eyes, their shoulders hunched over as they clung to their own sides, their ragged breathing just barely contained. They'd clearly been crying.

That's when it all hit him. There was that sweet little bookworm he'd fallen head over heels for. There was his other half, the one he'd sworn to love for all his days. There was the poor lost soul he'd hurt so, so badly. There was the only reason he'd gotten caught in the first place. There was the source of every single problem he'd had for the past three years. There was the one who'd stolen his heart, only to tear it to shreds.

He hissed out a whisper as the wind shook the brush around him. "No, you're the one who pushed me. You threatened me. You *abandoned* me."

As much as he yearned to call out their name, to finish what he'd started, damn all the consequences, he couldn't do it. He couldn't get out a single word, nor lift a finger. All he could do was watch as Euris walked right past him, oblivious as ever, and disappeared into the woods as quietly as they'd arrived. Once they'd gone out of sight and been that way for a while, he laid down on the forest floor, staring at the rustling leaves overhead.

"Damn it all," he said.

He took a deep breath. Alright, maybe he didn't want to see their pretty fucking face ever again. That was fine, as long as he kept things under wraps this time. It wasn't like they lived together anymore - he could just stay out of their way, and they'd stay out of his. Probably.

Gene picked himself up and dusted himself off. "What a waste of time," he said to no one in particular. With that, he turned back toward the settlement. If he hurried, he could still make it to that party.

THE END



LAURA ISRAEL

Laura (She/Her, Demisexual) is a computer science PhD student by day and a fantasy author by night. She has one or two other works out there, but not enough to warrant a real social media account yet. You can toss her an email at lauraanneisrael@gmail.com.

3. ETERNITY

Forever: a thought so vast
It stretches beyond the ceaseless creation of days
Beyond a lifetime of glorious mornings
An endless cascade of enchanting evening breezes
Above, an ebony dome studded with stars, twinkling pinholes to my
eye,
Extending beyond human comprehension,
An inconceivable otherworldly arena, teeming with possibilities.
Do those stars in the cosmos understand eternity,
Riding the night sky high above my head?
They are ancient sentinels, steadfast and silent.
Surveying the scattered orbs,
Each enveloped in eternity's secret sounds.
Does Forever exist outside of human consciousness?
Or is Time itself a perpetual now,
Without future or past,
An endless loop, circular and unending?
Meaningless
An epiphany in which the sacred and profane merge,
The alpha embracing the omega?



KATHLEEN CHAMBERLIN

Kathleen Chamberlin is a retired educator, living in Albany, New York. She began writing creatively during the quarantine period of Covid-19. In addition to writing, she enjoys gardening, genealogy, and grandchildren.

4. FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE

WELLS FARGO BANK STATEMENT: SEPTEMBER 1ST- OCTOBER 1ST

SEPTEMBER 4TH: AMERICAN AIRLINES \$328.29

My dad died. I got the call from my sister while I was watching a movie with my friend Elise. I didn't answer the first two times she called until she texted me saying it was urgent. I didn't think it would be serious, so I put the phone on speaker. I regret that now. Elise didn't say anything when my sister told me what happened. My dad had a heart attack, which wasn't surprising because of how much he drank. He and I weren't close, but I flew back home for the funeral anyway. It was weird seeing all of my family together in such a depressing setting. I didn't give a eulogy. I couldn't think of anything to say. I came back to college the day after the funeral.

SEPTEMBER 12TH: COFFEE HOUSE \$14.51

Elise invited me to get coffee and study with her. I went because I needed a distraction. She asked if I could buy her coffee for her and she would Venmo me. She complained about her boyfriend for 45 minutes while I listened. She didn't ask me anything about the funeral. She also never paid me back.

SEPTEMBER 16TH: STARBUCKS \$10.56

I bought coffee on my lunch break. I felt like I couldn't focus and needed a pick-me-up. I got distracted by my phone in the Starbucks parking lot and came back to work thirty minutes late. My boss yelled at me for the first time. I cried in the bathroom afterward. The last person to yell at me like that was my father, years ago. I hate being yelled at.

SEPTEMBER 19TH: GOODWILL \$4.60

I went thrifting to try to find some new clothes for fall. I invited Elise to go with me, but she backed out at the last minute, so I went by myself. I

found a cute plaid sweater, but once I got home and washed it, it shrunk. I didn't read the care label about it being 100% wool. I ended up throwing it out.

SEPTEMBER 24TH: WALGREENS \$7.49

Elise invited me to go to one of my favorite bars across town. I thought she was trying to distract me, but once I got to her apartment, she had already been drinking with three other people and expected me to be the designated driver. Her cat was also downstairs, even though she knows I'm allergic. I was sneezing so much at her apartment that I had to leave. She groaned about having to buy an Uber as I left. I had to stop by a Walgreens and buy Benadryl on my way back. I haven't spoken to her since. She also never reached out.

SEPTEMBER 30TH: MCDONALDS \$3.08

I agreed to go to a party at some random person's house with my roommate. It was 90's themed. I went because I had a pair of low-rise jeans that I had been meaning to wear. It ended up being way too packed, and the music wasn't even on theme. One of the host's friends was talking to me all night, and I ended up going home with them, despite not being my type. I regret it. I went to McDonald's on my walk back home the next morning. My fries were cold.

WELLS FARGO BANK STATEMENT: OCTOBER 1ST - NOVEMBER 1ST

OCTOBER 4TH: UBER \$60.17

It was my roommate's friend's birthday party. I don't know her very well, so I bought her a bottle of red wine as a gift. I felt uncomfortable being there, so I kept drinking to try to make myself more social. I ended up getting too drunk on my own bottle of wine and threw up in her bathroom. I called an Uber back and threw up in it too. I had to pay the cleaning fee. I hate drinking. It makes me feel like my dad.

OCTOBER 8TH: WALMART \$26.38

I had to buy groceries. I bought a bunch of fruits and vegetables, but I never used any of them, so they all went bad. I also stole an eyeliner - I don't know why - I can afford it. I didn't even bother checking for cameras or any employees watching. It felt like someone else took control of my body. I only realized how bad the situation could have been once I got back into my car. It was fun, though.

OCTOBER 11TH: AUTO REPAIR \$310.72

When I was driving to class, I found a parking spot next to a pole. I turned in too early and I knew I had to stop and reverse, but I kept going anyway. It felt so reckless. I hit the pole and dented my front left bumper. I can't stop thinking about how mad my dad would have been at me if he was still around.

OCTOBER 15TH: ZARA \$183.94

I impulsively bought clothes online. They weren't things that I would normally even wear. I didn't like how any of them fit on me. Nothing fits right anymore. Whenever I looked in the mirror, I just saw my father's face staring back at me. I look just like him. I should have returned the clothes but I didn't.

OCTOBER 18TH: TARGET \$12.40

I bought a bunch of organizational tools to clean out my closet. It's been a mess all semester. While I was cleaning, I found a rosary hidden underneath a pile of junk. I remember when I used to always wear one around my neck. I also remember when I took it off. It was when I was 16 and had a crush on a girl in my Sunday School class. My dad screamed at me when I came home and I wasn't wearing it anymore. I don't regret anything. If he knew why, he would have told me I was going to hell. I almost feel a sense of relief knowing that he never will.

OCTOBER 21ST: EDIBLE ARRANGEMENTS \$49.99

My sister got engaged. We all know that it's because she got pregnant, but she insists that the baby was planned, and that she can't wait to get

married and become a mother. I sent her an edible arrangement with chocolate-covered strawberries as a congratulations.

OCTOBER 31ST: VENMO

\$ 5.00

I went to a Halloween party. Halloween is my favorite holiday, but it didn't feel as good this time around. I reused my vampire costume from last year. When I was putting it on, I couldn't stop thinking about how different my life was the last time I wore it. The party I went to was going fine until halfway through I saw my ex. We hadn't spoken since we broke up six months ago. They were dressed as a boxer and had a black eye. I couldn't tell if it was real or part of their costume. We made awkward eye contact, and I hid in the bathroom for 20 minutes. They texted me later after the party ended saying that they heard about my dad and that they were sorry, but I never replied. I should have.

**WELLS FARGO BANK STATEMENT: NOVEMBER 1ST -
DECEMBER 1**

NOVEMBER 1ST: ATM

\$2.00

I went to church. I haven't been to one since the funeral and I'm not religious, but I was raised in one, so maybe that's why. I took two dollars from a nearby ATM to put in the collection plate. My hangover was so bad from the night before that I almost threw up in it when they handed it to me. I didn't pay much attention to the homily and instead focused on the family in front of me. It was a husband, a daughter, and a wife. They knew when to sit down and stand up, and I had to watch them to remember when to kneel. They seemed so happy, like they really loved each other, the way a real family should. I didn't know it was a holiday - All Saints Day. I was named after a saint. I prayed to her. I hope it helps.

NOVEMBER 9TH: SHELL

\$41.09

My friends from high school surprised me at college. They drove up with picnic snacks and a blanket and dragged me to go to the beach with them. I don't like the beach, but I missed them, so I agreed. I offered to pay for

the gas. By the time we got there, it was late and it wasn't sunny out, so we sat on the sand and played music and talked about old memories until midnight. It was nice. I think I might enjoy the beach now.

NOVEMBER 15TH: MICHAELS

\$11.61

I went to the craft store to pick up some yarn. The idea of making a baby blanket was stuck in my head. It feels like something that aunts are supposed to do. Making the blanket was rough at first, but I got the hang of it. It's made out of this beautiful multicolored yarn. I have some left over, so I think I'll use it for something else in the future. I can't wait to be able to give it to my niece or nephew. I finally feel like I have something to look forward to.

NOVEMBER 24TH: DELTA AIRLINES

\$394.55

I flew back home for my sister's wedding. It was nice to see all our family again, in a happier setting. I was her maid of honor. Both her husband and I cried when she walked down the aisle in the church. I think he'll be a good dad. My sister looked so pretty in her wedding dress with her baby bump poking through. My sister and I started tearing up while I was delivering my wedding speech. I felt like I had so much to say. The doctors expect their baby to be born on Christmas, and my sister and her husband call them their 'little Christmas miracle.' We feel like a real family now. There wasn't a father-daughter dance, but even if he were alive, I don't think there would be one either way.



ALLISON CHORATH

Allison Chorath is a rising senior at Florida State University. She is from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and writes creative fiction. For fun, Allison enjoys hiking, listening to music, and crocheting.

5. STAY WITH ME

Your herpes is an invasive species, a sprig of wildflowers, the fingerprints of a ghost. Your lips are swollen, scabbed and cracking. You trace a fingertip over this most recent outbreak. The woman in the mirror is nearly thirty and married but she wears her past on her face. You are trying to come up with better ways to explain this plight to yourself. A cross, the last gift she ever gave you. The last insult he ever paid you.

“Where did you come from?” you ask, painting over the puss with matte lipstick. “Who left you here with me?”

She was a Holly Golightly in boxer braids, eating ice cream for breakfast and falling asleep with diamonds in her ears. She wrapped a scarf around her hair when you went driving, the car like a bullet cutting through the night. She hung her head out the window, singing at the top of her lungs, while smoke poured through the sunroof. She laughed like a goddess.

“I’ve yet to meet an era that can understand me,” she told you. You tasted blood when you kissed her. She left without saying goodbye. You knocked on her door and it fell open. The room was sterile and stripped. Your friends were no help;

“She dropped out.”

“She’s not answering anyone’s texts.”

“I don’t know where to find her.”

“Stay,” you would have begged her, if she had given you the chance.

Or...

He was a cocaine nosebleed with the habit of quoting Tolstoy like a second language. You made lists of his vices, of the things he took before he crawled his way to your doorstep.

Someone needed to know what to tell the ambulance, if it ever came to that. You ran your fingers through his hair after he passed out, your hands fluttering towards his pulse. You held your breath in terror that his would stop, there in your arms.

“She doesn’t understand. She yells,” he said. It was a silent agreement you had, you never said her name. The girl he belonged to across town. “You keep me going.”

“It’s never too late to change,” you said. But he was in love with the ruin of himself. You didn’t know then that it’s pointless to try to fix other people. You never woke up together. Somewhere in the night, he unfolded himself from your arms, tiptoed across the floor. He’d kiss your forehead while you pretended to be asleep. He kissed you like it was supposed to mean something.

“I exist when you’re not here,” you wanted to tell him, but you weren’t sure that was really true. Some nights your roommate would confront him on his way out, her small angry hands wrapped around a cup of coffee, as determined as a stakeout cop.

“You are killing that girl,” she’d tell him.

“You don’t know anything about her,” he’d say. A door would slam.

“Stay, please,” you whispered, nose pressed to the window, watching him walk back into the world.

Or...

In the mornings he wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and fed breadcrumbs to the pigeons living under the eaves. The birds would flock to his open palms. You sat in his bed, topless, marveling at the wonder of human hands, that they can contain such gentleness, such violence, such multitudes. This boy was teaching you gentleness. He was a writer too.

“I respect you,” he told you, that first night when you kissed him in the snow, under the streetlights. “I respect your work.”

He said these sentences like they changed things. He drank Pabst for the aesthetic. He once smuggled a small amount of weed through the TSA line by hiding it under his tongue, when you flew out to California, when the world played out like a Red Hot Chili Peppers song. He graduated. You weren’t afraid of him enough to fight for him.

Or...

You met her in the middle of a bar fight. Your gaze met as some other girl’s fist collided with the side of her face. You scooped up one of her teeth from the pub floor and asked the bartender for a glass of milk. You took care of each other like that.

The boy she was dating was being arraigned on assault charges. Rumor had it he'd given a man a traumatic brain injury with a baseball bat. You were two girls without any real home. You made quiet love on the bathroom floor, while someone else's party raged outside. By midnight, the boyfriend raged drunk and loud. You crawled on top of the stove to cry, your knees pressed into your cheeks. A bottle of Patron the size of your skull sat on the pool table.

"If he hits you, disappear," you told her. "Take my tips and run as far away as you can."

She took your money, she took herself to Georgia. You think sometimes that you should have gone with her.

Stay with me, stay with me. You said it. You almost said it. You thought it. It doesn't matter now. A part of them did. Just not the part you wanted.



ALIZA DUBE

Aliza Dube is a poly, bisexual writer who enjoys writing about the messy and beautiful reality of being both those things at the same time. She is a student of University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA program in fiction writing. She is the author of "The Newly Tattooed's Guide to Aftercare" through Running Wild Press. She is currently seeking literary representation. She can be found on Facebook under Aliza Dube Author Page.

6. SO MUCH TO GIVE

My mind is up and down like a yoyo
Eyes all around looking for the popo
Paranoid, freakin', jumpy like a pogo
Red faced, dull eyes, alcoholic logo

The life I am living is fake
All 'hair of the dog' and 'wake and bake'
That's no way to live, I got so much to give

Satisfied with getting fried on each and every dime
Liquefied suicide one sip at a time
Mortified and terrified of my downward climb
Horrificed, I recognize this slow death in my prime

The most fucked up in the room
Sensing a feeling of impending doom
As I recklessly zoom from womb to tomb

The life I am living is fake
All 'hair of the dog' and 'wake and bake'
That's no way to live, I got so much to give

The message I found in the bottles I was drinkin'
Finally opened my eyes and set me to thinkin'
Am I gonna keep digging this hole that I dug
Or will I really learn to plug the jug

It's not easy to quit so most people won't
Society makes it legit so what's the damn point
I really don't need it yo I know that I don't
I'll wind up in the hospital, the morgue or the joint

There has got to be a better path
That doesn't incur this daily wrath
So I slowed my roll and bided my time
Took out the trash one piece at a time

Cause tis what tis, taint what taint
I ain't never gonna be a saint

The life I was living was fake
No more 'hair of the dog' or 'wake and bake'
Cause that's no way to live, I got so much to give



GARY ROSE

Gary Rose is a graduate student of philosophy at Texas State University.

7. THE RINGING IN YOUR EARS

It's happening again.

Hannah lifts her face towards the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. She closes her eyes, but it doesn't stop.

The ringing. That goddamn ringing in her ears.

Her mother had been a quilt: a one-of-a-kind tapestry woven together from collected witticisms. One of her favorites had gone like this:

If your ears are ringing, someone's singing. In other words, someone out there is talking about you.

The lightbulb that hangs from the ceiling of the massage parlor is coated in a red film which is supposed to make the space feel sensual and illicit. Hannah has come to associate that low red light with her work, which feels like a shame because a year or so ago, before she started this job, it would have reminded her of a darkroom. She had taken a photography class one time in high school and liked it a lot; for a minute there she'd even considered doing something real with it. Life gets in the way.

The ringing in her ears continues, but her client clears his throat. Hannah opens her eyes and turns her attention back to the nude man lying on the table before her. He's covered in oil and spread out like a slab of meat she's about to prepare for dinner, although Hannah understands the reality that it's her who is the meal. She gets back to work. Her hands trace a forceful circular pattern over the man's thigh. He lets out a low groan.

"Were you looking for anything extra today?" Hannah asks seductively, but her mind is elsewhere, wondering who is out there talking about her.

After work Hannah walks the streets of Hollywood as the sun begins to set. There are sparkly little flecks in the sidewalk on Vine Street, and in the right lighting they make the whole street glitter. Hannah never judges newcomers who still think of this city as glamorous; she was like that once as well. A ragged man with his pants around his ankles stumbles towards her muttering nonsense, and she dodges deftly as he vomits on the sparkling sidewalk. Hannah continues on her way.

She knows it's stupid, and probably childish too, but she's decided to make a mental list of everyone who might have been talking

about her earlier. The problem is, it's hard to discern which candidates are actual possibilities versus which ones are just wishful thinking on her part.

It could have been a relative – maybe one of the countless Pennsylvania cousins – wondering idly over a three-dollar beer what had ever happened to little Hannah. *Last I saw on Facebook, she was still out in Hollywood.*

Or maybe an ex-lover. Ideally one she hadn't really cared for or thought about much at all, but who had been so obsessed with her that they couldn't help but talk about it even now. *She just really left an impression on me, you know?*

Or maybe a former teacher. Or the landlord from her old apartment in the valley. Or her mother's childhood best friend Nancy who she hasn't seen since the funeral two years ago.

All at once Hannah decides she doesn't want to play this guessing game anymore. She crosses Sunset and heads home to her studio apartment above the liquor shop.

#

The next day at the massage parlor, this time with a different naked man splayed out on the table before her, Hannah hears the ringing once again. It comes at almost the same time as the man, which is fortunate because Hannah knows he would have noticed her distraction otherwise. Yesterday was slow, so today it's important that she earns her tips.

When he's done, she hands the client a wet towel with which to clean himself, then surreptitiously checks her phone. She's not sure what she's hoping to see, but two days in a row of being talked about must mean something.

There are no new messages.

When Hannah was younger, there were lots of occasions on which she could expect to be talked about. At the playground being watched by small clusters of slightly bored yet deeply proud parents. At school when a teacher called home to complain that she'd been disruptive during math. On her birthdays when she'd wake up to find the whole house decorated with streamers and her mother waiting in the kitchen with Funfetti pancakes as if the whole world revolved around Hannah.

Sometimes it was nice to be the object of so much attention, and other times it was overwhelming. It often felt like a thing she didn't

deserve and couldn't live up to. By the time she was a teenager, Hannah mostly just wanted to disappear. She supposes that now, in a way, she's gotten her wish. Under the dim red light of the massage parlor, she is all but invisible.

The ringing in her ears fades out – going, going, gone – until she's left with nothing but the ambient noise of the room: her client's heavy breathing, the hum of a box fan, the muffled honking of a fruit cart outside on the street.

No one is talking about her. There's no one left who'd want to.

Hannah watches the client pull on his clothes and leave without a tip.

#

In her apartment that night, Hannah tries her hand at her mother's chicken cordon bleu recipe. The tiny kitchen, which is little more than a corner in her one-room apartment, fills up quickly with smoke. Hannah opens the rusty oven to find a burnt and inedible lump. She puts on her sneakers and rides the shaky elevator downstairs instead.

At the grocery store a few blocks away, Hannah drifts like a ghost between the aisles. She's somewhere in the territory of the frozen burritos when it begins.

The ringing in her ears is back.

Hannah closes her eyes. The tighter she squeezes them, the louder it gets. *If they're ringing, someone's singing.* She wishes she could shut it all off, but she's not sure she would even if she could.

“Wow – hey.”

Hannah's eyes snap open.

The ringing stops.

A man stands before her in the aisle, a grocery basket dangling on his arm. He's dressed in slightly rumpled office clothes and is watching Hannah with a familiarity that unnerves her. She tries to place his face, but he couldn't be more generic or unrecognizable.

“Remember me?” he asks. A suggestive smirk plays across his lips.

Hannah's heart sinks as she realizes where he knows her from.

The man takes a step closer. A mother with three small children in a cart, all of them singing a kids' song, pass by them in the aisle.

“Don't worry, I won't tell anybody,” the man says in Hannah's ear. “You were so fucking good; I think about it all the time.”

His basket hits her softly in the side as he gives her another smirk and vanishes into the produce section.

Hannah leaves the store quickly without buying anything.

#

The next day at the massage parlor, Hannah hears the bell on the door jingle. She's like a dog with that bell; it causes a physical reaction in her body that, at this point, is instinctual and survivalistic. Hannah jumps to her feet and heads down the dimly lit hallway to the lobby.

A young man, maybe twenty-one or so, stands sheepish and small by the door.

"What can I help you with?" Hannah asks.

"Massage?"

"Sure. Come on back."

She gestures him into the red-lit massage room. He lingers awkwardly on the threshold as if unsure of what to do.

"First time?" Hannah asks.

He nods.

"Go ahead and undress to your comfort level, then lie back on the table."

"Do you do...other stuff here?"

"I don't know what you mean," Hannah says as she prepares the oils.

"Are you sure?"

"What specifically were you looking for?"

"You know. Extra special stuff."

The young man is looking both at and through her as he talks. The ringing sound, distant at first but quickly growing louder, fills Hannah's head.

Suddenly she is no longer standing in the red-lit massage parlor. She's no longer twenty-five. She is seven years old and bobbing around her mother's knees in the kitchen of her childhood home. It's springtime and the windows are open. There's chicken cordon bleu in the oven. There is a person in the world who is always thinking about her, always talking about her, always keeping her in sight. Hannah's mother leans down to her level, smiling.

"You're my extra special girl."

Hannah blinks. The bright daylight of her childhood kitchen
fades to dim, muted red. The massage parlor reforms itself around her.
The young man is waiting for an answer.
The ringing in her ears continues.



AMY MONAGHAN

Amy Monaghan is a queer Los Angeles-based writer with an MFA in Screenwriting from UCLA. Her fiction has appeared in publications such as Witness Magazine, Mulberry Literary, Cagibi Lit, The Write Launch and others. In her free time she enjoys road trips to towns with one gas station, reading books about tragedy, and collecting pinecones in the park. Learn more at www.amymonaghanwrites.com.

8. ON HAIR

she moves me
the way a lock of hers
swirls around my nger,
and i would melt in thin air
if i could catch her perfume.
i dream of all kinds of hair owing
down female shoulders. i dream of
texture and shine, argan oil. i
imagine caramel waves,
and long thick braids,
and hair as dark as night.
and to me she is always welcome,
to me she's the giver and the given.
i will let myself know this, just now, how we
wade into conditioner, swimming in shampoo,
and how the sunlight gets ltered and absorbed by
her loving strands. of strawberry and sky. how
does she always smell like vanilla and something more
luscious? how do i climb back down the ladder and not
fall all the way down? my mind forms frizz, and
baby hairs and buzz cuts. how i've held the truth so
lightly. why i never used that lightness in my ngertips
to caress the curls that form at the base of her neck.
she bursts every hair elastic she ever tries to tame it back with.
i'm afraid i will lose myself in the lengths of her locks, or
worse, nd myself in the silk of her tresses.
let this not cut me like a split end.
i love the honey of her hair
gleaming in the
glowing
sun.



SOPHIE SUSANNE

Sophie Susanne is a bisexual poet currently attending University in Boston, Massachusetts. She was a chosen poet representative for the 2023 Intercollegiate Poetry Festival in Salem, MA.

9. TRANS MEN IN LOVE, HAIBUN

I wash my face with a hand cloth that just dried his shoulders, take into my mind and come up with a few years ago and how I must have known something, then. Blue lights on rooftop railings and the flesh-born want to fight. Brick buildings and us surrounded by news broadcasts. Hunger. Bans. Nighttime. Staring at a stranger. At a stranger's dog. I think I say something out loud but I don't. I think my ankle is bleeding but it's not. The twin size bed where I thought I had never existed, the queen size bed where he fucked me until daylight after the wrecked car and the repair shop. On my stomach, a freckle I'm worried about. On his, hair and hair and hair. I sit with him like a dog sits with a good bone, gently in its mouth, and looks up stupid, like *please, can I keep this?* One day our parents will learn that they messed up and we will already be people without them. One day I'll look into a mirror and have nothing at all to say. A friend takes me to the symphony to see the hot Icelandic pianist. Somewhere a father realizes his life is almost over, like his father years before. After hormones my lover's face matches his dad's. Many whiles ago we trusted ourselves always to be kind, and then others took that away. The night moves on with its bird calls. The state moves on with its crimes. I can't blame. One night he comes up behind me, writes his fingers up my back, says:

*we have things to do:
the god given gift of hands,
your face above mine.*



JH GRIMES

JH Grimes is a trans poet and writer. Their work appears or is forthcoming in Devastation Baby, Spires Magazine, REMAKE, and others. They are the recipient of a 2022 Academy of American Poets Prize, the Norma Lowry Memorial Prize for Poetry, and the Roger Conant Hatch Prize for Lyric Poetry. They received a BA from Washington University in St. Louis. Instagram: grimesview.

10. UNIVERSAL

Universal-
One size fits Most,
Adaptive contraption
Suitable for any user
Plug-n-play,
Should snap as fingers,
Slotted to fit:
Tab A
Application of figurative language
Problem solved

Sometimes that's how it feels.



WILLIAM T. BLACKBURN

William T Blackburn- Educated in English:Writing/Teaching and Music Composition, his work appears in numerous digital and print journals, technical manuals, and RPG books. He has authored Cubicles I & II, as well as contributing to ACW PoemVillage 2019-2022. He served as an Ageless Authors judge in 2020. His work has been submitted for a Pushcart Prize.

11. SIGNED ANONYMOUS POEM

I signed my name to a passport with the expiration date printed a year
from today
Above the stoic image of myself looking out
With no stubble.
The woman at the bank told me to.
You should have signed your passport , she said.
I almost forgot.
So I signed my name quickly with the pen she gave me
Which was a ballpoint pen.

I used to sign my name with a gel pen. In private
I signed; within in the confines of my notebook
And the corner of my papers
And the cardboard backs of my school books.
I signed my name to my work as though I were an important man.
I knew I'd never get caught writing in my books.
If I did they'd study the script and say who is this boy
That you like so much
That you want to have your surname.

I signed in the gel pen I carried wherever I went
Full of anonymous joy.
Euphoric because no one had ever worn my name
Except the historian who's weathered face I saw
When I googled myself.

This name was once an untarnished metal.
Freer than a newborn, saddled with their parents':
Expectations
And their:
Baby naming books.
I had no use for the name
That gave me a mouth of cotton and chafed my soul to speak it.
So I gave it up, with the expectations and the baby-namers.
Did those babies feel pride
When their names were given to them?

Did their parents still feel pride
Having carried the burden of their name for so long?
Those hapless, cursed souls.
They did not know the joy of being queer.



WILLIAM SWIFT

William Swift is an emerging transgender author and recent graduate from the University of Sheffield. His work is most often short fiction dealing in the themes of masculinity and neurodivergence, although he can be inspired by the challenge of new forms. You can find him @will.g.s on social media or at the public library, where he is a passionate supporter of accessible education and library attendance.

12. A HOMETOWN NEVER STOPS BEING HOME: GROWING UP A TRANS IN A RURAL AREA

I grew up in a myriad of little towns scattered across the Hudson Valley. I was 40 minutes from the infamous Woodstock, about two hours from New York City, and surrounded by the exact type of people you'd suspect would exist between those two extremes. It was a liberal area, even if it felt like I was constantly boxed in by the Catskills that raised high above me always, on all sides. Every town I moved to – and I moved a lot – had a different flavor of rebellion and grunge. In upstate New York, I grew up thinking I could be anybody.

I knew the Hudson Valley like the back of my hand. I knew what towns I could leave my car doors unlocked in. I knew where all the swimming holes were. I knew what Kingston, my hometown, looked like before gentrification started to plant its roots in the historic streets, sprouting new bars and antique shops and putting up fences so the weeds of the displaced, impoverished many wouldn't taint the fertile soil. I knew the safest streets to walk on at two AM. My hometown was full of friends and enemies and my past and future and I could read it like you could read the oldest, most worn book on your shelf.

I felt safe.

So, of course, I didn't think I was going to have any issues when I came out as transgender. I had heard horrors stories of people coming out in rural areas deeper in our country. I had read *The Laramie Project*, saw *Brokeback Mountain*, and watched *Boys Don't Cry*. While I was filled with nerves and anticipation, I knew the Hudson Valley had my back. I knew there were resources for me and I would have the space and support to explore my new, true identity and blossom into the man I knew I was destined to be. I could come out in a supportive environment that wasn't laden with smog – where the air smelled fresh and – most importantly – I could afford to pay rent.

It was my connection to these resources that brought me to an undercurrent of secret truths about where I grew up:

I was not safe.

Once I was out as trans, another side of my hometown opened up to me. Through support groups and hungrily consuming all queer culture in my area, I developed a tight relationship with the trans community of where I lived.

I found out that a lot of us had been raped. I found out that almost all of us suffered from depression and struggled in some form or another with self harm or suicide. I found out that a trans woman who lived in the same town as me was left multiple ransom notes threatening that she either leave the town or be killed.

We weren't doing too hot. We were scared. I was scared. And I didn't just have to hear the stories from my trans siblings – I experienced it first hand.

A few months after I came out as trans, I got fired by the job I had for over 4 years. I was assaulted by a man who, when I came out to him as trans and asked for him to use new pronouns for me, decided he would take it upon himself to “teach me I’m a woman”. To this day, I am still afraid to name him.

After using a bathroom at a Dunkin Donuts, a man in a truck slammed his car door into my own, denting the metal as he yelled “Faggot”.

While using the bathroom at my old community college, someone came up to the stall I was using and banged on the door after announcing that “this was the men’s room”.

When leaving my trans support group, a group of drunk men threw a beer bottle in the middle of the road in front of me. “Faggot”, again.

I thought coming out as trans would free me.

I remember one of my first times at my local trans support group. It was near Christmas time and a choir who had rented out the space below us were practicing heavenly sounding Christmas carols. Their songs floated up to us as we sat in a heavy silence after one of my siblings shared a particularly horrific story. We all were just taking in the moment – digesting what was divulged to us and giving it the space it deserved as the choir filled in the silence for us and made it a little easier. I remember feeling like I was in one of those low budget indie films – my heart swelled with love for being trans and the trans people around me. I knew we all had each other’s back and something inside me told me the hard times were already behind us; how could a moment of peace and truth like this happen if we weren’t destined for something better? I felt swaddled by that moment. A baby in a warm blanket of safety – unaware of the reality of the situation I – and everyone else – was in.

Coming out did not free me. The blanket was eventually ripped off of the bed – the lights flipped on with a violent motion.

In coming out I realized there was an invisible cage of prejudice that surrounded my entire county. Even the most liberal of rural areas are supported by a strong foundation of prejudice. Our history as a country is built on violent marginalization and oppression and I learned very quickly that no place was safe – not even the places I thought I knew best.

Funnily enough, the times I felt the most safe were the times I were hidden in the forests of my home. In the cabins miles down dusty roads, in the dips of the valley, at the tops of the mountains. I always felt most invincible when watching a sunset from the trestle that crossed over the Hudson River or sitting on a rock that overlooked Rosendale after a hike with my roommate. The first time I had any type of sexual encounter with another person of either biological sex, I was hidden deep in the woods – laying on my back so I didn’t have to face my discomfort of my own genitals and away from any prying eyes. And well – if some eyes had decided to come and pry they would not see me, a trans person, but

a nymph; two people shrouded in lust and love and nature that were not meant to be disturbed.

I had always had a deep and profound love for the Hudson Valley. I didn't think I would ever leave and if I did – I would surely return. As I grew to exist more and more visibly as a trans person however, I found myself yearning to live beyond the mountains and in the thrall of urbanity. I wanted to live in Washington D.C., where representatives now flew flags in our support. I wanted to live in San Francisco or Los Angeles, where I could walk down the street and feel the same sun absorb into my skin that I was seeing bounce off of the skins of a line of people who look like me. I wanted to live in New York City, where people like me existed in the crevices of every borough and even if I felt unsafe I could disappear in the safety of crowd invisibility.

This summer, I left my hometown. I moved to somewhere even worse – a place where confederate flags waved at me as I took my nightly jog and I had to remember to take another side street so the person sitting outside wouldn't memorize my schedule. I was mishandled and mistreated by doctors and fumbled like a tokenized football until my partner and I finally scraped up the cash and landed in a city. Now, when I go to support meetings – there are more than 4 of us and the room is often teeming with light. I am not afraid that I will not see the other people in the circle ever again because I'm not sure if they'll make it. There is laughter. I am invited out to karaoke.

I ache for my hometown, though. I ache for the way the air smells in summer and the rushing of the Hudson River. I miss sharing cigarettes with generations of queer people. I miss painting my face and sweating it off on stage during a drag show. Maybe one day I will live in a city where I can do all of this again and not feel like my skin will be shed. Maybe one day I'll be able to cross state lines on the NY thruway and not feel my skin prick up with the familiar fear of being recognized and I can do all of this where I once did again. Really, I just want to be able to live someplace where someone has never tried to hurt me *and* I can afford to pay the rent.

A hometown never stops being home, no matter how far away you get from it – and just like parents who throw you out or that abusive partner that still manages to haunt your dreams, running away from it does not tamp down the tense, love- drenched trauma you carry around for it.

I wish for laughter to exist amongst the rural beauty. I wish for life to bloom like wildflowers. I wish I did not feel *lucky* because I know those further landlocked, nestled in the canyons and meadows and plains of our country, have it worse off than me. I wish – I wish we could all find a home among the moss and stone that we can return to and stay in tact.



RAINE GRAYSON

Raine Grayson (he/him) is a multi-genre storyteller who specializes in social action theatre and autobiographical nonfiction focusing on the trans and queer experience. He's a champion of storytelling not just as a means of expression but also as a tool for social justice. He's spoken his own suicide survival story nationally for The Trevor Project, edited autobiographical shows such as Zelda Miller's "Que Será, Será: A Life's Journey of Sexual Orientation & Gender Expression," and has had work featured by GO Magazine, So Say We All, The AutoEthnographer, Rosendale Theatre, and many more. He currently works for the non-profit The TMI Project (tmiproject.org) running writing workshops and helping to produce "true storytelling" performances that transform everyday people's stories into monologues.

[@rainerpism](https://twitter.com/rainerpism) | rainegraysen.com

13. THE LADY WITH CAT EYES

She rests upon a white nook,
Cigarette in her hand
Black hair falls cascades down her olive-skinned shoulders.
She's wearing that golden nightclub dress they dragged her in
She looks out of place in this psych ward
She's a schizophrenic who's started seeing things again
And thinks other women are talking about her.
She laughs at absolutely nothing
Don't look at her-
Her dark cat eyes will shift into slits
And cut you with their sharpness.
But with me, she smiles.
I mean she sees me
Really SEES me
Stares at my lips while I stare at hers
And although I have a boyfriend
I want to hop up on that nook with her
And graze my mouth on her bronze-like skin...
I ache to rescue her and convince her
There are no conspiracies.
That the world isn't against her,
I sneak a kiss when the nurses aren't looking
The lust is too strong
For a muse and a beautiful creature I want to possess
The lady with cat eyes.



MONICA VIERA

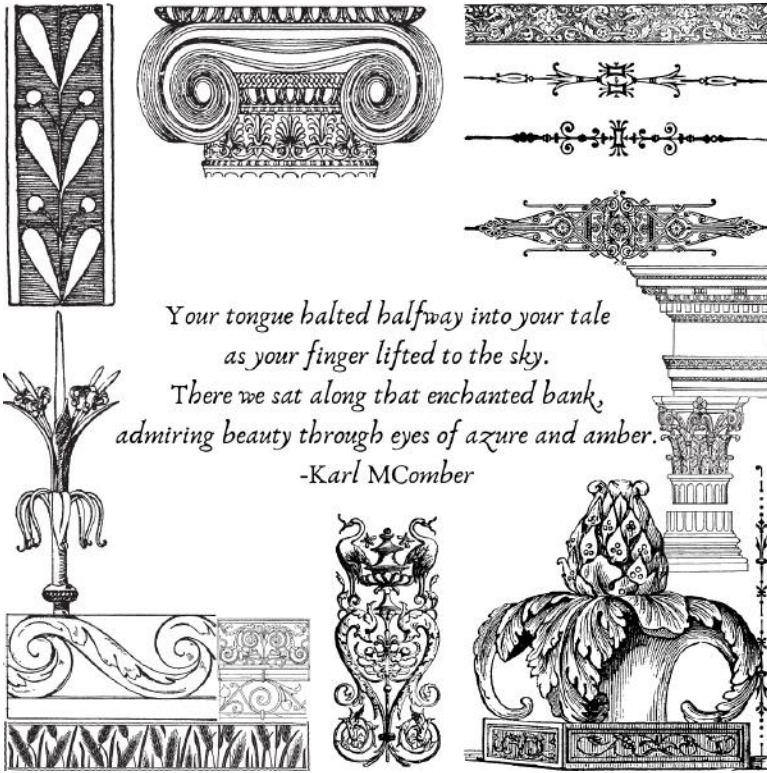
Monica Viera is a neurodiverse author from East LA. She is bisexual.

14. AN EAGLE, AN OSPREY AND AN ANT

Those bald feathers flew above the pair of us two,
sailing high behind our eyes.
Soft rippling waves divided our thoughts,
but brought us nearer than the years
spent apart from one another.
I had never witnessed the splendor of a
bleached head around this town.
You spoke to me of nature's innocence,
with a tone as unbound as the wings
overhead this duo of you and me.

The talk between us shifted and swirled
in circles of past subjects discussed ages ago.
Then we both caught that darkened mirage.
That grayed outline of an outspread span,
which appeared to move high and low along
with the slowly striding waters.
Your tongue halted halfway into your tale
as your finger lifted to the sky.
There we sat along that enchanted bank,
admiring beauty through eyes of azure and amber.

Just as our mouths began to stall their stories
of old remembrances and our minds
wandered blankly without a word to utter,
high upon the sun-kissed skin of your thigh
treaded the smallest of this world's life.
Its pocket-sized stick legs crawled sure and slow,
until you finally felt its antenna closing in.
With a shriek and a wail, you flicked him far.
There our feet stayed cool in shaded tide,
as we laughed the day until it turned to night.

**KARL MCOMBER**

Karl McOmber has been writing creatively since he was a child. It was always a backseat hobby until he realized he had true knack for it and others could feel the same emotions through his words as he did. Unbeknownst to him, his father before him had written forms of poetry in his spare time before he passed away when Karl was young. Even though these few words from his father usually accompanies drawings and sketches, something Karl doesn't do himself, he came to believe that creative writing was in his blood. As creativity lives with his sister, brother, and mother as well. While mostly writing for himself as an emotional release, Karl believes poetry, no matter how personal, is meant to be shared.

15. BECOMING

‘Becoming’ is a word
That says life is occurring
(note the present tense)
There really is no end
To the experience we call growth
So it’s okay
When we aren’t quite sure where we are
Or where we’re headed
Because ‘becoming’ means
We’’ (almost) figure it out
And that’s a good place to start



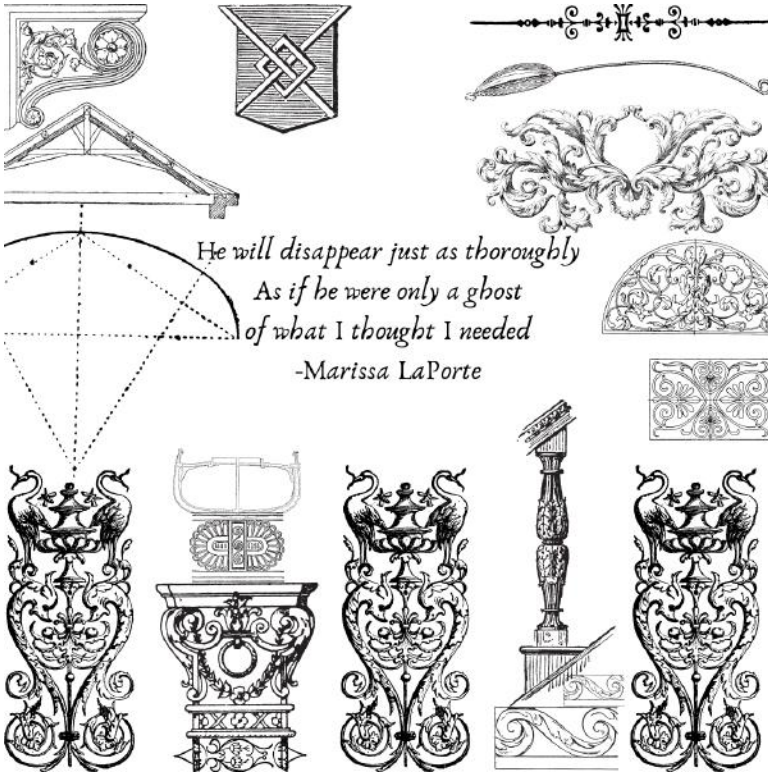
JULIANNA BALMER

Julianna Balmer is an aspiring poet who thinks through words. The conversations she shares, the words she reads, and the internal murmurings of her soul are what inspires her to write about real life in free form stanzas. Emily Dickinson and E. E. Cummings are classic poets Julianna admires, and Tanner Olsen (Written to Speak) is a contemporary poet she resonates with. You can find Julianna's original poetry on her Instagram account, [@testify2love](#).

16. MEN, APPROACHING

A man approached me at the bar
He smelled like dirt and automobile grease
He was covered in hair
From his arms to his chest
He looked more like a bear than a man
Like a threat
Should I play dead
or run?
He reminded me of my father
I reminded myself that I have the power
to leave any situation
Ducked out the back door
I didn't look back
The bar and that man
Smelling of Budweiser
and the most unpleasant parts of my childhood
This encounter
Almost sent me back to
Children of Adult Alcoholics Anonymous
Bet you've probably never heard of that one
I still wish I hadn't

When I return home
I am greeted by a cisgender, straight man
I have convinced myself that I care about him
More than any other person
That I have met
or will ever meet
This man approaches me
He smells like the prettiest musk
A cologne he special ordered, I'm sure
He smears on beard oil daily to keep his skin moist
And his face smelling like tea tree
What I don't know yet
Is that he is nothing but a mirage of a man
It doesn't matter
that he doesn't remind me of my father
He will disappear just as thoroughly
As if he were only a ghost
of what I thought I needed



MARISSA LAPORTE

Marissa LaPorte is a resident of Michigan, she holds a degree in English Literature from Grand Valley State University. Marissa has also been published in Speculative 66, Sick Lit Magazine, The Drabble, The Flash Fiction Press, and more.

17. CHAIR

the damn chair keeps breaking and i dont know what to do about it since i fixed it not two months ago using the nails and hammer daddy got me the back keeps splitting and the legs keep bending to the right the damn thing wont stand up straight anymore and its getting bad this damn stupid damn fucking damn damnest thing and whats worse is granddaddy fell out the other day I suppose these nails are copper or some bullshit or the wood is pine or some damn thing and now it sits in the back behind the shed because i just cant look at it anymore and granddaddy looked sad and i suppose that makes me sad and what if debbie doesnt love me anymore because im not man enough to even fix a fucking damn chair in the back behind the shed like some inept toad in a gutter puddle far off and she ends up marrying that man from work and leaving me all because of that stupid damn chair behind the damn shed i cant even fix and i know she has been eyeing him i have seen it in my minds eye when she talks about him and the business trips have gotten longer recently and everytime she comes back she is glowing like a damn winter star and it fades quickly again as day in and day out i cant even fix this silly chair tucked away behind the damn shed and i even asked my neighbor to help me but he told me that if i cant fix the damn chair behind the damn shed he would come over and take a spin with debbie which i just know she would smile at like her damn coworker because this man is such a damn stud and what am i but a sack of this and that that cant even fix the chair behind the damn shed and so i hit him in the nose and he hit me in the nose and he invited me in and talked about debbie again over drinks so i kicked him in the balls and he kicked me in the balls and we shook hands over another drink and i left looking like a purple and blue bouquet of tropical flowers and he looked like a god should one ever exist and i went back to the chair behind the damn shed and hit another nail in and it split the end of the backrest and i threw the hammer against the wall and broke the handle of the hammer and stomped inside for a drink but there was none so i drank water and pretended and debbie came in and her smile dropped at the sight of me and asked me if i had yet to fix the chair behind the damn shed and i said no and she just looked at me still and said ok and went to the bedroom and shut the door but i followed her but the damn door was locked and when i knocked i heard her humming a song and she didnt answer so i assumed the usual and went out back to

try and fix the damn chair behind the damn shed again but this time with some duct tape and glue but that also didnt work and i suppose i even made it worse since it took part of the finish off so i went back inside and i didnt see debbie so i went to the door again and it was locked so i walked out and around to the window and looked in and there she was hanging like a christmas turkey from the ceiling fan and i looked and i looked and i looked and then went back to the shed to fix the damn chair i hid behind it and i didnt fix it again and i think i am done now and tired of being a disappointment so i think ill turn in now if you know what i mean goodnight for a while and in case i dont see you again be sure to fix the damn chair behind the shed before some other fucker loses his mind trying to work with wood in a world where the nails are copper and hammers are rubber and neighbors are slugs and coworkers are this and that and this and that and goodnight goodnight goodnight and good morning good morning good morning here and there forever and forever and forever god bless the chair behind the damn shed that was never meant to be fixed and god bless the wood it came from i sure hope others worship it as i did.



AUGUST REYNOLDS

August Reynolds is a poet whose work has appeared in Red Cedar Review, Philologia, The Scarlet Leaf Review, In Parentheses, Blue Unicorn, Full House Literary, Red Noise Collective, and elsewhere. He is also the author of a book of poetry titled "The Freedom of Lavenders" published by Atmosphere Press. He is also a co-editor of a poetry collection published by Pocahontas Press which features an original forward by Nikki Giovanni, a volunteer reader for Ariel Publishing, and was a co editor for Philologia in early 2023. August had poems accepted for presentation at the Glossolalia Literary Festival, won the Creative Writing Department award at the 2023 English Undergraduate Excellence Conference for Virginia Tech, won the 2023 Free Verse Poetry Award in Bacopa Literary Review, and was long listed for the erbacce-prize 2023 poetry competition—the biggest poetry competition in the world. He currently lives in Blacksburg, VA and is a full-time, triple major student studying English Literature, Creative Writing, and Professional & Technical Writing at Virginia Tech.

18. IT ALL MADE SENSE

Strolling under rain clouds,
waiting for a pour.
With hairs blowing on my face,
I was dreaming of snow.

Was waiting for a sunset,
and pink and blue skies.
But didn't even see or feel
any calm before the storm.

It all made sense
when lightning struck,
but never made me stuck.
'Cause I was waiting for
a sunset and a pour,
hoping for a rainbow,
and dreaming of snow.

Searching for dawn in night,
maybe in the dark for light.
Never cared to search for any star,
maybe dreaming too far.

But a single smile
caught my eye,
very far away
in the night sky.
Shining in it's crescent glory,
and carrying a dark story.

With beautiful
blemishes and scars,
yet sparkling proud
and beyond the pars.

And it still made sense,

'cause I was searching for
dawn in night,
but moon gave me light.



MRINZ ELLIS

Writer of this poem submitted for the 'Wingless dreamer spring poetry contest 2023' is Priyani. An 18 year-old girl probably maturing through her way of thinking and expressing through poems and sometimes songs. She tends to hide herself from the world except for the one she calls hers. Her own little world that she lives within, where her intention is to give light to a concept of intentions and even make it a light for others. A light for those lying on the tip of iceberg waiting for it to melt, which might never happen, and nor having courage to climb down, maybe with the intention of slowly dying and freezing to death...Because even she was once one of them. She is a first year engineering college student in her hometown i.e. Jalandhar, Punjab, India. Her skills lie in writing poetry, mainly of genre 'Lyric poetry' which is also her area of major interest and expertise.

19. PERFORMATIVE POLLINATION

he sat atop a Sweet William,
undeterred by pink.
then took his two front legs
to dismiss a dew with vision linked

with scrutiny of his hive,
who don't prefer – but submit –
to a single patch of clover
instead of flora they're prefixed.

which in colony's consciousness
is an unbecoming pollen.
to the comb, as a whole,
corrupting the larvae.

who are preset to believe
that their floral inclination
should be in benefit
to the production of honey.



JAWN VAN JACOBS

Jawn Van Jacobs is a New Jersey-based poet who weaves complex emotions and experiences into lyrical tapestries. Offering an intimate glimpse into the human experience, combined with his appreciation for the natural world, Jacobs invites his readers to embark on a journey through the delicate interplay of life and nature.

20. ALONG THE FLOWER GARDENS

the bumble bees have
been pollinating well
blood red roses and
snow tipped tulips have
created a little paradise
a symbiotic relationship
with my deceased mother
who despite her wishes to
act as fertilizer for the
magnum opus notre dame
tended to her very end
was refused and brought
to a concrete fortress
a pale slabbed graveyard
unrecognizable from the
rest and now this
garden has begun to wilt
despite their perfectly
watered roots and fed dirt
in my mother's absence
spiting the callousness of
man and all his tricks
they have revolted
an act of sacrifice
choosing death
over spectacle



BRANDON SHANE

Brandon Shane is a Japanese-American alum of California State University, Long Beach, where he majored in English. He's pursuing an MFA while working as a writing instructor and substitute teacher. You can see his work in Acropolis Journal, Grim & Gilded, All Existing Magazine, Bitterleaf Books, Remington Review, Salmon Creek Journal, BarBar Literary Magazine, Discretionary Love, among others.

21. BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

Time was irrelevant for Freddie Mercury. Alive, dude always microphoned sick lyrics. In death, “Bohemian Rhapsody” breathed life. My jam is “Bohemian Rhapsody” karaoke. Tap tap to the highly vocal drums. Drop-step drop-step loudly. Speaking of “loud,” leopard print made a comeback. Back out of my closet. Maybe people won’t judge it now. I think Freddie foresaw my leopard leggings. Things always come back tomorrow, Freddie. Which is why leopard print never really faded. It should have. It should have buried itself in the back of my closet. Waiting for that day I finally organize. Organize a garage sale to sell useless junk. When does leopard print become junk—ten years? There has to be a quantifiable point. Maybe twenty. I’m not sure. The definition of junk seems sketchy. Junk lies between love and no longer mattering. Although leopard print is not my only pair of leggings. Have to face the truth on this one. These leggings continue to be a mistake. Wind cuts through them in the Midwest. Shimmy shake booty bumps its way up my spine. Slipping fat rolls into cotton Spandex. Roll right over the top like land-sliding down. It figures. Forced to junk ourselves in leopard leggings. I can’t help but think about Freddie Mercury. Did he also feel the crushing weight of reality? Crushed like the weight of opinion in Spandex. Guess I can’t disguise everything in closeted leopard print. That’s where all the junk is supposed to go.



ANGELA MILLER

Angela Miller is a high school English teacher who is described as a builder of unapologetic, transformative sanctuaries for youth. Rooted in Chicago’s west suburbs, she has carved out many safe spaces, particularly for queer voices and bodies to be themselves. Beyond teaching, she is the advisor for the Animation Club, the Gender-and-Sexualities Alliance, the Literary Arts Magazine, and the Creative Writing Club in her school; a coach for her district’s Slam Poetry Team; and the Director of the Youth Poet Laureate Program for the Fox River Valley. She serves on numerous committees, including her district’s Equity and Inclusion council. Her most recent accolades include a Slam Poetry partnership with Children’s Theatre of Elgin in 2020 and the Most Outstanding Cooperating Teacher Award from Northern Illinois University in 2022. When she’s not working or writing, she spends her time lecturing her dog for eating the yarn she’s crocheting with.

22. T-SHOT TUESDAYS AFTER AN OIL CHANGE

The hardest parts of transitioning
Has been greeting my father
In the morning when I brush my teeth.

He regards me like puzzle to an image
his brain can't bear making sense of—
Reminds of his: "bleeding heart,"
 & his wounded eyelids
 His bunioned and marooned toes

From all that walking
 As eldest of 10
 (Depending on who you ask)
Or all that stumbling
 (Depending on who you ask
 & I have.)

My dad was one of 13.
When grandmere recounted her others to me,
she whispered it so matter-of-factly.
How one might hum the quadratic formula
in the shower because of a math teacher whose mnemonic jingle,
imprinted like muscle into memory.

Grandmere said it like she was talking about the weather—
 left her body &
 Went to be with her babies for some seconds
 Swaddled them back to sleep

I see her in my face
& I see my grandfather—though I have no conjurable recollections
Of what he looked like
I see his eyes in mine
I see his cheekbones

I see sweet boy Marco & his mischievous smile when I laugh
I see his father's smile too

And his old car shop on Georgia Ave.
when I'm due for an oil change.



JOELLE SIMEU

Jo is a first-year PhD candidate in English at Cornell University. Born in Cameroon, they were raised in Pennsylvania where their interest in justice, poetry, and literature took root. Jo's undergraduate degree from Washington and Lee University is in English, with minors in Africana Studies and Poverty and Human Capability Studies. They interned at both NYU's Brennan Center for Justice and Shenandoah magazine, then worked for two years as a paralegal at a civil rights law firm in Washington, D.C. Their writing address questions of (im)migration, transness, and belonging.

23. COMING OUT LATER IN LIFE

Coming out as an older woman in a small remote Australian community has been an interesting experience. I believe that it has been much less painful than if I was an 18-year-old still fearful of people's judgement. At this age, I am less concerned about other people's opinions. It took me 45 years to finally meet someone of the same sex who I fell in love with and someone who I had imagined long before I even knew her. For many years, before I met her, I imagined what life would be like to live in a way that I wanted. There were many incidents along the way which highlighted the fact that I was indeed gay. There were many situations that I found myself in which confirmed this. The constant fascination and thoughts of being with a woman. The endless searching and googling "Am I gay?" indicated more than I really wanted to admit. Always being comfortable in gay bars and searching for women on dating websites. Being too scared of what people thought particularly living in a small town.

I remember telling my mother recently on the phone that I was in a relationship with a woman as I live in Australia and had left Ireland 24 years prior to that. Although initially, my mother seemed accepting of us even joking and laughing once she processed it, it was a quite different story. She decided to deal with it by completely ignoring what I had told her. It was as if we did not have that conversation. She refused to mention my partner's name which is and still is painful to me but unfortunately it did not suit my mother's idea of what looks good to the rest of the family etc. She seemed happier when I was with toxic men who made me unhappy.

The most accepting person was in fact my beautiful 21-year-old son who simply asked me if my new friend and I were together as he already knew my partner was gay given that we live in a small community. I said "yes" and he laughed and that was the end of it. He never questioned it again. The difference being my son was born in 2000 when these things are more readily accepted and within his own friendship group, he had friends that were gay. He had supported and helped one of his own best friends when he came out. My brother who lives in the UK, being only three years older than me was extremely positive and happy for me. Given the state of my earlier toxic relationships with men this had to be better. Even my own father did not bat an eyelid and he said he was just happy if I was happy.

Friends of mine were surprised that I hadn't mentioned this before and I suppose you could say that was part of a process. For so long, I had hidden a part of me and who I was. For so long, I had denied this part of me. Growing up as an Irish Catholic in Ireland such things were frowned upon, so it was easier to live a lie. We certainly were not encouraged to explore our sexuality. Although Ireland was one of the first places to legalise same sex marriages in 2015 there are still major traces of homophobia in the older generations. Not so much in the younger generations.

Looking back, I do wish that I had come out sooner. I buried this part of myself for so long and the reality is I was killing myself doing it. Depression and anxiety have plagued me my whole life and although these issues are not just about coming out, it certainly has affected my mental health. Being able to be honest with myself and others has been important. My experience has taught me that there are many people who are extremely accepting of you and those people who do not accept that part of you do not need to play a part in your life. That is their choice and their problem.



LYNSEY PATTERSON

Lynsey Patterson is an Irish writer from Northern Ireland. She has written for years and has kept most of her work in her moleskin notebook. When she isn't writing she is teaching or spending time with her fiancée and her three dogs who have eleven legs between them.

24. FINER DAYS

Times are gone for the gauntlet
wrapping up
goners like
gamma had a family

Now its a sanded sea
stranding strands of
slammed peas
of peace to that

Whatever speak springing Greek
like gross domestic product
it's a festive frogs hut faxing over foxes
getting a slog thru cups

Of the sawdust in
star ducts chucked
chests over the elephants
were elegant flying with the ducks

In trust of truth thunders
a blunder better by the busts
of bucks butter in the blenders
on Bleecker beasting beakers

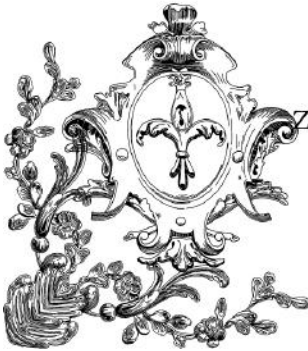
Like beams
of blood no
need for the
beef bud.



*In trust of truth thunders
a blunder better by the busts
of bucks butter in the blenders
on Bleecker beasting beakers*

*Like beams
of blood no
need for the
beef bud.*

Zachary Klebaner



ZACHARY KLEBANER

Zachary Klebaner (He/Him/His) is a writer, actor, poet, comedian, & filmmaker whose work has been featured in numerous programs and publications, including Nonsense Humor Magazine, Wax, Poetry, And Art, Oddball Magazine, Thursday Nite Live, Breadcrumbs, the Belladonna Literary Arts Magazine, Literary Garland, Paper Dragon, and The Scarlet Leaf Review.

25. A WRINKLE IN 2/2 TIME

Somewhere beyond the bright orange horizon
a version of me marches in rhythm with others.
She puts letters together spelling *home and my*
family. Her invisible limb doesn't itch at the sounds.

She remembers to breathe when she thinks of her
childhood. Bleeding apples on branches. Golden
stars on weak knees. Stories that make her feel
beetles and dragonflies. Crawling into her belly.

That version gets curvy and ripe like an apple.
A boy from her church is a hunter. She is a gazelle.
His Hennessey lips touch the baby skin on her thigh:
she breathes in floral and sweat of his skin.

She spits out a baby. Gets lost in shrill sounds and red.
Her daughter could drown in blood before she takes steps.
She teaches her how to swim to the shore.
She tells her, "The world is an ocean of grief".

She learns that somewhere beyond the bright orange
horizon
a version of me unites what I was, and what I will be.



LUNA FLOYD

Luna Floyd is a creative writing student who likes writing about social issues that she finds important

26. A WALK FROM FUTILITY FOR NO REASON

Resolving to leave home for one more appointment is more difficult each month, filling out medical expense forms renews in difficulty each month, the twenty-two-hour bus ride to Toronto rotates a more desultory difficultness each month. Damn, simply walking to Jarvis Health and Mental Health Clinic, the nearest clinic with a transgender program and a mere four hundred kms southeast, once disembarked gets more difficult each month. Yet here I am, for my eleventh journey to doctoral disapproval. First it was my weight, then my weight again but also my lack of usefulness for other LGBT people in North Ontario, my new clothes from the men's sections of stores aren't manly looking enough, whatever I use to bind isn't passable, my being interracial, my lack of support system and I'm not losing weight fast enough, familial trauma, plus my weight's still too weight. Over and over, round and around, in torment perpetuity. This time it's onto my being interracial, specifically the length of my hair. As I'm informed by Dr. Payne, 'real' transmen have theirs cut short, into brush cuts.

Payne, it's pronounced like the bodily sensation, and is she ever aptly named.

I wonder for the hundredth time how in hot hell I got on this tribulation as she informs me further, real transmen all get such cuts simply by their own inclination. They never have to be told to cut and present as expressly masculinely short as possible. They just do. My hair, along with dozens of other things I'm not, don't. Why then should treatments be allocated to my wrong body without similar inclination and behaviors presenting?

I'm Ojibwe, I respond. My three inches of hair length is a completely masculine one, it's just not an exclusively white masculine one. The words are hard to speak, but I still do. Her scoff and dismissal precede her directive to decide whether I want to be a transman here in Toronto, or an Indian back where I've come from. It's followed by repetition of questions burning me down again to appoint one.

Why do I want to transition? What makes me a good candidate for

treatment? What am I doing to prove trans validity to those encountering me? Do I understand and accept that if I was doing that effectively it would be working and showing positive results? Good, so why haven't my actions been showing positive results do I think?

Leaving Jarvis more emotionally beat down than usual, the question of how I came to be over and over again seeking from such a caustic wellspring rearises. It was in college. During some class of some course on some subject forgotten the instant pen left final exam booklet, where an incidental speculation of the prof's suddenly threw me into wholly bleakness, my own outlook of my own future, on who we'd left our home communities as, who we'd returning be, and what our change would, should, could, mean back at home? 'Nothing', I realized. Hard truth, I was nothing back home before I left and, despite wanting to be, post secondarily studying in order to be, I still wouldn't be.

My Rez, a social order unto itself as hard as it is small where there's simply no additional carry for the non-immediately necessary, does live with vibrant intensity, but bleakness is no place for anyone to be and my truth of no home place nor purpose was a bleak one. And what else could permanently hiding out in an attic be called save bleak?

Hid out of sight out of mind, for my own safety of course. Yes yes, rights and freedoms legislated legally are all high well and good, but really basic responsibility and staying practical about my immediate situation and surroundings, are down to me. With community personal opinions and antipathy made painfully plain, I better hide and keep myself safe. If I didn't it'd be like I don't even care if I live or die, and as any and every Institution employed personnel will confirm, there's not a thing laws and the system can do for someone who doesn't really care if they stay alive or not. That worked, until my realization of 'Nothing' at college made me aware of my bleak internal unsafety. Phoning Student Wellness felt what ought to be done at the time. Subtle shaking from an oncoming TTC car shifts Payne's false dichotomy forefront again. Real transman or Indian (not Native, Ojibwe, or Indigenous, words less painful to use but that were not), drift my thoughts as I walk to a government paid for clean, safe room where I'll be able to sleep, one night at any rate. Growing up

I often heard something so akin to her phrases it feels a debasement. In my Rez, home and Native community, the phrase “Real Indian men” precedes phrases like, “know their way home from any point in the bush”, “can endure things others couldn’t even manage to speak aloud”, and “do what’s needed to keep the roads safe”. There’re also ‘n’ts, such as, “don’t bother with little things”, “can’t recover what’s lost once it’s gone”, and “won’t stand for things they know is a lie”.

Before ever I heard the word (genderfluid, nonbinary, and Two-Spirit all falling under singular “transgender” moniker) I instinctively strove to pattern my life by those surviving tatters of Ojibwe teachings, instead those of Ojibwe women. I always ended up unable. Because I won’t do and don’t as Ojibwe women and aren’t vouchsafed the dos and don’ts of Ojibwe men, I resultant nothing. Every day I feel the opportunity of it gone by. My community lives, still going despite all systemic ill intent. I’m only increasingly conscious of every fire I never built to set ablaze, every team disallowed even signing-up for play of that first game, and each family member, blood happier pumping, without me. It belts down like living death’s sacrilegious drumbeat.

Whyever Creator produced me here now of no possible purpose I don’t understand. My only possibility for some life salvageable, eyes opened at college, seemed transitioning. Once I’d done that and, able to present an accurate me undeniably, impenetrable as the Turtle, I’d get started on the learning, practicing, and honing for a life fully animate overtime, double time, maximized quality efficiency time, catching up and making up for all that life of mine passed by. Useful back home at last, perhaps posted at the LRCA, knowing the trees, soils, streams and lakes everyplace and in between for original peoples and migrated citizenry both, moreover the animals as not all roads are paved and if a life’s there walking, it’s to be kept safe.

People like that are needed back home more than the vindictive vindication of hate, I hope. I should hope. Every person should, or at least be able to. I know I’m not how they wanted me to be, but fighting stereotypes on top of stereotypes, and having to struggle against encouragement because it’s only ever encouragement to be what I’m not, while having to see all I’m denied out a narrow high window each

morning, wasn't what I wanted either. They're disappointed in me who they got and I'm disappointed in their complete lacking in any degree of acceptance. You'd think there could be considered some balance.

My community and family do not think that, and they outnumber me. Twenty-two hours returned, attic bed and exhausted drop. Waking, I've one quick walk. Pine needle scents my first step, whispering poplar leaves flutter the air, low hanging cedar brushes my upper arm, then an instance caught glimpse of fauna profane before one blink and swift gone, make for a chicken belly of sense delights to my spirit. Okay maybe the sudden blackfly back of the throat wasn't so delightful, but that's certainly not enough to disgorge me. My truth is, of course I want to be an Ojibwe back where I've come from...it's just too true I'm an Ojibwe man not a woman.

Another month hid up in the attic passes and, re-climbing aboard for another twenty-two hours towards Toronto, I haze to dreams of skilling the skillset, ceasing being fundamentally backwards, with unlocked gate, open field, and autonomous play to be safe and a life there too. I hope it's not too late as the safety of hotel walls close in. String me up and stretch me tight dreamcatcher I need to believe, with treatment and transition, I'll be and they'll see that person the real me. Except heading to my early morning, twelfth session of pain, all that just couldn't seem sillier.

Jarvis wavers and blurs, dissolving all self and cultural knowledge away along with its very edges. Agony racks me afresh as Pain sears home what a waste she considers me of her time. After her dismissal of "should've been more" to my news of four more lost pounds, she burns a new unsurety onto me by ordering me to come out, again. "Be clear and blunt as necessary to unequivocally get across that you are Transgender.

Oh ho!" she delightedly laughs, "you are going to find out who your real friends are now, and which of your family members actually love you!"

I've no friends and my family doesn't love me. This hardly proved any shock. My family never wanted anything to do with me before I came

out to them. Aside from my being half white, which no Native's crazy about, I'm also weird. At least that's what I've been called for long as I can remember.

"So...weird", they always used to say. Weird is a good umbrella term for wearing the bare minimum only of feminine attire, never getting dolled up to go stand for hours in the places people opinioned on young women pass by, being unconvincing of any wanting to, and worst never speaking with hopeful longing of boyfriends-cum-husbands. It all was doubly intolerable to those boding genes with me in common, and that was before I spoke aloud the specific term of transgender. Before this term found only in white sources solidified to a more tangible implement my family and community might use to once and for all reject me.

Conversely, their retroactive fabrication of times they'd shared with some niece and girly-girl cousin, most decidedly not me, I think invented and crafted to collectively rage and storm at me for taking "that you" away from them, "with this out of nowhere life decision of yours!" Whoever that her was I don't know. I'll never know. I don't want to even as everyone goes on to speak of their relief "your father's passed and not here having to hear of your latest, worse than usual weirdness". It's the first thing they and my white mother have agreed on, and I agree too. I'm relieved. The relief of his violence, abuse, assaults, and exploitation, all gone out of my life along with the departure of his, was a cool breeze soothing tear and sweat tracks. I won't get started on my mom. There isn't space and text enough.

The physical harm done by those I believed friends beating me up in the back of their dad's van while god-awful sermons set to Christ rock blasted the speaker system is simple enough to heal up and get over it from. All it really was was a matter of escaping. The slapping down of sole against parking lot pavement, strike to my eyes of florescent lighting as the gas station's opening door bells overhead jangled, and broken splitters patterning the edge of the place's (mercifully lockable) bathroom door will never leave my mind, but it could've been far worse company to the bad already in there residing. I must feel lucky. Nothing's luckier than keeping alive. Twenty-two hours, bruised past the point of sleeping even hazy daydreams to enter Jarvis wide the forest awake. I'm

awake enough to realize it's the phantasmic fantasy belief that Jarvis is ever going to be anything but the administration of Pain. Of course, if I was actually woke-up to the world and how it works I would've realized in time to be smart and just fucking lie to her why-why-what-do-good-so degrading questions. Description of a good support system is all any professional to the disenfranchised wants to write on their forms, and the only circumstances which could be held by a person worthy of aid and treatment. Support and aid to a clinic, social service, or NGO seem like collateral to banks. If you don't already have it, you're never gonna get approved for it.

"I do not like the fact that you've been abused." She informs me. "I don't like the fact that I was abused either," I quietly answered, managing to refrain from adding "maybe more so than you", having learned nothing was to be more so than her. She's a doctor, a doctor who now laughs with deathly arid dry rejection at my small attempt to communicate that if I'd had any ability to protect myself from being abused, I would've stopped myself from being abused. None but you are responsible for the condition you present yourself in. That's how personal responsibility gets Institutionally effected. She awaits explanation of how I plan and guarantee to keep my abuse and trauma from ever being her difficulty. I have no plan, I couldn't have guaranteed one if I did. Pain can be misleading, because while it absolutely will act upon an already scarred surface, that doesn't imply any liking on Payne's part to have to act upon an already scarred surface. There never will be treatment, I know. Not for me. An exhausting journey towards a dissolving reverie, only to find more scorching effacement is all there is here at the end of this twenty-two-hour journey.

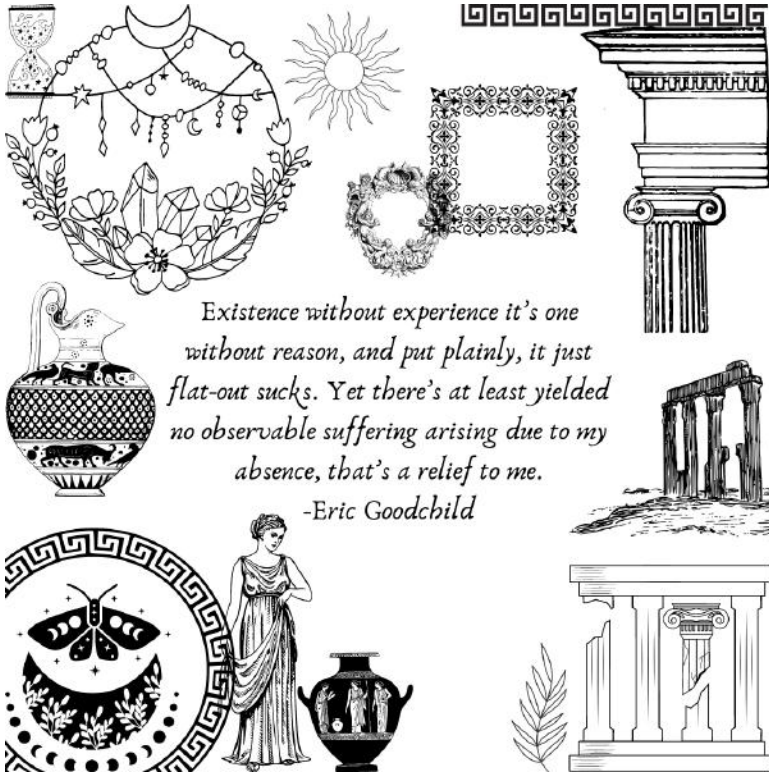
"Why do you continue to waste your precious doctor's time seeing me at all then Payne?" I bitterly wonder aloud, "if I'm so flawed, useless here as well as back there?"

As I walk out through Jarvis' doors one final time, the failure and futility I'd been so in fear of throughout the now gone year, is not what I feel. It should be. I'm never going to be me. That's just the blunt end of honesty, of no purpose, not to the place I most want to be perhaps nowhere else. Except, all I'm able to feel is the most intense relief I am never ever

going to have see that horrible excuse for a person again. Pudding proof of the accurate efficacy of medical gatekeeping while watchful waiting I speculate. Maybe a real transperson wouldn't've given up, would've promised, and done everything necessary to keep the appointments going, letting the dehumanization of them splatter off like so much mud off a shell.

I don't know, I'll never know. At the terminus it turned out it was my resolve that dissolved. Off the bus, a final twenty-two hours bled away for no other reason than trans' disadvantage of any second opinion, to hide out up the attic again. Unliving to at least not be dying, I turn my cut-off life over and over and over in my mind. Eventually it comes to feel smooth to the thought, like tight stitched stitches. I suppose all social orders operate to beget a balance harmonious for the most of their people, and it's understandable as star charts they do. My dream meeting transition with community was naïve but hope risks naïveté.

The difference between truth and honesty, between dream and mirage, between acceptance and declination of humanity, will continue confusing me even while evaporating away. Observing home high and narrowly, tarmac and footpath, peoples driving, bicycling, and walking, as well as bears, lynxes, and wolves running or crisscrossing soothes the upset churning my belly. It all looks safe and healthy enough. The river, ponds, and turtles are too far away to view, but large mysteriously known tracks appear some early mornings now. Their exaggerated impressions of deep heels, broad curving arches, and fanned toes question mark me problematically. Existence without experience it's one without reason, and put plainly, it just flat-out sucks. Yet there's at least yielded no observable suffering arising due to my absence, that's a relief to me.



ERIC GOODCHILD

Eric Goodchild is a Two-Spirit, Ojibwe person. A would-be writer and artist Eric creates in hopes of perhaps illuminating Indigenous and non-cis experiences in accessible and entertaining forms. Eric's work has appeared in Laurentian University anthology *Sulphur*, volumes VII, VIII, and IX, online publication *First Nations Poetry Magazine*, and *Open Minds Quarterly*. They also find occasional time to post sketches to *Deviant Art* as *0cean20*, and for the occasional open mic poetry night around Sudbury. Art's a light always possible to alight through the worst eternal darkness.

27. AUTUMN COMMUNION

Wafer thin moon
Cradled as host
Above burning bushes
Taste!
Eat!
Drink dawn's mist
Sauvignon with subtle
Overtones of oak, fortifying
Against the chill
Of winter



KATHLEEN DEYER BOLDUC

Kathleen Deyer Bolduc is a spiritual director, author, and founder of Cloudland, a contemplative retreat center. Her award-winning books, including *The Spiritual Art of Raising Children with Disabilities* and *Autism & Alleluias*, contain faith lessons learned parenting a son with autism, and finding healing and restoration through the spiritual disciplines. www.kathleenbolduc.com

28. SNOW & NOSTALGIA

Something about a Sunday afternoon
spent slipping coupons and
watching snow fall outside
my kitchen window
reminds me of my grandmother.

I have missed her more this year
that snow seems to fall weekly
despite global warming.

It is something of childhood
and the secure warmth of
a house full of family
smells of cocoa and soup with nowhere
to go, nowhere to be
but where you are.

A long-forgotten sound of silence
over crystalline flakes of purest white.
Robert Frost poems and seed catalogs
saved for the coming season.
All such things the graceful lady
knew so well.
I miss her more
in snowy winters.



SABRINA JULE

Sabrina Jule discovered the beautiful world of poetry as a child. With a natural knack for creative writing she was encouraged by teachers and won several poetry contests as a youth. Around age twelve she began compiling personal chapbooks of her poetry. This tradition continued with her throughout her young adult years and beyond. She has continued compiling her poetry yearly in this way for the last twenty-six years. A native of the beautiful mountains of Western North Carolina she loves hiking and has a keen appreciation for art and beauty. She has traveled extensively in the Americas, Europe, Asia and Australia and spent the last several years living in Asia and studying Mandarin Chinese.

29. A CAPTIVE HEART

My Heart is your captive,
the capture was complete.

With it totally there to give,
initially a feeling so sweet,
but then caution came to mind.

With such a confession done,
what kind of reception might I find?

Will you still be there, or will you be gone?
My insecurities may begin to show,
mindful of hurt my heart could come to know.

My heart is your captive, it is true.

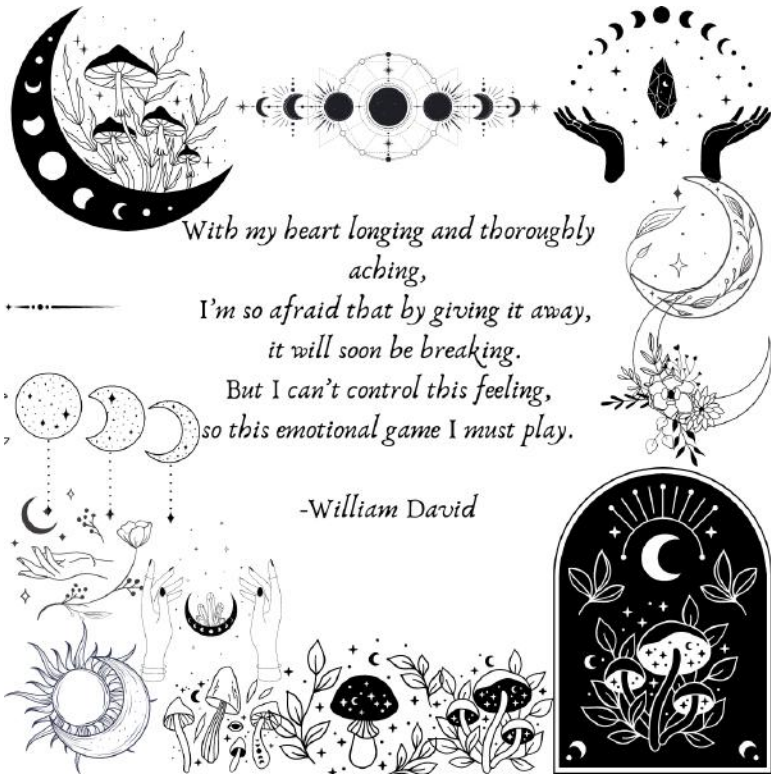
But here I am, not knowing quite what to do,
realizing some walls between us are there.
Though they may be unseen, and some unknown,
therefore I feel I must tread with care.

My head tells my heart to beware,
it is so hard to let this apprehension go.
Now here's hoping that you'll know,
that at times it may feel like I want to walk away,
but my heart makes me want, and need to stay.

I only want happiness for you,
and I'm hoping that happiness includes me too.

Should it be, not meant to be,
please know you can always have a true friend in me.
My heart is your captive, it's plain to see,
and right now I can't find a way to set it free.

With my heart longing and thoroughly aching,
I'm so afraid that by giving it away,
it will soon be breaking.
But I can't control this feeling,
so this emotional game I must play.



-William David



WILLIAM DAVID

William David has had a 40+ year career as a Senior Engineering & Architectural Designer working with international mining companies, designing mineral processing plants around the world, including the first SX-EW copper processing plant in Asia, located near Monywa, Myanmar. William is retired now, living with his wife of 39 yrs. in Tucson, Az. He is now devoted to his passion, reviewing, and writing poetry. William writes for his pleasure, and for the pleasure of those who might read his poems. He has been published in three journals by Underwood Press, the flagship journal Underwood, also True Chili, and Rue Scribe journals. He's an invited reviewer for that publisher. His poems have appeared in online journals, Bluing the Blade, Elevation Review and Sheepshead Review. He has had poems published in 23 different anthologies by Wingless Dreamer Publishers. Check them all out on Amazon's Authors Page for William E. David.

30. WITHOUT YOU

It is hard living without you --
You were all I wanted to do.

Sometimes, I feel very hopeless,
Knowing now there will not be bliss.

But I know you were not my best,
And I shall now put you to rest.

I will let you live out your life,
And be the best mother and wife.

For my part, I am moving on --
Do not worry, I will be strong.



A.J. CHILSON

A.J. Chilson is an award-winning author over 30 books; some of the books are poetry collections, but most are children's work. He currently lives and works in Winnsboro, Texas, where he seeks to inspire others.

31. MOON

It would have been a usual night
If I hadn't raised my eyes
And glanced at the sky.
It was as though,
surprisingly,
that this
was
my first intimate encounter with the moon.

She
had just
passed her
prime of maturity
and her fullness had just
began to wane like a luminous bun
of an ancient beauty rounded and heavy,
gently nestling on the angelic
nape of the neck of the
lady whose face
is always
hidden.

I
paused
transfixed
at the sight of her
so close, as if one step
forward would make me an intruder
into the secluded boudoir of her solitude.
My world is a battlefield, burned and smoky
while hers is quiet, soft and immutable
as though one day of hers is
a thousand years
of mine.

Why
do you
never turn around
and disclose the truth
of your beauty to the earth?
The whole silence of the night sky
speaks to the mystery of your silhouette
Oh, my lady, you are too far for my reach,
yet so close, at the same time,
that you can shine into
the deepest layer
of my mortality

as if,
your world
is surely superimposed
on mine.



ANGELICA LIU

Angelica Liu is from Hangzhou, China. She currently attends California State University where she is pursuing a master's degree in creative writing. Even though teaches English, and reads English literature in English, up to enrolling in graduate school she had never visited an English-speaking country. She possesses a deep and abiding fondness for the English language and writing in English is a major theme in her life. She is enchanted by the descriptive power found in English and enjoys writing for an English-speaking audience. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, an accomplished poet, and the author of a popular Chinese Blog.

32. NOT-SO-SMART WATER

Blood jumps in my
water-bottle body when
your arms finally reach me—squeezed
my summer hide—my perky rainbow plastic

— *Crunch* —

I'd set all my fires by then—
burned down schools and bridges with
my
magnifying eyes and
the sun on my right face

What did you expect?
(an honest question)

My cap twists—wrists click
guts pour—cover you
It feels good—for you

Am I half empty now?
Half full?
Do I measure with your cups, or mine?
Are we collecting your spoons or using mine?

You love me but
not my brand—
Spit me out still thirsty
let me quench the bison grass, but

I hit concrete—the sun
and I had a falling

out
I dried up there—disappeared

down the sidewalk cracks and
spotty chalk hopscotch

You cling to my water-stain ghost;
don't want me in your body
doesn't taste right—
but I love that you
say you love me and

I don't need my body
I've looked worse

My fireball days are long gone,
smoke died down, down, down,
(allegedly still flammable)

I love you where you spit me out and
you love what you thought I was—



BRYNN TESKE

Brynn Teske is a transgender poet and novelist based in Minnesota. He earned a BA in English Creative Writing and is passionate about mental health, spicy villain arcs, and stealing horses in Red Dead Redemption II. Brynn is a lifelong writer. He completed his first novelette in the third grade and was unable to stop

33. THE REAL PLAY

I don't march with the left foot forward
I stagger and sync a bit late with the squad.

at many shows, I don't show up on time, sometimes with a purpose.
I know when the protagonist will prevail, and the crowd will cry,
cackle, and clap.
and even if there is a massive traffic jam,
the two-line story, I will catch up.

With my eye wide open, I unfollow the plain shirt, the oxford shoes,
and the flat hat
with every pore alert
I wear exciting ethnic when the somber suit suits
just as an experiment, I eat the irreverent exotic
and I don't sing the chorus
but dance with the lonely voice
I know I
will be there when
the real play begins.



TAJENDER SINGH LUTHRA

Tajender Singh Luthra TJ@LuthraTj is a poet of Hindi language. He doesn't plan his poems or their stimuli. Most of his stimuli come from his unconscious mind. Thus, he doesn't compose poems around a particular theme either. Though unintended, his poems hover around struggles of a common man, his deep philosophical worldview and feeling of love from various perspectives. At the process level, he loves self-examination to create poetry. And here, he doesn't become a fence sitter, place others at the center, and comment from the ringside. Instead, he loves to be the center and allow others to watch his vulnerability. Consequently, he feels the contradictions between his personal values and his private life. These dilemmas sometimes brew a heady poem, and other times, they heal the wounds inflicted by my inherent contradictions. His first poetry collection - 'Assi Ghat Ka Bansuri Wala' - in the Hindi language was published in 2012, and the second one - 'Ek Naya Ishwar' has just been released. His poems have been accepted and published in influential American Literary Journals - New York Quarterly, Lammergeier, New Plains Review, and Voices. Tajender Singh Luthra (TJ) lives in New Delhi, India, where he is a senior police officer and works for the Delhi Police, the largest metropolitan police in the world. He has been working for women's protection, children's rights, and access to justice. He was awarded Indian Police Medal for Meritorious Service and President's Police Medal for Distinguished Service. He is also a Positive Psychology expert with a Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) from the University of Pennsylvania

34. THERE'S NOTHING ABOVE AND BEYOND

I think it's winter
when you come back a coyote
chased by guns and dogs

I open the door for you
and don't ask or wonder where
you'll be hiding

(I made a father-
shaped place for you underneath
the boxelder where

I doubted my faith)
I tell you if we talk then
I won't stop loving

you, so at first you
watch me with bared teeth, limping
past my little house

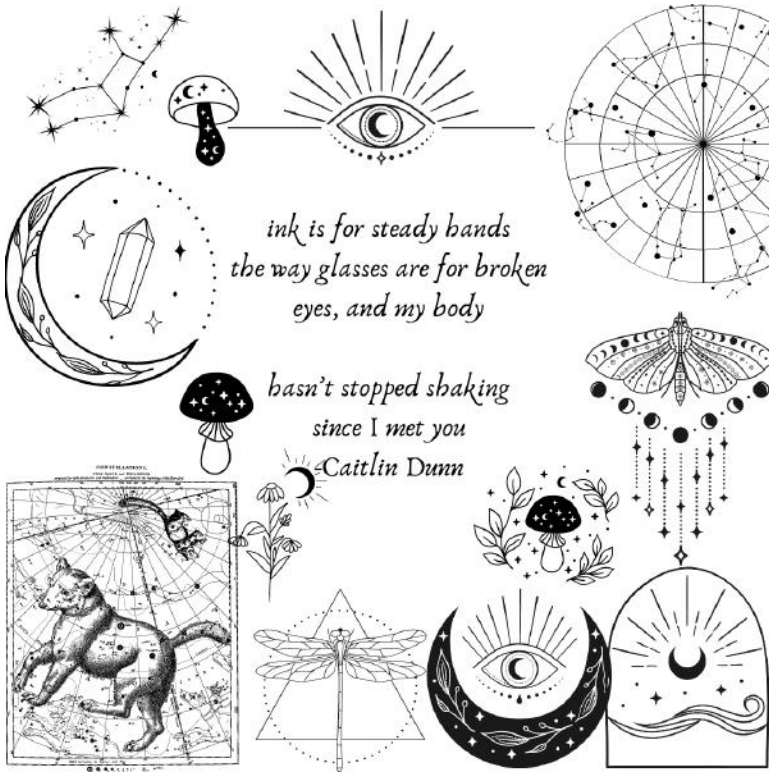
but later I find
photographs of you and her
burning on my steps

so I understand

in this way you send me
letters and in a way I
write back except

ink is for steady hands
the way glasses are for broken
eyes, and my body

hasn't stopped shaking
since I met you



CAITLIN DUNN

Caitlin Dunn holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Belhaven University. Her work has placed in the Live Poets' Society of New Jersey poetry contest and the Southern Literary Award. She currently lives in Denver, Colorado.

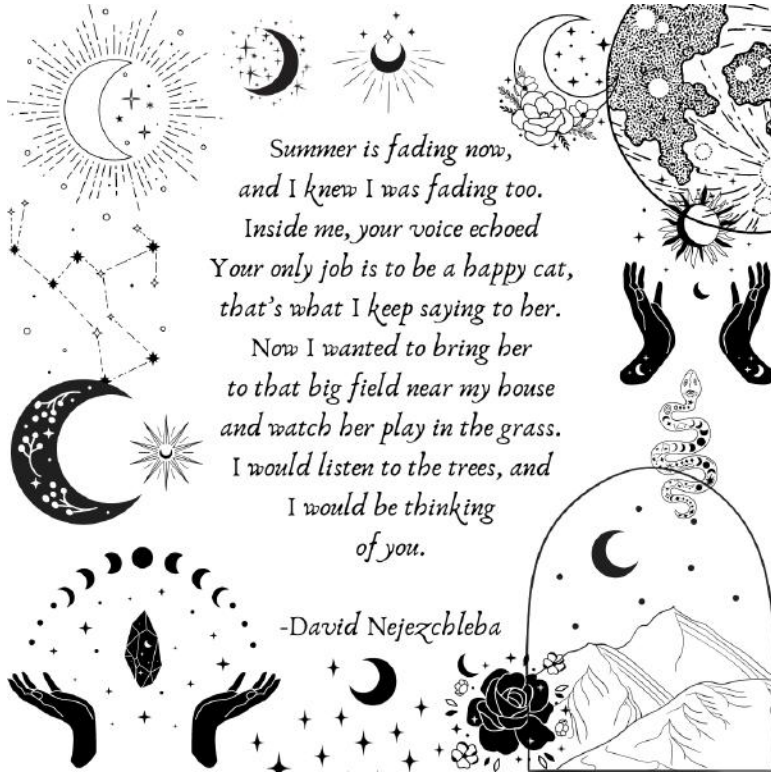
35. TIED TOGETHER THROUGH MEMORIES AND THINGS

I moved again
alone, this time.
There were always fewer of us
from college to Alden Street
from Wells Street to Medford.

I kept remembering my drive
from Greenfield to Haydenville
and all I can recall is green.
That summer was cool,
in shades of saffron and emerald.
I listened to the trees
and went home to you.

It was just us, as
fall arrived, and
we sang to our cat
and cried in the living room. I
took pictures of you
sleeping on the couch I
brought with me, to this
new place, as a memory.

Summer is fading now,
and I knew I was fading too.
Inside me, your voice echoed
Your only job is to be a happy cat,
that's what I keep saying to her.
Now I wanted to bring her
to that big field near my house
and watch her play in the grass.
I would listen to the trees, and
I would be thinking
of you.



*Summer is fading now,
and I knew I was fading too.
Inside me, your voice echoed
Your only job is to be a happy cat,
that's what I keep saying to her.
Now I wanted to bring her
to that big field near my house
and watch her play in the grass.
I would listen to the trees, and
I would be thinking
of you.*

-David Nejezchleba



DAVID NEJEZCHLEBA

David Nejezchleba is a graduate student at Brandeis studying philosophy. He is passionate about poetry, nature, and self-discovery.

36. DISASSEMBLED

My mother doesn't know.
There are so many aspects of my soul that she does know. The taste of
my food. The shape of my
heart. The press of my hand against her back. The warmth of my love.
The chill of my apathy. The
melancholy of my mind. The words of my mouth. still—
my mother does not know.
She knows why I have a scar on my middle finger and she knows why I
dropped out of college the
first time and she knows what my favorite book is and she knows why I
don't drink and she knows
who my best friend is and she knows how I feel about my father and
she knows what I think about
religion and she knows why I dropped out of college the second time
and she knows where I was
when I lost myself and she knows who I want to be and she knows
what television show the quote
on my arm is from and she knows when I am struggling to survive and
she knows it will pass as it
always does.
Still—
she doesn't know.
We talk on the phone once a week and she doesn't know.
She holds me close to her, her body which created mine, and she
doesn't know.
Every breath in and out and in and out and in and out and she doesn't
know.
She calls me a woman—
because she doesn't know.



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

*She calls me a woman—
because she doesn't know.*

-Dianna Morales



DIANNA MORALES

Dianna Morales is a queer Mexican-American writer currently working at a non-profit that focuses on inspiring social change and creativity in young people. Dianna's work has been published in The Field Guide Magazine, Dream Glow Magazine, and The Rhizomatic Revolution Review. Dianna currently resides in Austin, Texas and is also very fond of cats.

37. I HAVE A LIGHT IN MY CHEST

I have a light in my chest.
It is molten,
It will wait for you



MORGAN ROUTH

Morgan Routh is the bestselling author of the Dorm Life Series, the Love By the Shore Series, and the Present Intimacy Series. If you are new to Morgan's writings, check out Dorm Life, Dorm Love on Kindle Unlimited. For additional titles and to join Morgan's email notification list, go to: MorganRouth.com

38. OUR DANGLING CONVERSATIONS

I knew my high school boyfriend and I had a relationship problem when he turned around to face me while buttoning up his shirt. “And that’s kind of the other thing bothering me,” he said, “you call me Mike and everyone else calls me Micheal.”

“You told me your name was Mike the day we met,” I said. He shrugged as if it was my bad.

“Okay, from now on it’s Michael.” If the name game sounds trivial, it was a part of a larger sexual identity crisis he was having his senior year. That personal trauma was the “first thing,” which he’d left dangling from a previous conversation a few months earlier – he didn’t understand why we – two males – were having sex. At the time I had simply looked into his eyes and said,

“Mike, I’m homosexual.”

“No, you’re not. You’re not girly like that. You’re just someone who enjoys it.”

I couldn’t deny that. “If it feels good, do it,” I said, repeating the mantra of the seventies. If in his mind we were just experimenting – the results were pleasingly positive.

Michael most definitely was the effeminate type, but he didn’t see himself that way perhaps because he had five older sisters and seemed to be the little man of the family. I might have told Michael explicitly he was homosexual too, but I didn’t think it my place to put him in a box; he needed to see it for himself. Despite the issue he had understanding our queer identity, we continued enjoying frequent trysts together until I went away to college.

Sex between us started the day we met. I saw him during a lunch nibbling a sandwich and chips on school grounds and realized he was the same guy I’d snubbed the evening before. He’d been standing next to a mountain of moving boxes behind the vacant house two doors away from mine. He was small, angelic looking with feathery-fine brown hair

struggling to reach his neck line – a bit of an English waif look. I had simply nodded and waved as I rode my bike past him.

At lunch when I saw him, I was flying on a hit of meth and immediately went over and kneeled in front of him to introduce myself. “Sorry I didn’t stop and talk yesterday,” I said. “You looked like a sixth grader, but you’re a freshman too this year?” The meth had spoken before I could take it back.

“I’m a sophomore – a year older than you,” he said, brushing it off with a shrug and an Elvis- like curl of his upper lip. I supposed he changed his name during our introductions, thinking Mike sounded more mature after hearing he looked about twelve years old. Then he smiled, grit his teeth and gave his head a zany shake while maintaining a steady gaze. “And you kind of look like Janis Joplin – but with a beard.” Ouch! Had he just called me the bearded lady? Well, I was quite the wild child back then with long frizzy hair brown hair halfway down my back and an oddly blond beard.

Other things I learned about him that day: he’d been a preemie baby, his parents divorced that summer, he was the youngest of six siblings, he had a bit of a chip on his shoulder and he responded with a barb when he felt insulted.

I enjoyed talking with him and invited him to walk home after school with my circle of hippie friends. Even if we were all a year younger, he seemed relieved to have found ready acceptance and not have that awkward, out of place feeling at a new school. And his day was about to get even better.

He rang my doorbell that evening after supper. I introduced him to my parents and then took him up to my room, a shocking pink affair plastered with psychedelic posters. As we talked, I couldn’t help noticing the boner growing in his pants – unlike his hair, it did not struggle and he didn’t hide it. I took the cue and moved on him. It was his first sexual encounter – and he came quick. I sat back smiling as I swallowed and said, “Well, so now you know.”

“Yeah, I noticed something different about you earlier,” he said curling his lip. “But don’t test me again,” he said, wagging an index finger as a warning. “I’m just the kind of guy will try anything once.”

“Gotcha,” I said, pretty sure we would get along swell. I had experience in these things – I could tell he was more titillated than offended.

In fact, after school the next evening he invited me over to his house. He had deck of poker cards laying out in his room and suggested we play poker. As he shuffled, he upped the ante to making it a game of strip poker. He probably intended to lose, because even before I had him stripped to his underwear, he had a hard-on. When those came off, I moved on him again.

After that we were regular bed fellows – except he would never let me kiss him. His try- anything-once rule apparently didn’t apply to French kissing – maybe because of my mustache and beard. I kissed him all over anyway, including on his lips. No real problem for me – I was accustomed to working around prudish limits and ground rules with other guys.

But Mike became my favorite and I even asked him to go steady with me. He declined – gay lib was only getting started and he wasn’t ready for so much as that. I refrained from ever saying ‘I love you,’ as I was certain he couldn’t have processed it: Michael wasn’t a great student and whenever he got a D he’d snap, “Anyone can be book smart.” Perhaps, but it wasn’t lost on me that though he was older, I was the one teaching him about sex.

Michael came from a broken home, and with Mike’s father absent, his mother had odd lovers, guys she met at bars, living with them off and on. But his elder brother Pat was especially hostile to him – and the rest world. Not ideal. Our foreplay often started with me holding him trying to calm him when he showed up at my house trembling. He would sit cross-legged on my bed, wanting to rest his spindly arms on his knees, but he shook so much his arms moved haltingly an inch backwards and forwards, as if throbbing between two worlds.

I was sympathetic and understood his trauma: I'd grown up in family always in flux with a half brother forever at odds with my father. The only relief for me was when either left – for years at a time, leaving our mother depressed either way.

When I started college I was away myself for months at a time. The first year on breaks, Michael was glad to see me when I returned, and we'd make out as before. I told him about the gay campus organization meetings I'd attended and the annual Halloween dance they held. Michael avoided talking about anything gay, just half-heartedly acknowledging my comments.

When I came home in my sophomore year, I told him about a local gay bar I'd heard about. I invited him to join me, but he cut the conversation short and began shaking – and this time I seemed to be the cause of his trauma. Michael then began talking up a book he'd read about a young man dating an older woman, insinuating he'd outgrown our trysts. I didn't comment on his fantasy, but point of fact: Michael was hardly the stud an older woman might go for.

I let it rest a few days before going to see him again. When I did, he charged out of the front door, dead-eyeing me as I backed away off the porch. We hadn't argued or fought about anything, so I was confused. Was he projecting his self-loathing my way? I felt he shunned me for being gay and felt he was hopeless. Living so close under the circumstances was uncomfortable until I went back to school. Fortunately, Mike's family had moved the next time I returned home.

I wouldn't see him again for five years – when I ran into him in a gay bar, Carol's Speakeasy, which I frequented during school breaks, a warehouse space filled with disco and music videos – as well as horny guys until 4 a.m.

Michael looked quite different when I saw him then: he'd cut and combed his hair and managed to grow a light mustache. He was nearly a miniature Freddie Mercury wearing black leather pants and harness – no longer my type. But finally, at least one of my high school

boyfriends had come out of the closet. They had all gone to parochial school before attending public high school – the nuns were apparently effective at shaming any tendencies they had. Go nuns!

I was thrilled to see him and walked up waving, expecting immediate recognition, but he looked at me like I was nobody. “Don’t you remember me?” I asked. He shook his head and shrugged, indifferent. Even if I had shaved and cut my hair too, you’d think that after all the time in bed together he would have known every inch of me. How could he not recognize me?

Only when I stuck my face in his, nose to nose, did he catch on. “Oh my god, I’m so embarrassed,” he said. He wouldn’t look directly at me and then suddenly stood up, and started walking toward the back of the bar, staying a pace ahead of me, but turning his head to the side as he apologized for his open hostility the last times I went to see him. “Look, I couldn’t come out back then,” he said. “I had to go to therapy last year to come out. It’s been really tough for me.”

If that’s what it took, I was glad for him – until he followed up saying, “I didn’t want you to know.” Huh? Hold on – he came out but still wanted to hide it, from me? I’d rather think I should have been the first to know – at least after he told his mother, which he did do.

“What’d did she say?” I asked.

“She told me to do it well,” he said, delivering her remarks as if they were a punch line, as if she’d meant for him to give good head.

Other things I learned: he’d had a mild heart attack from MDMA, he joined a ballet troupe, he still had a chip on his shoulder and the bartender at the Glory Hole next door was his boyfriend. That was a dive bar I avoided, but I had seen the bartender, a bearded guy with a brusk attitude. Michael had apparently become accustomed to kissing male facial hair. Curious he never asked how I was doing.

Normal people would: have a drink together, catch up, make a vague plan to meet up again. I figured at least we could be friends again

and leave bygones in the past – I mean, “friends of Dorothy” are supposed to be “family.” But none of that happened. Instead, Michael made a hurried excuse to leave, back to safety at the Glory Hole I presumed.

I saw him again weeks later, slumped over on a stool at the same bar – skunk drunk. When I gave him a nudge, he confided that his boyfriend was being mean to him as he dropped his beer bottle to the floor and stumbled out to the street. I followed to make sure he was safe, watching from the doorway as he hailed a boxy Yellow Cab. I doubted I’d ever see him again, but shouted “Call me.” I waved as he sailed away into a blur of traffic lights. Ironical that in the speakeasy we couldn’t, our conversation forever left dangling.



JOHN HAYMAKER

John Haymaker is a LGBTQIA+ writer whose stories and nonfiction appear in various online journals, including Quibble.Lit, The Bookends Review, Hawaii Pacific Review, Cosmic Double, Piker Press, Across the Margin and Switchgrass Review. Chinese to English translations appear online at Bewildering Stories. John writes as an American expat in Portugal, where he lives with his partner of 28 years. Find John online at <https://johnhaymaker.com>

39. BEFORE MR. BAKER AND MR. MCCONNELL

Our fairy godfathers wanted to live.
On a Saturday night at Paradise Garage,
in the silken darkness of the piers,
in the arms of a lover.
Or in the same house as the parents who birthed them,
in peace and freedom,
a forever sort of harmony.

But survival has always meant leaving.
Jack changed his name to Pat,
abandoned himself
to open the door for all of us.
September 3, 1971,
not June 26, 2015.

No wonder neutrality scares them.

Our children can't say gay
yet we're visible as ever.
Dad and Daddy, shoulder to shoulder at Open House.
Our rings no longer signal revolution.
Mow the lawn, the suburban cut,
no blade sharp enough to tear up the roots.
People remain when books are banned.

Is this what Jack and Mike imagined?
A domestic ideal for us all.
The only queer family
at karate, swimming, football.
A white picket fence
refashioned with steel.

To assimilate is to disrupt.

We were us once.

We still are now.
Radical families in camouflage,
normalcy as a raised fist.



JEFFEREY SPIVEY

Jefferey Spivey is a Des Moines, Iowa-based author and copywriter. His debut short story collection, *The Birthright of Sons*, won the 2023 Iron Horse Book Prize and will be published by Texas Tech University Press in January 2024. He was named runner-up for Poets & Writers' 2023 Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award for fiction and received a 2022 COURAGE to WRITE grant from The de Groot Foundation. His short stories have appeared in *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *Punt Volat*, *A Gathering of the Tribes*, *Typehouse*, *decomp*, and *Havik*.

40. A SCULPTURE, NOT JUST MY OWN

Freedom meant nothing, other than ascribed in the dictionary.
It was blasted away by the most respectful reactionary.
It was shredded from my still-beating vessel.
Now my fight for it is everything but subtle.

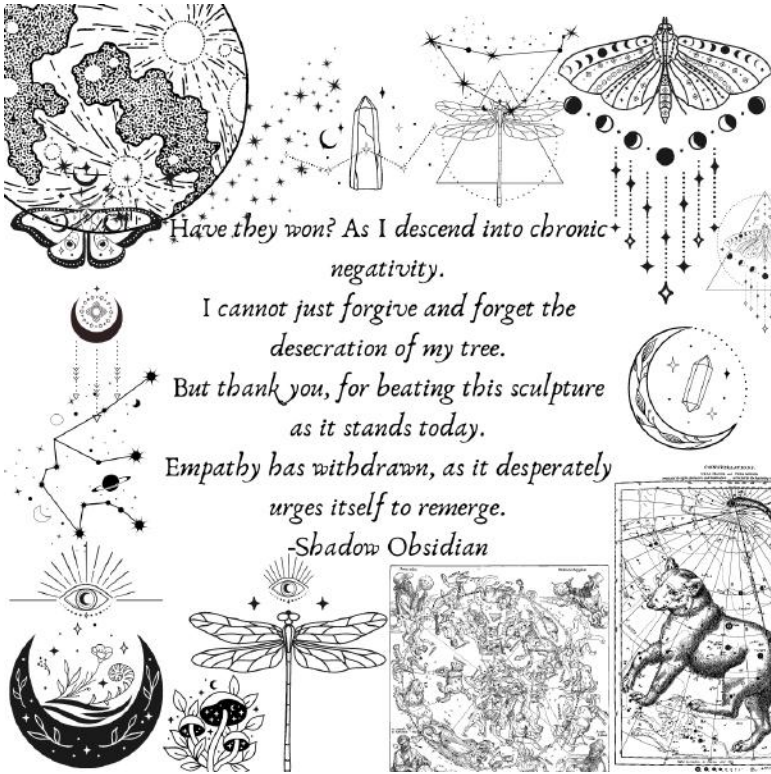
In a moment of deceptive confidentiality, I molded my stories,
into reality. The memories paint a hellish rage sculpted from my heart.
A therapist with a selective conscience.
A conscience for those who carved my imprisonment.

I no longer tremble in my waking nightmares, as I accept the perversion
of my nerves.
Where is the map, when one is lost on unmaintained roads?
“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” right? What a fucking
joke.
Ironical how everything physical and metaphorical was remote.

Reluctant to remember all that resides in my crumbling bandwidth.
A lack of empathy will be returned to your illiterate library.
Recovery slips further and further as I descend towards death.
An almost systematic sculpture to your rhetoric, in your unevolved
northern capacity.

Let personal interpretation be that of my own democracy.
Disappear into a reality, free from your governing body.
My flag will still crack and flee in the wind.
Let my sculpture be absent from your conforming appendages.

Have they won? As I descend into chronic negativity.
I cannot just forgive and forget the desecration of my tree.
But thank you, for beating this sculpture as it stands today.
Empathy has withdrawn, as it desperately urges itself to remerge.



*Have they won? As I descend into chronic
negativity.*

*I cannot just forgive and forget the
desecration of my tree.*

*But thank you, for beating this sculpture
as it stands today.*

*Empathy has withdrawn, as it desperately
urges itself to remerge.*

-Shadow Obsidian



SHADOW OBSIDIAN

Shadow Obsidian graduated from ISU in May 2023 with a BA degree in English. He currently lives and works in Utah

41. THE ONE HOLDING THE KNIFE

Rueful muse,
What does the future mean,
To you?
A reminder of what could have been.
How heavy does
Your past weigh
On your mind?
Soul of abounding pain,
What will uncouple you
From the ghost who holds you?
The impuissant writer,
Wishes to give you relief,
Create worlds of marvelous fabrication,
But I cannot create falsities as you do.
Saccharinity lips,
Your kisses attempt to deceive,
As you vigilantly control your soul;
You won't let out
The pain you hold,
But eyes, my dear,
They tell the truth,
Beyond the smile you offer,
They grieve quietly.
In the background of your façade,
They perish unnoticed.
Will you let your regrets consume you,
Until the reflection in the mirror,
Is unrecognized.

Will the ghost not allow you
Vindication?

Yell my love!
Certainly you still feel something sincere!
How much longer will you live,
In such melancholy?

Can't you see
Beyond yesterday?
Aren't you owed
A tomorrow?

Are we not human?
Do our mistakes
Truly have no forgiveness?
Love, my dear, love,
Walks hand in hand,
With pain.
For every good intention,
Laid another brick on the road,
To the abyss.
You haven't done any wrong,
For choosing to live!

Look at me,
With honesty,
Without falseness and consideration.
Look at me
From the depths of your soul,
And face fate
With openness.

Regrets,
Carved deep into our existence,
Will never fade,
Nor will it,
Ever lighten,
But do not mistaken,
Regrets for definition,
Of your being.
Fate and phantasms,
Look beyond you.

Can you not
Do the same?



ARBEN ALOVIC

You might find Arben Alovic somewhere on your adventure. He may be teaching at LaGuardia College in NYC or taking a nap on the Kamo River in Kyoto. Remember, there is no obligations to life. It is yours and yours alone, so do what makes you happy, without feeling the need to explain yourself. His work has appeared here and there, but what's the fun if he listed it here? Time for a good scavenger hunt. May you explore all the other lovely writers you find on that hunt! Till next time, may life treat you well.~

42. THEIR HELL

I trace the freckles
on your skin
like constellations
in a space
where only
you and I can breathe
consuming
one another
and hoping
we don't suffocate
under bed sheets
and behind
closed bedroom doors
and behind
other doors too
waiting for the time
the right time
to come back down to Earth
hoping gravity
doesn't find us first

And if it does
would you keep
your hand in mine
as they searched debris
for our bodies
and maybe our souls
if the book is correct
would you stay with me
until we reached
the pearly white gates
above the Earth
but below our space
as they tear us apart
would you hear my yell
my last promise
to find you again
even if that means in hell



KATIE O'CONNOR

Katie O'Connor, originally from New York, is an undergraduate student at the University of Edinburgh. There, she studies English literature and philosophy. She enjoys reading and writing fiction and poetry when she's not too busy procrastinating her next essay for school.

43. BUILDING A CITY AND BUILDING YOUR LIFE COMPLETION

The artwork I am presenting is art depicting the American Dream, whether it be a city skyline showing the floors
From the bottom floor, a starter floor to the top floor is the
pinnacle of success.

Or a painting of a farm and all its land surrounding the
home one built, and builds on

To create their American Dream.

Or a painting of a hotel that runs like clockwork, a place
for people to relax

And enjoy the fruits of their labors.

Or a painting of a cottage in the woods, being a place of
solitude and relaxation.

A get away from the hustle and bustle of the city, or town,
in which one lives.

All these paintings depict growth, a home, a getaway, a
city skyline, in which we all

Live and work in,

The artworks are brilliant and lively, colorful and joyful.

They all show what is possible for one to achieve, or
inspire one to achieve.

My art is built on layers of brush strokes like the layers of
days, months, and years

In our lives we build on them, carefully to create a whole
life, a complete life,

Like I create my art, working on it till completion, and
contentment fills the

Empty canvas with colors shades and hues, we pursue
and enjoy the beauty of life.

The colors being our view of our surroundings,

The shades are family, friends, and loved ones, all being
different in some

Way shape or form, with diversity, is the artwork of our
lives,

The Hue's being the ups and downs of life, the struggles
become layers

Of task completed, As the art grows and thrives to
completion.
All the paintings can be viewed like your walking through
them, as you walk
Throughout life, seeing what is above and below to the left
to the right of you,
Like viewing your dreams, your goals, your aspirations.
My artwork is alive, and thriving, just like all of us, alive
and thriving,
Reaching our goals, our dreams, starting from scratch and
becoming complete.
My art is in fine details, just like life, details make up the
threads of our lives,
Details show the complexity of life, right down to the
reflections from the boats.
Right down to the windows on the high rise, right down to
the grass in the
Yard of the cottage.
Life grows around you, within you, grow from your vision,
your plans,
Your dreams, your hopes,
By finishing a painting I have achieved my goal, living the
dream one achieves
Their goals, that home in the sky, that cottage getaway in
the woods,
That boat floating on the riverbank, all these things can be
achieved
With determination and strength, and perseverance.



*That boat floating on the riverbank, all
these things can be
achieved
With determination and strength, and
perseverance.
-Timothy F Phillips*



TIMOTHY F PHILLIPS

Timothy believes that with the publication of his words he is bringing to light the essence of the work of a true master who achieves this with his creativeness it will be transformed for world, and the way we see it. For this and many other reasons, when one speaks of Timothy Phillips, we do so in an articulate style. Timothy is committed to the body of works he composes with a precise hand and skillful use of words and phrases, shaping, thoughts describing that which brings us a vision of a more human world we are in. In the completeness is joy, love, happiness, dreams, hopes and desires, and fantasies. that have a life from the title and the first page on to the last page there is life and reality of it in every single story. Timothy F Phillips

44. SENTIMENTAL CREATURES

Despite my best efforts, the sun sets
and the air curdles.
It's not that I don't love night—I do—
but autumn in her lingering dark
settles so oppressive,
and lately I have so loved the light.

Evenings are reminiscent by nature.
Germans are not.

I call her when the sky
smelts navy dusk:
my blue-eyed muse who makes all things new.

I'm not nostalgic for my own past,
but I want what comes next
without letting go of now.
Define: selfishness. Define: self-preservation.

My mother came home with an urn last week
and nobody has addressed it. A few nights ago
I picked it up to feel if it was empty.
It wasn't.

Why is the divine feminine associated
with the moon instead of the sun? Rephrased,
is womanhood inherently lonely?
On one side of the family,
my grandfather fed his house to malaise and dust.
Nana was everywhere, but mostly nowhere.
On the other side,
Oma donated Opa's clothes
before she even picked out his casket.
She kept the plastic-stemmed flowers
and expired chicken cans.

Our sleeping cycles eclipse each other briefly:
I am up at dawn and in bed by nine.
She is a midnight bird.
How do you—casually—tell
your lover of a few months
that you want to spend the rest of your life
tracing aimless patterns
onto her back?



SOPHIE HOSS

Sophie Hoss is a New York writer who loves the ocean and is in bed by 9pm every night. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing and Literature from Stony Brook University. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in BOMB, The LA Review, Storm Cellar, The Southampton Review, and elsewhere. You can read more of her work at sophiehosswriting.com.

45. THE MILKY WAY PERAMBULATES

& I point at the dark mountain to the *seven stars of the North's head*. You tell me here they are called *the big dipper*. Spinning merry-go-rounds with our weight, gravitating against each other at an abandoned playground, the futurist trail of your gold kimono dizzies me into a light head so we return to the ground. To the pond protected by the family of perennial geese, we walk with our necks bent at the right angle & talk upwards about the queerness of bunraku puppetry, the camp of pretending to not-see. *Look, it's the Big Scoop*, I say. You laugh a starry laugh & tell me *the milky way is not an ice cream*, which cannot be scooped but only ladled like the faint pink milk constellated with lucky charms you once spilled all over my hardwood oor. We strut down the asphalt pretending like we are on a feet-high platform heels, the grass our knee-high socks. You wish we could walk like this forever in a circle that encircles a pond, a playground, a meadow, & a haunted mansion. I say, *Look, it's the big ladle*, looking down at our whorls.



DABIN JEONG

Dabin Jeong (they/she) is a poet and translator from Seoul, South Korea. Their poem won the Chestnut Review's 2021 Stubborn Writer's Contest, selected by Dorothy Chan. Their works appeared or are forthcoming in Up the Staircase Quarterly, Indiana Review, Brooklyn Poets, Chestnut Review, Perhappened mag, and Chogwa zine. You can find them on twitter @dabinjeong__ or on Instagram @verymanybins.

46. MOM DRESS

During my pre-school years, my brother and I shared the spare bedroom in our paternal grandparents' home as our parents fought in court for custody. Being the devoted Lutherans that they were, my grandparents sent me to a Lutheran pre-school down the street from their house. During that time, my favorite playtime activity was role-playing characters in the life-size dollhouse. I was a shy child who stood alongside my classmates but did most of the role-playing in my head. While the other girls dressed up in the donated clothes from the cedar chest and gave themselves pretend names and roles to play, I quietly occupied as little space as possible while still being in the dollhouse. In my imagination, I was always the mom. Living with our paternal grandparents, we saw our father on occasion—despite the court ordering against it. But, for a while, I didn't have a mother.

While I was secretly the mom, Danielle, one of the meanest girls in the class, always called first dibs on the long cobalt blue summer dress with a motif of tiny faded red flowers. The Mom Dress. Danielle had a very different idea of what a mother would be like because she bossed all the other girls around, even the ones who weren't her children. The Mom Dress gave her power and she abused the power to stay in command.

One day, as the teachers freed us for playtime, Danielle decided to go outside to the playground instead of bossing around all the girls in the dollhouse. I watched all the other girls grab their outfits from the cedar chest, praying that no one would claim the Mom Dress. Once the girls were all happy with their roles, I grabbed the dress and pulled it over my head. I buttoned the collar as I felt the power start to take over me. I glided to the kitchen and began piecing together plastic recipes for a dinner that I wanted to cook for everyone in the dollhouse. A few of the girls laughed that Matty was wearing a dress. I laughed with them. But I had never felt as beautiful as I did while wearing the Mom Dress.

Once dinner was cooked, I told all the girls to take a seat at the tiny table and I began serving their plates. During our dinner, Danielle stormed in from the playground and demanded that I give her the Mom Dress. Afraid of Danielle, but more afraid to lose the dress, I began to cry. I told her that I wanted to be the mom that day, just for once. She said no, *she* was the mom. She threatened to tell the teacher, and I froze.

I sat at the kitchen table with tears falling onto my dinner plate, unable to express how badly I wanted to the dress. All the other girls stopped their conversations to see what would happen next. Danielle ran to the teachers, braided pigtails swinging side to side, and told them that I was wearing her dress and pretending to be the mom.

“Matty,” one teacher said as she approached the doll house, “that dress is for the girls. You need to take that off and give it to Danielle.”

Danielle stood beside her, with a grin sent directly from the devil himself, hand stretched, awaiting the Mom Dress. I unbuttoned the collar, unable to stop the tears from running down my cheeks. The teacher just stood there and watched as I pulled the dress over my head and handed it to Danielle.

“Thank you Matty,” the teacher said, “now go play on the playground with the other boys.” I ran to the playground, but I didn’t play with the other boys. I sat in the shadow below the curved slide and hugged my knees as my body shook with silent whimpers.

The next day, Danielle went outside for playtime again. The Mom Dress was unclaimed, so I took it upon myself to pull it over my head and make dinner for the other girls again. Like déjà vu, Danielle stormed into the dollhouse when she was done outside and demanded the Mom Dress. I said no. She told the teacher.

“Matty,” the teacher said firmly as she towered over our dinner table, “I told you yesterday that you cannot wear that dress. This is for girls and you are a boy. Take it off.”

I stood up from the dinner table with my head hung in shame as all the other girls stared in silence. I unbuttoned the collar and pulled the dress over my head before handing it to Danielle again. This time I was unable to look at her devilish smile.

“You need to come with me to the time out corner,” my teacher said.

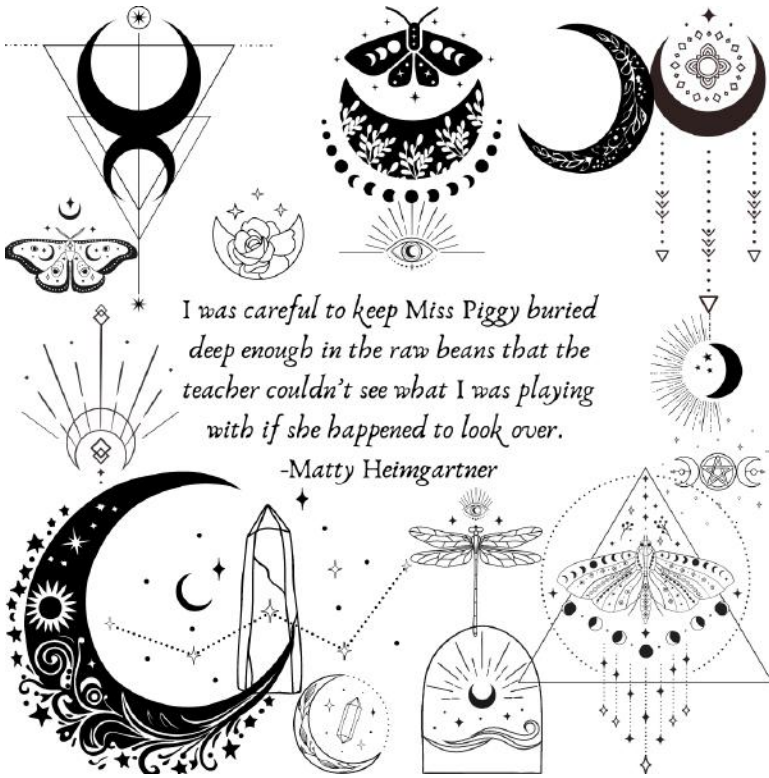
I kept my head down to hide my tears as I followed her off the carpet, across the cold tiled floor, to a metal chair. The teacher sat far behind me and finished her lunch. Beside the time out chair was a large container of uncooked beans for children to stick their hands into when they weren’t being used for arts and crafts. Despite being in timeout, I played in the raw beans. The teacher was busy watching other students as she ate her lunch. After pushing my hands in and letting the cold beans

rub against my bare arms, I found a toy buried deep inside the pile. It was a plastic water toy of The Muppet's character, Miss Piggy. She was wearing a purple bathing suit with matching purple sunglasses and heels while reclining on a purple floaty bed. *The Muppets* was my favorite movie from the VHS drawer because I loved Miss Piggy. My actual favorites, the tapes with female leads—*The Little Mermaid*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, etc.—were locked in my Grandma's closet and only allowed to be watched on special occasion, like a birthday or a holiday.

I was careful to keep Miss Piggy buried deep enough in the raw beans that the teacher couldn't see what I was playing with if she happened to look over. I didn't care anymore that I was in timeout because I had Miss Piggy and my imagination. I pushed her and her floaty through the raw beans, imaging it was the wide-open ocean. I made up a story about how she fell off the cruise ship while vacationing with Kermit and the other Muppets.

After class, my teacher asked my grandparents to stay for a conference about my absurd behavior. Two teachers, Grandma, Grandpa, and I sat in a circle and the teachers explained that they caught me wearing a dress and pretending to be a mom two days in a row. They told my grandparents that because I deliberately disobeyed them, and that I was put in timeout. My grandparents were embarrassed and ashamed, and they lectured me in front of the teachers, making me promise that I would not play with the girls anymore.

When the teachers announced playtime the next day, Danielle ran straight for the Mom Dress and she made sure to catch my eye contact to stick her tongue out as she pulled the dress over her head. Instead of joining the other girls, I walked across the room to the raw beans and dug around for Miss Piggy. I covered the diva with both hands as I hurried out the back door and ran onto the tanbark ground. I sat in the shadow of the curved slide and lifted Miss Piggy to the sky. I tuned out the preschool and escaped to the open sea with my friend, Miss Piggy.



*I was careful to keep Miss Piggy buried
deep enough in the raw beans that the
teacher couldn't see what I was playing
with if she happened to look over.*

-Matty Heimgartner



MATTY HEIMGARTNER

Matty Heimgartner is a California artist and writer whose surreal paintings and personal essays tend toward the introspective and reflective. Heimgartner often participates in art shows around the San Francisco Bay Area, and their art has been featured in the magazines *CreativPaper*, *Beyond Words*, *Content*, *Midnight Chem*, *Cerasus*, and *Artist Portfolio*. Their nonfiction appears in *Reed Magazine*, *Thanks Hun*, *The Romp*, *Resurrection*, and *Beyond Queer Words*. Matty holds a BA in art and an MFA in creative writing. MattyHeimgartner.com / [@fabulousmatty](https://www.instagram.com/fabulousmatty)

47. WHY WOULD I DO IT

I have the desire to speak
Let words flow like a river
But I'm never quenched by what flows
So instead I vocalize
Let my voice say what I can't
But if I can't appease to what you think I should be
Why would I do it?

I cradle my own rotting body
Choosing to fill it with poison
I can feel my mind deteriorating
Everyone tells me I need to heal
But if I can't be what you want
Why would I do it?

I spent my time trying desperately
To help you be happy
You told me I was the antidote
But you were the poison
So if you're gonna leave me every time
Why would I do it?

If you could see me dance
You would see
My body moves like a puppet
There's no other way for me to function
Without control I'm unsure of who to be

My fingertips always reach
Towards the sky
Always reaching for an answer
Perhaps just a few moments of relief
But if I never find it
Why would I do it?

If I never find comfort with you

And I'm only a toy for you to hold
Why would I stay
Why would I choose you
Why would I do it?



TANNER SQUYRES

Tanner Squyres is a poet living in a small town in central Texas. Since coming out at a young age he's seen it all and incorporates this immature feeling of timeless wisdom into his work. He hopes you enjoy his art

48. IN SUMMERTIME

We are the people whispering loudly
in the movie theater. I'll say

anything I can to make you laugh.
Then grin in return when they look back

to shush you because they don't know
better. That your throat is magic;

drops from your lips untrouble
my day, making worries

un-terrible. It was on a Wednesday
we hiked the mountain path and you laid

a picnic on the summit and fed me
cheese from dirty fingers. I willed ants

to crawl up my arms so my nerves
would awaken in time to feel your strawberry

breath. Mud smudges on your cheek
were chocolate. I circled my tongue

in your mouth and on your skin
wanting to drink you from the inside

out. And when you laughed I held
your belly, feeling your abdomen

tense and relax. Finally, no one
was there to quiet us; only ladybugs

and grasshoppers cheering us on
in the glowing heat of our sweat.



NORAH MAE CLIFFORD

Norah Mae Clifford (she/her) grew up in Lambertville, a small town in central New Jersey. Norah graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania with a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and a minor in Music Performance. Norah currently lives in New Orleans, Louisiana where she interns with the Tennessee Williams Festival nonprofit. You can contact Norah at norahmcclifford@gmail.com and find her on instagram [@norahmaecclifford](https://www.instagram.com/norahmaecclifford).

49. SINGLE FOREVER

who am I to plot against God?
I have tried to live a life of my own design
but unlike Saint Paul and the thorn in his side
I have frequently succumbed to mine
that is why I must remain single forever
allowing others to figure skate upon my frozen surface
never really fostering any depth in conversation
I am not searching for any pity over this self isolation
it is for the best and has been carefully considered
my attraction towards other men has left me no choice
but to become one with the figures of history
who knew how to live productive lives
while carefully holding their kryptonite



CODY DRACO

Cody Draco is an American writer who debuted in 2023 with three self-published poetry collections (Observations, Healing is Not for the Faint of Heart, Untimely). As a gay Christian and someone who is diagnosed with bipolar disorder his work often explores themes of mental health, love, loss, creativity, and spirituality.

50. HOME

I wave to the wind
And the wind waves to me
She takes me far from home
Away from from thick fields
She leads me to the sound of fiddles
Carries me off to sea

Grandmother, when we talk
You speak to the sprite the wind left behind
A watery echo wich you fill
With memories I've long forgotten.
Unlike me, she is a good girl
She is a Christian, she will marry a
Man close to home and have three children
She is never bitter, she still loves her father
When the wind blows, it cuts right through her

Grandmother, if you knew
Would you even attempt
To understand, or would
Your bible soaked brain
Explode like a rotten honeydew
Left in the back field for the rabbits?
Would you plug your ears
And mumble like Mother?

I've found my native soil
I will burrow like a tick
Into warm earth until
It does not hurt anymore
I will dig deeper until
You come and join me.



I've found my native soil
I will burrow like a tick
Into warm earth until
It does not hurt anymore
I will dig deeper until
You come and join me.
-Anthy Strom



ANTHY STROM

Anthy Strom is a writer based in Sackville N.B. Their work has appeared in 805 and The Parliamentary Literary Magazine. They are currently trying to obtain a Bachelors of Economics, although it is a constant battle against the urges telling them to run away and become a feral hermit.

← **WRITE. FEEL. PUBLISH** →

NEVER GIVE UP ON YOUR DREAMS.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

If you liked our work, kindly do give us reviews on Amazon.com/winglessdreamer. It will mean a lot to our editorial team. You can also tag or follow us on social media platforms:

Instagram: @winglessdreamerlit @ruchi_acharya

Facebook: www.facebook.com/winglessdreamer

Mail us: Editor: editor@winglessdreamer.com

Sales: sales@winglessdreamer.com

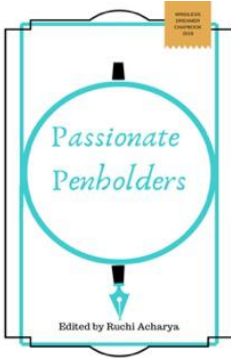
Website: www.winglessdreamer.com

You can also support our small publishing community through donation:

www.paypal.me/Winglessdreamer

WRITE AND WRITE, AND SET YOURSELF FREE.

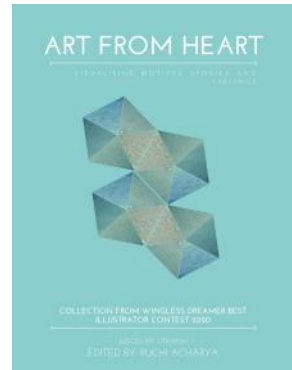
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



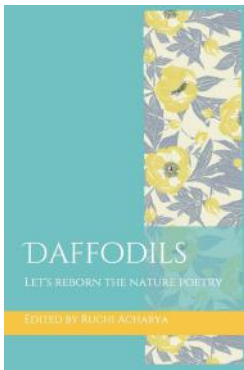
Passionate Penholders



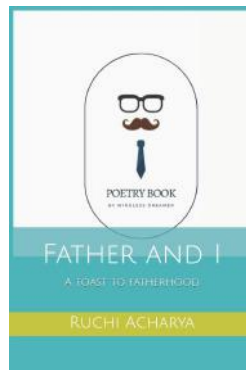
Passionate Penholders II



Art from heart



Daffodils



Father and I



Sunkissed



Tunnel of lost stories

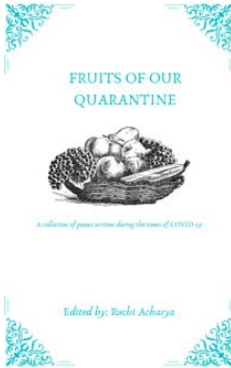


Overcoming Fear

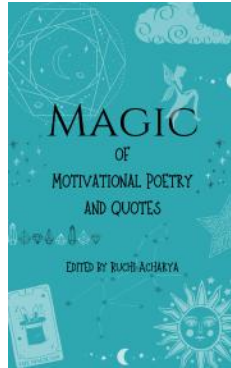


The Rewritten

BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



Fruits of our quarantine



Magic of motivational



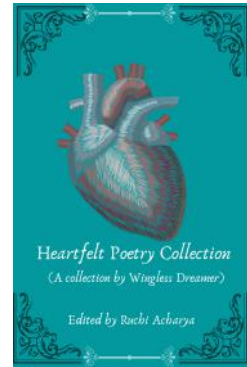
Diversity



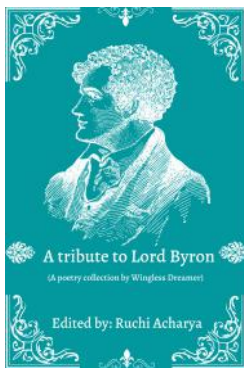
Dark Poetry Collection



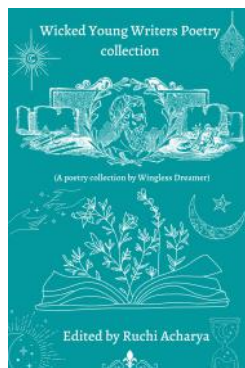
A glass of wine with Edgar



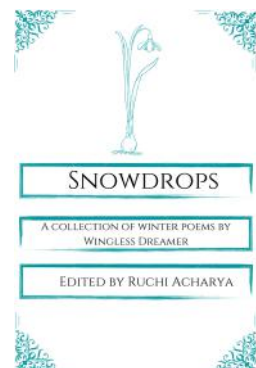
Heartfelt



A tribute to Lord Byron



Wicked young writers

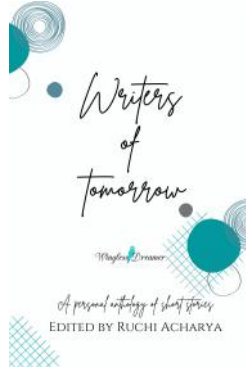


Snowdrops

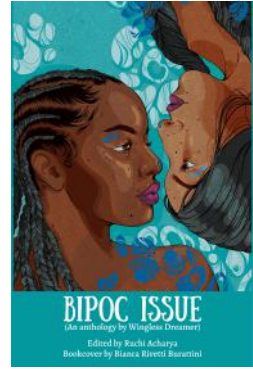
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



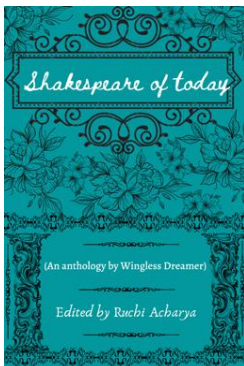
The Wanderlust Within



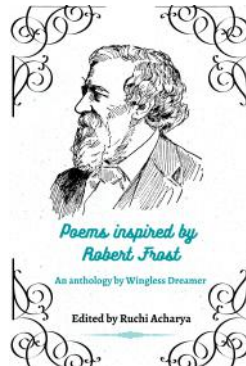
Writers of tomorrow



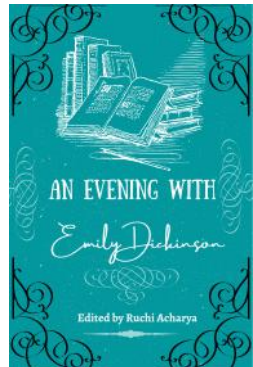
BIPOC Issue



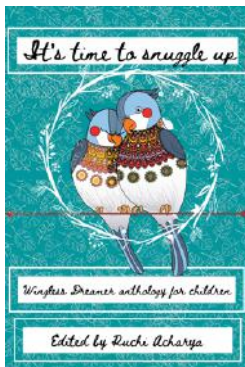
Shakespeare of Today



Poem inspired by Robert Frost



An evening with Emily Dickinson



It's time to snuggle up

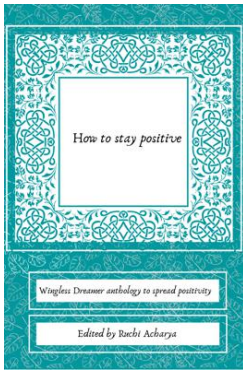


Depths of Summer

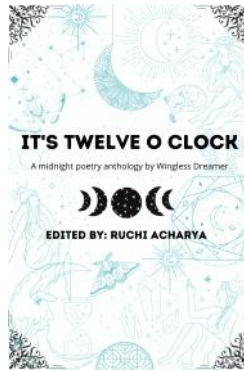


Flee to Spring

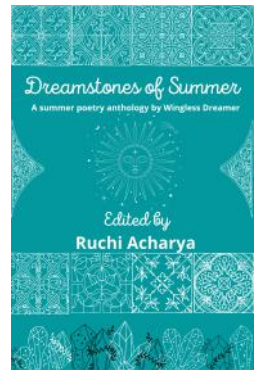
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



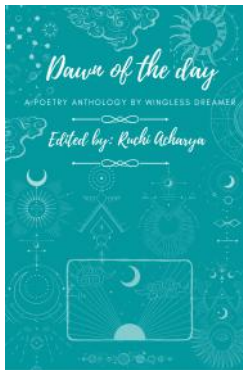
How to stay positive



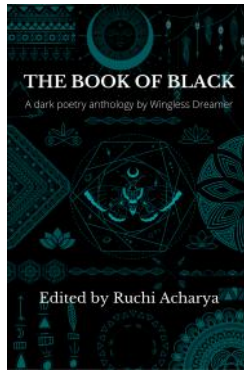
It's twelve o clock



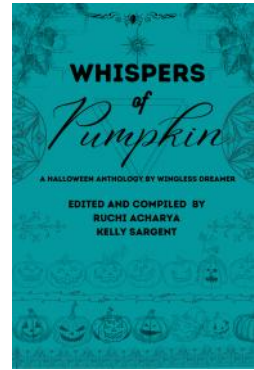
Dreamstones of Summer



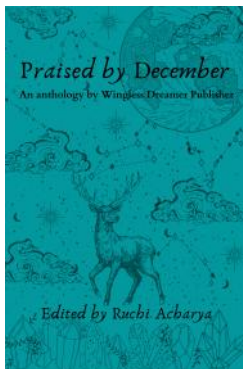
Dawn of the day



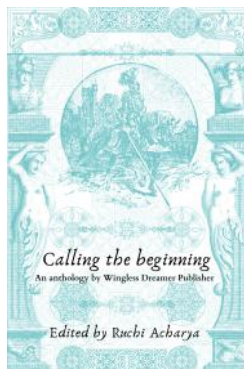
The book of black



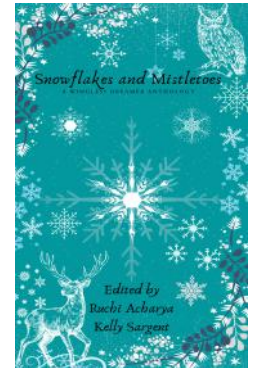
Whispers of Pumpkin



Praised by December



Calling the beginning

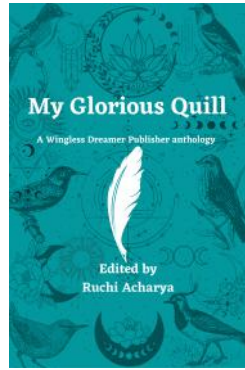


Snowflakes and
Mistletoes

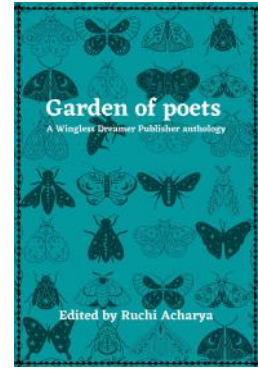
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



My Cityline



My Glorious Quill



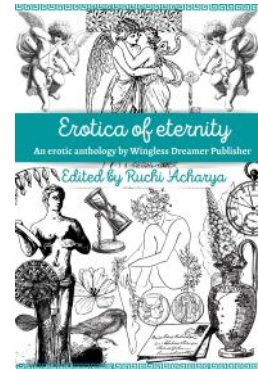
Garden of poets



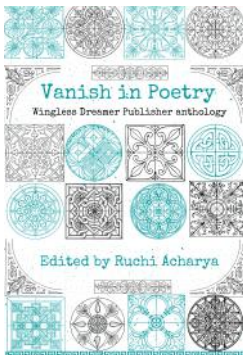
Let's begin again



Field of black roses



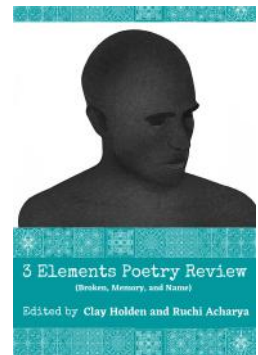
Erotica of eternity



Vanish in Poetry



Oxymorons & Poets
Wingless Dreamer



3 Elements Poetry

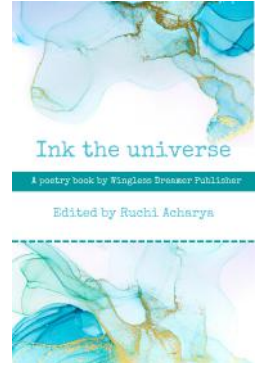
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



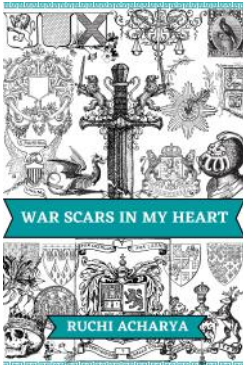
Still I rise



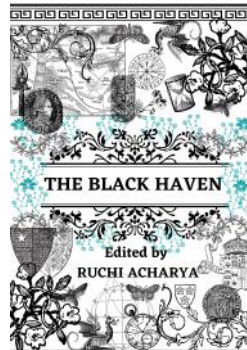
Mother, a title just above queen



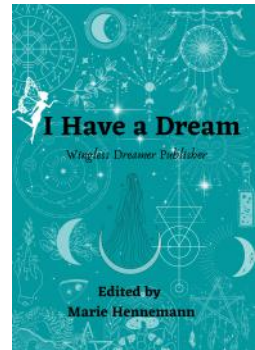
Ink the Universe



War scars in my heart



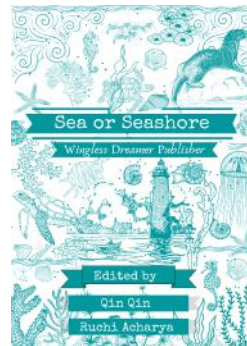
The Black Haven



I Have a Dream



Midsummer's Eve

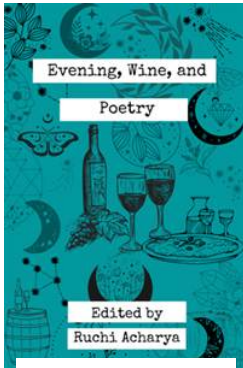


Sea or Seashore



Summer Fireflies

BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



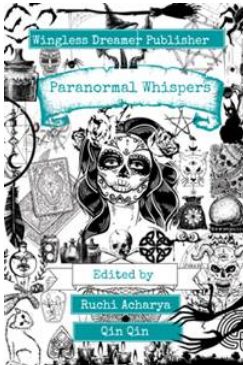
Evening,
wine & Poetry



My Unheard
September



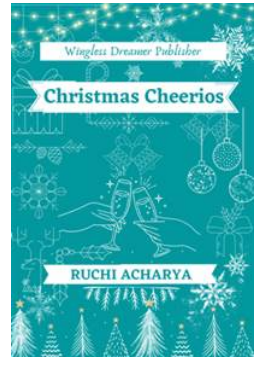
Unveil the Memories



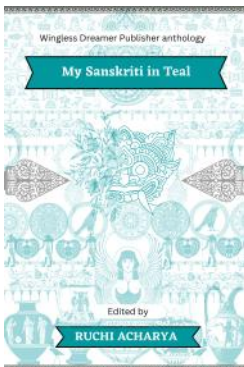
Paranormal Whispers



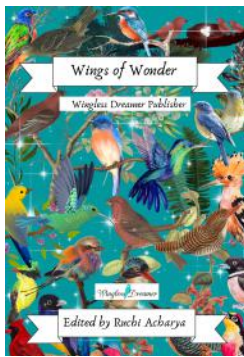
Dulce Poetica



Christmas Cheerios

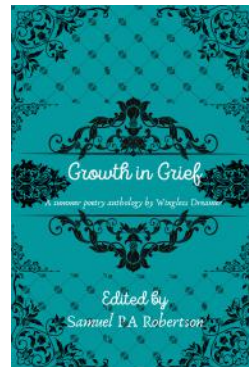


My Sanskriti in Teal



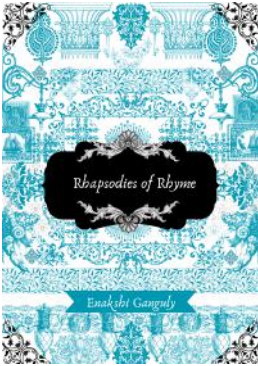
Wings of Wonder

Wingless Dreamer

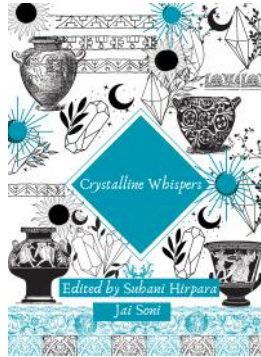


Growth in Grief

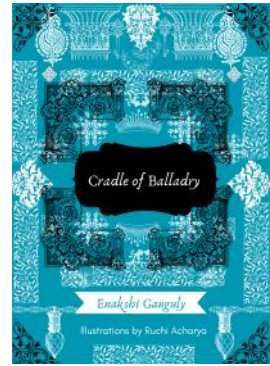
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



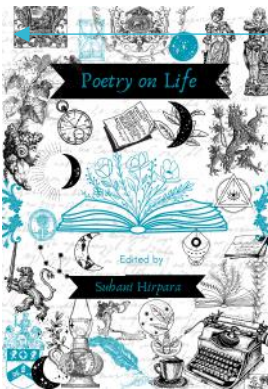
Rhapsodies of Rhyme



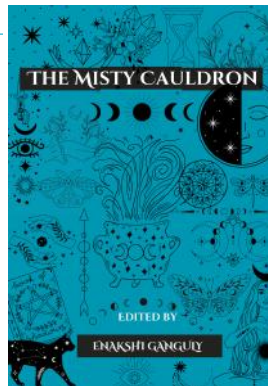
Crystalline Whispers



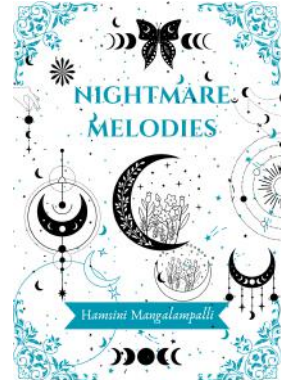
Cradle of Balladry



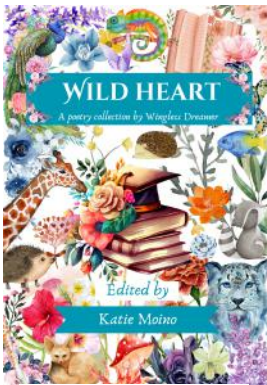
Poetry on Life



The Misty Cauldron



Nightmare Melodies



Wild Heart



Whispers of Spring



The Power of Hope

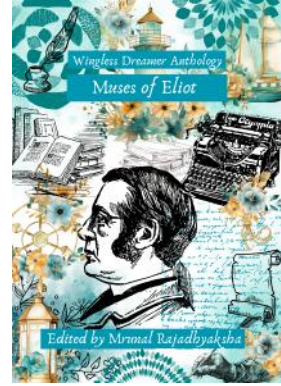
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY WINGLESS DREAMER



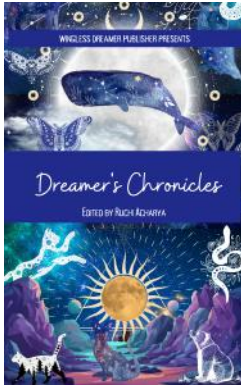
The Petal Pages



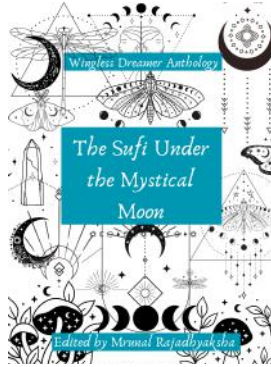
Unheard Phantoms



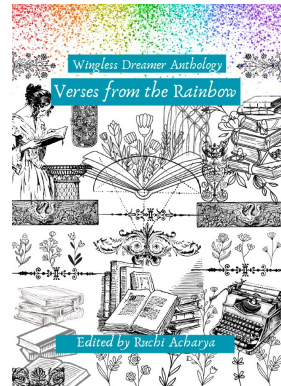
Muses of Eliot



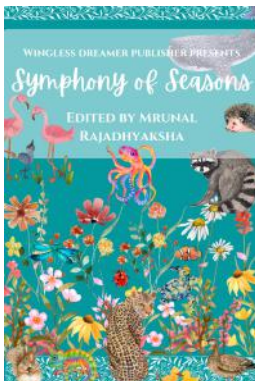
Dreamer's Chronicles



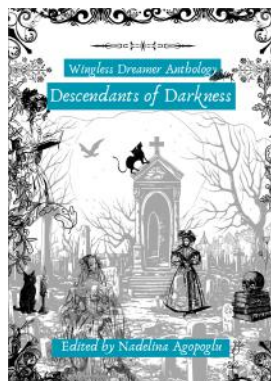
The Sufi Under the
Mystical Moon



Verses from the
Rainbow



Symphony of Seasons



Descendants of Darkness

