



CLOSETED

THE
PARAGON
PRESS

Claseted

A Conversation About the LGBT+

Closeted: A Conversation About the LGBT+
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A COUNTDOWN TO NOW

WRITTEN BY: SARA STEVENSON

Ten (or “the number of seconds that spanned between her question and my answer”)

“Do all the boys in this school act like they’ve never seen a pair of tits before?”

My eyes flicked to the t-shirt that clung around her chest and torso, and I immediately found myself entranced by the curve of her breasts and the cinch at her waist. Her dark-washed jeans hugged her hips just right, and my heart skipped a cliché beat. She held her books against her stomach, which only helped to accentuate her breasts, and I forced myself to chuckle even though I’m certain I was acting just like the boys in the school that she was referring to.

The seconds of silence lingered, floated, and hovered in the air, filling the space between us, before I managed to force air between my lips and create words. “They just like to ogle every new pair that walks through the front doors.”

I cringed at the sound of my voice — the awkward stutter and the ill-phrased statement — but she simply laughed and shook her head. “It was the same way at my school in Philly. But lemme tell you: all the girls in Philly have tits.”

I allowed myself to laugh because she laughed at the ironic obviousness of her comment. She had a humor that was rare in my high school, and I took a moment to relish in its existence before the warning bell rang and she sighed heavily.

“Guess I’d better get to class,” she said with another exaggerated sigh and flipping her dark hair over her shoulder. “Will I see you later?”

Another pause that seemed to last years spanned between us before I managed to speak again.

“Yeah. Totally.”

Nine (or “the year I started to question myself”)

I’d spent the first fourteen years of my life conforming to the societal notion that I was supposed to be attracted to boys. I had boyfriends, and I’d convinced myself every year of middle school that I loved one boy or another. I gossiped with my friends about which boys we thought were cute and which ones we could see ourselves hiding in the stairwell to kiss; I was obsessed with experiencing my first kiss — my first real kiss — the way that most girls are.

I grew up in a rural area filled with close-minded people, conservatives who couldn’t fathom the notion of being something other than straight and white. It wasn’t until my freshman year of high school that I realized there was a whole community of people who felt differently than they were expected to, and I was a freshman when my best friend came out to me as being gay.

I was a freshman the first time I started questioning my own sexuality.

New students were always a hot button topic when they arrived, and it was hard not to notice them. They were the talk of the halls, and every teacher asked them to stand up and tell the class a little about themselves; they became the center of attention whether they wanted it or not. When Elizabeth showed up, it was hard not to notice her: she was coming to our school almost halfway through the year, and she had tanned skin that stood out amongst her classmates. She’d come from Philadelphia, she told our home room class, and she had an interest in astronomy.

As she stood at the front of the classroom, I couldn’t help but take her in. Her long, dark hair was draped over her shoulders, and her shirt hugged her chest and torso in the most flattering way; her jeans fit her hips and thighs perfectly before flaring out slightly at the bottom. Her smile was bright and friendly, and when her eyes met mine I felt my heart stutter like I was in one of those cliché romance novels I was constantly checking out of the school’s library. A moment later, she was sitting next to me, smiling, and it was a moment I couldn’t get out of my head for the rest of the day.

Elizabeth was the start of a year-long struggle with who I was and what I wanted. She left at halfway through our sophomore year — her parents decided they wanted something more than what our school had to offer — and she and I never became close friends, but she had sparked a flame of a fire that I hadn’t known existed. She put in motion every question I had about who I was, and I’m fairly positive she had no idea what she’d done or how thankful I am that she walked through the front doors of the high school when she did.

Eight...

Seven...

Six (or “how many girls made me question myself every year”)

After Elizabeth moved, I found myself repeatedly looking at other females in my grade. It wasn’t that I hadn’t noticed them before -- there were several hundred of them in my high school, and I’d been seeing them for years -- but I was starting to notice them in new ways. I was noticing their curves and the way they pulled their hair up in a high ponytail; I was noticing the way that their eyes glistened and sparkled when they talked about the things they enjoyed -- dancing, cheerleading, their current boyfriend -- and I noticed the ways that my heart skipped when I noticed these things.

With each of these thoughts I found myself questioning my sexuality a little more. I was especially confused because the way I felt when I looked at some of these girls -- the flutter in my stomach, the tightness in my chest, and the way my eyes focused on each of them -- were the same ways I’d felt when I looked at some of the guys in my class that I’d found attractive.

Was I supposed to feel the same way about boys and girls?

Was I allowed?

Five...

Four...

Three (or “the number of years it took to find my identity”)

I was a senior in high school before I finally found the term “bisexual”.

Bisexual: to be sexually attracted to, not exclusively, people of one particular gender; attracted to both men and women.

Less than 15% of females reported having sexual encounters with other females between 2006 and 2010, and almost 4% identified as being bisexual. The concept wasn't new, and it wasn't completely unheard of outside the four walls of my high school and the run-down trailer I lived in. But for me, it was a revelation. It was a term that I'd never heard and had never included in my own vocabulary.

I spent those three years of high school struggling to figure out who I was. I spent those three years fearful of what would happen if my peers found out that I thought about girls the same way that I thought about boys. What would happen if they learned that I'd kissed one of the most popular seniors in the stairwell during study hall?

I spent three years hiding who I was from my parents because I simply wasn't sure how they would feel if I told them I felt that I identified as bisexual. It wasn't that I thought they would be disappointed or angry, but I wasn't sure they would support me or see me the same way if they knew the truth.

I spent three years learning to understand that who I was was just as acceptable as who I'd been as a freshman.

Two (or “the number of times I was raped and told it would straighten me out”)

I was a sophomore in community college the first time I was raped by a classmate. He'd been in my night class -- an education class focused on hands-on methods of teaching children -- and he'd been in my English composition class. He was someone I considered an associate, someone I frequently talked to during classes, and he'd come to visit me in the campus' writing tutor center for my help on assignments.

He was someone I never expected to hurt me the way he did.

While his fingers were wrapped around my neck and he was forcing himself on me, he told me that “a good dick would straighten me out”. He told me it was obvious that I was into him, and he was sure that being with him the way we were -- my sweatpants hanging off my hips and the hard brick of the campus library biting into the base of my back -- was going to help me understand just how much I wanted him.

It was only two years later that, just a month before graduation, that another peer told me that he'd been watching me all semester and knew that all I needed to destress was a good fuck. He was certain that forcing himself on me in the back of his car was the best way to show me that “girls weren't worth my time” and that the only thing I should concern myself with was enjoying the feeling of being in the moment with him.

I hated every moment.

One (or “the number of opinions that actually matters”)

Mine.

BOYS

WRITTEN BY: DANIEL EDWARD MOORE

It sounded like
boys in the woods
kicking a dying wolf.

They called him faggot
and his eyes
rolled to heaven.

They called him hungry
and his face
ate the earth.

Like a drunk parade
of soccer ball stars,
mindless brothers

welcomed them home,
stained with the blood
of untamed things,

on a bullet train fed
by adolescent miracles
no one was asked to unmake.

CITY OF STARE

WRITTEN BY: DANIEL EDWARD MOORE

At the Green Lake Library anonymous minds
flicker with mystery under bearded lampshades,

under black Asian hair deftly chandeliered,
the tangle free syntax of fear and lust

flowing down arms into hands onto tables
where pulses parade unpunished and lovely.

As my eyes snapped on face after face, like
a Venus Fly Trap whose beauty is bondage,

library rooms became gardens of gorgeous,
rooms where silence strips language down into

heartache by line break, asystole style. Some think
there should be laws against this: penalties paid

by those whose eyes x-ray strangers with flammable need
in the chilling, city of stare. I am not one of them.

CALENDAR BOY

WRITTEN BY: DANIEL EDWARD MOORE

It's not easy being Calendar Boy
strung out on waiting for numbers to change

men into monsters & monsters to men
the alchemy found when confessions are heard

by those who gather to grieve their body's
sad appointments with lies

supposedly these days like us
crushed by the simple mention of night

by midnight's jazzing arrhythmia pulse
beat us down to morning's last breaths

CHOREOGRAPHER

WRITTEN BY: EDWARD M. COHEN

“I’m dying. I’m dying!” my father was bellowing into the phone at 9:30, not exactly the middle of the night but my folks are in their 70’s and go to sleep at eight. I heard her crying behind him.

“I’m having a heart attack! Do you hear me? I’m dying!”

“Hold on a minute, Pop, hold on...”

“Don’t tell me to hold on!”

“What are the symptoms? Tell me what you feel.”

“All of a sudden you’re a doctor? You’re a choreographer! What the hell kind of job is that? How does a cockamamy choreographer know if someone is dying?”

When my father curses my career, it means he’d like to take other potshots that hit closer to home, but I’ve warned him not to call me a faggot again. Still, he gets his message across.

Of course, my father bellows constantly. In conversation, on the street, falling into rages at bank tellers. He is a retired attorney: son of immigrant parents, drove a cab during the day – went to law school at night. He started out representing poor Jewish families on the Lower East Side. Some of my earliest memories are of strolling with him down Delancey Street as the ladies in babushkas called out from doorways, “Counselor Cohen! Counselor Cohen!” waving incomprehensible documents about citizenship, truant children, evictions from their Essex Street Market stalls, and he advised them then and there in Yiddish; a god on those streets.

Today, his practice is over but he is still involved in dozens of suits against insurance companies, manufacturers who have “defrauded” him, ex-employees who have “stolen” from him. He uses me to type his legal papers. Nobody knows how he gets from his house to mine. He is half-blind and his driver’s license has been revoked. He cannot

get auto insurance and won’t say how he is able to hang onto his car. He claims he hires drivers who owe him for past legal favors: an out-of-work bartender, a bookie. I think he is driving illegally.

All I know is that he arrives at my door whenever he has chaotic papers to be typed. He has never accepted the fact that I might be at rehearsal, might be working at home, making phone calls, meeting with composers. The whole thing infuriates me. But I have been choking on rage with him all of my life.

“You gotta come down! I’m dying, you hear?”

“Did you call an ambulance, Pop?”

“I don’t want an ambulance. By the time they get here, you’re dead. You’ll drive me in the car.

OWWW! The pains are awful!”

So I grabbed a cab, muttering that this was crazy. In fact, he did not look well; pale, perspiring, terrified. My mother was ready to pass out. We left her at home and I drove him to the hospital, repeating that he would be fine. He kept bellowing that he was dying. When they wheeled him away to Emergency, I collapsed into a waiting room chair, suddenly afraid he was right.

*

They kept him all night without telling me a thing. I called my mother hourly with the non-news because she could not sleep, anyway. The time passed in panic.

We had never been close. He has always scared me. He clawed himself out of immigrant poverty, fighting his father who was furious he was going to law school instead of spending the time tending the counter of the family store. They had argued so much that when there was no longer a need – with me – he could not stop. So, I flew as far from him as possible, becoming a modern dance choreographer. Like he said, what the hell kind of job is that? Even at the top, they don’t make any money. And I had been so wrapped up in rage and rebellion that I had never made it close to the top.

It was all so clear to me, sitting in that waiting room, half asleep, more alert than I had ever been; how much energy had been wasted, battling my father. Once, a dancer had video-taped me in rehearsal and it was him on Delancey Street: bellowing, giving orders, moving masses of people around, exuding authority, making huge demands, energizing the room. I had defined myself as an artist to get away from him, but I had used what he had taught me to do it. If I had used those talents in a different way, say, by becoming a lawyer, I would be helping people, would have an admired place in society, would make a lot of money. I would not be tied up in knots, working in crummy off-off Broadway theatres, trying to prove that I was different from him. It all made such sense in the dizzying fluorescent glare.

*

It turned out to be indigestion. They kept him for tests, but it was obvious in the morning that he was fine, perched on the side of his bed, spindly legs swinging out under the sheet, flirting with nurses, joking with attendants.

“This is my son! He’s a big shot choreographer!” Then, snarling out of the side of his mouth, “She probably thinks that’s some kind of chemist!”

“Dad, I thought about that last night. I made a decision to take some time off from dance. What the hell, I’m not making any money.”

“You can say that again!”

“I’m thinking of going back to school.”

“What kind of school?”

“Law school, Dad. I’d like to become a lawyer.”

He reflected for a second. Then he snapped back: “If I had it to do over, I’d never be a lawyer. I made all of my money in real estate!”

“Son of a bitch,” I seethed to myself. “Nothing I do can please him.” I expected him to go off on a harangue about how the legal profession had cheated him. But, no, we both lapsed into a surprising silence. Usually, one or the other is complaining. I peeked up to find him glancing at me.

Finally, I had to get to rehearsal. Waiting for the elevator, I tried to figure out what had just happened. Through our lifelong fog of miscommunication, because of the terrifying night, not even know what I was saying, I had tried to tell him how much he

meant to me. I had offered to be the son he wanted. And he had answered by saying, “Be who you are.” We announce that we are gay with a flourish. Our parents accept it in quieter ways.

Maybe there were other interpretations. At another time, I might have leaned toward them. Maybe I was putting words in his mouth, but they were better words than I used to put there. Glad he was alive, I raced to rehearsal, light-hearted.

CRYING TOGETHER ON THE PHONE, I LISTEN TO YOU TRANSFORM INTO A BIRD WRITTEN BY: HALLIE NOWAK

I don't think I can do this, your damp voice
sobs through my static cell speaker.
You told me you were crying beneath the American flag
in Central Park. Every day, a moony egg cracks,
nesting precariously high above pavement. I tell you this,
saying *it'll be okay* in every tense I can speak.
Your words are pinker when they spell, Yes,
I was just so ready for surgery. Months of pills
swallowed, hormones groan
through your blue veins. A second puberty,
my womanhood reaching her clumsy
red-tipped wings to yours, searing through this frost:

Ross, you've always been a woman.
A second puberty swims your blue veins.
Today, I learned that cardinals molt red feathers
once a year. Your tender voice urges
that I am worthy of love. Now, I tell you
bodies are a lot like beds
of flowers, or maybe even blue clouds
twisting into new shapes. My *I miss you*
is magenta as a birdsong. You say, *I'll be flying*
back home next week. The only thing I can muster is a *yes*,
imagining all the women I've loved flying
in one true owl body singing, *I see you, see you soon*.







RETHINKING THE “STRAIGHT” SEX I USED TO HAVE – UNDERSTANDING YOUR BODY’S HISTORY AFTER COMING OUT AS TRANS

WRITTEN BY: RAINE GRAYSON

As someone who has been out as trans for many years now, I feel like I’ve got the hang of my identity as much as a person can. I’ve grown to understand and articulate what being male and being trans both mean to me. I’ve navigated the process of coming out and have gone through my “second puberty” with HRT. I connect with the person I see in the mirror when I look into it every morning.

It took a lot of relearning and reprogramming, but I eventually found myself. **I think it’s important to also note that while I had to learn how to interact and love my own body, I also had to learn how this body interacts with the bodies of others.** There was a lot of navigating in relearning how this body felt comfortable receiving and giving pleasure. It took me a long time to understand the types of intimacy this body was capable of. I for many years had swings of being physically incapable of sharing intimacies such as sex with another person because I didn’t associate with my body – and if I didn’t associate with my body how could I then allow it to feel physical closeness, passion, or pleasure? It’s hard to enjoy sex when you’re in months-long dissociative episodes and trying to deny any part of your physicality.

I don’t necessarily want to share the road I took to relearn the pleasures of sex, though. Even for an over-sharing author like myself, there are some explorations that are meant to only be experienced by partners or diaries.

What I want to talk about today is recontextualizing my own sexual history in a way that makes sense to my trans body now.

When you come out as trans, history of self becomes a fickle beast. Sharing memories becomes wordplay as you try to rewrite your time in the closet. I have a lot of little girl’s memories. I have a lot of growing woman’s memories. I’m not ashamed of them and I’m as grateful for the knowledge and strength growing up as a woman gave me as I am for the knowledge and strength coming out and existing as trans continues to give me.

It does make looking back complicated, though.

Let me try to explain. **Every trans person identifies themselves in their history in different ways that are individually comfortable.** For many trans folk, they erase the traces of their incorrect gender by retroactively applying their correct gender to their history. For example; If someone always saw herself as a woman, all of her memories refer to her as such. She shares her stories from her perspective as woman and requires others around her to do so as well, righting any wrongs history blighted her with. Some folk create a definitive line between the then and now – blatantly speaking about their past self as someone who did exist but does no longer. They have become a new person – the one they have always wanted to be – but to do so has had to essentially kill off their old self. They refer to the person that they were before they came out like they are a distant relative they are remembering – someone that maybe did exist as boy or girl at that time – but why would that matter if they’re no longer with us? Others are comfortable referring to history with whatever pronouns or gender they were assigned at birth without any discomfort.

For me – and for certainly many others – it feels a little more complicated. I often find myself erasing any gendered markers from my memories. I don’t necessarily feel a want or need to rewrite my male identity into my past. There are so many moments that, paradoxically enough, I feel deeply tied to my brief 22-year stint with womanhood. My old gender identity is integral to some of my memories while I wish it could be erased from others. I’m still navigating how to relate to my own past because right now it seems to exist with deciduousness.

My sexual history is not excluded from this process.

I’ve always had a weird connection with my own body when it comes to sex. When I look back on the sex I’ve had knowing now that I’m trans, everything starts to make a little more sense. However, like everything else, that means making sense of my sexual history the same way I’ve had to make sense of the rest of my pre-transition journey.

I’ve only had one partner since being trans and on hormones and that is my fiancé. I am sure they wouldn’t want

me to go into our sex lives here – so I’ll just leave it at this: **sex with another trans person becomes more of an exploration than a maze.** Doors are opened and the rules are fast and loose because both people understand the intricacies of dysphoria and the importance of comfort. This is not to say that sex between a cis person and a trans person can’t also be a journey, but there is a baseline understanding that creates a strong foundation for communicating even the most ephemeral of feelings, insecurities and wants when both people have had similar insecurities.

Two of my sexual partners have also grown up to be trans. Sex with both of them was very different. My first ever sexual partner led me on adventurous journeys that, while I was sometimes nervous to participate in, also reveled in. We were incredibly young and I look back on this sex categorizing it only as “the first time” phase. We were wild and reckless and passionate and inexperienced. We thought we were cool and mature (we most certainly were not – one of our songs was, quite unironically – “Your Body Is A Wonderland”). It was with them that I saw a penis for the first time. We were hanging out with a friend of theirs who was a gay cis man and he showed it to us. Something about that made sense to me – I felt like I was partaking in a gay gaze. It solidified my own thoughts about men and about my own relationship to my attraction with men. My first partner and I both had no clue we were trans back then but our sex was a prequel and foundation to understanding what sex was. I don’t look back and see a young girl exploring sex for the first time – **I see two people making waves in each other’s lives and focusing more on the queer aspects of our relationships than any gendered ones.**

The last partner I had before I met my fiancé and I had admittedly very bad sex. However, it wasn’t long before we broke up that we both came out as trans. One of our last conversations was about exploring new pronouns. Dysphoria had clearly taken a toll on both of our abilities to communicate or understand pleasure in the context of our relationship. We wanted different things because, in a lot of ways, I think we both wanted pleasure but were unsure how to navigate it because of a disconnect from our bodies. I realize I’m projecting things onto my ex right now – and perhaps I shouldn’t. I have no clue what was running through their head the same time I was having moments of dysphoria that disconnected myself from my body so badly I wanted to swear off sex altogether. (This is to say please, take anything I say that doesn’t have to do directly with my own experience with a compassionate grain of salt.) Part of me, at the time, was ashamed that I couldn’t enjoy the sex we had. I wanted to revel in the queerness of our sex but something never sat quite right... Looking back, it’s very clear that I was simply deeply in denial about my own trans-ness and my body had stopped feeling like my own so I didn’t have any want to provide it with pleasure.

I’ve had sex with two straight cis men. The first one I was deeply hesitant to let touch me. We were young and I was wary of him because up until then I had only had my one “gay” experience when it came to a man’s body. This man clearly and definitely saw me as a woman and wanted to have sex in a way that defined me as such. I remember not being able to make eye contact or look at myself when we engaged in any type of intimacy. Even kissing felt wrong. **Now that I have an understanding of gender dysphoria and have learned how to love my body, I understand that I didn’t want to make moves with this man because I was uncomfortable with how intrinsic “womanhood” was to our relationship.**

The other straight man I had sex with was a long term partner who, once time cleared up the details of our tumultuous relationship, I realized was an abusive one. Our sex was fun and wild at the beginning of our time together, but there were long stints of time where I was unable to have any sex at all. I had no urge or craving for it. For years after this relationship, I felt ashamed of my low libido. I considered myself a sexual person and these times made me feel like I couldn’t claim that for myself. I mean, I understand now that that’s wrong for a myriad of reasons. There was a lot of shame being placed on my body for a lot of reasons that extended beyond body dysphoria. Therefore, I was not as receptive to the messages my brain was trying to send me.

Nevertheless, I consider sex with this partner an eye-opening experience. **For me, sex with him wasn’t straight sex – it was closeted sex.** When we would have sex, I would imagine sex with men or imagine myself as a man. I could not open my eyes during sex – it would ruin my fantasy. I felt dirty because of this for so long. I was not at all uncomfortable at the idea of having sex with a man – that was exciting to me. But... I only wanted to have sex with men in a “gay” way. At the time such a thought made my head spin and made me feel like I might not be right in the head. I didn’t want to fetishize gay men and I also “was a girl” so I was unsure as to where these weirdly specific urges were coming from. Fortunately, this is an ironic phenomenon that I’m now cognizant enough to laugh at. **I look back at sex with this man as my first dabbles in experiencing gay sex – sex related to and awkwardly trying to encompass my gender identity.**

I’m happy to say that – looking back – none of the sex I’ve had with my very queer body was ever really “straight”. Now, this is important to me because of how I understand my own body and interactions. Reneging on my own moments of “straightness” is personally powerful but for someone else proudly exclaiming old

flames they used to have as “straight” might be uplifting. **Understanding your own history is an individual and potent process.**

If this made you uncomfortable to read – I’m sorry. Sex is an important part of a lot of people’s lives. The way we interact with sexuality becomes a part of the vocabulary explaining who we are; even if that interaction for some people is not wanting to have or participate in sex at all. While I am proudly bisexual and proudly trans, my sexuality and my gender are two distinct things that sometimes converge on an intimate path as I make peace with my own body. **Sex is what my body does. Gender is who my body becomes.** They both need me to be in tune with what I want and who I am to ensure I have a safe and pleasurable experience with an intimate partner.

What is my purpose with this? Perhaps I am encouraging you to look back on your intimacies and understand how to recontextualize them. Perhaps I am also asking you to forgive yourself (or a partner) for any mistakes you (or they) made as you navigated this world in a body that wasn’t fully realized to you yet. **There is power in taking control over your own narrative** – and that encompasses your past. It can encompass moments in the dark, in the bed – your firsts in both your beginner’s body and your recontextualized one.



BODY COUNT

WRITTEN BY: OLIVIA KINGERY

by Jessie Reyez playing in the background:

I can count on one hand the people I have loved
but not the people who have made me cum.

And by the people I mean two besides myself
because that's a given, right? I can't count

the lines in my mother's frown when I comment
on my ex-girlfriend's laugh but she doesn't count

because there is no connection between female
and female that cannot be solved by a male in the middle.

And in my heart of hearts, I am counting down the days
until I meet the girl who can match my body count,

bodies counted, time embodied until we got to here,
counting on each other, the cum-

ulative body count, lover count, choice count,
the melody between everything in the air.

QUEERTURE

WRITTEN BY: JAMES PENHA

Elisa fell for the Amphibian
Man in *The Shape of Water*
(and so did Giles) (and so did I)
but I recalled his archetype—
ancestor maybe—for whom
I had puppy—or guppy—love
in the 50's: Gill-Man, *The Creature
from the Black Lagoon*, buff-shafted
and with that lurking head of his,
a walking, swimming, naked prickly
hominid who made the other Dicks—
Denning and Carlson—shirtlessly pale
in comparison, green with envy: cold-
blooded Penis-Man was hot. At seven,
warmed and bothered by darkly brawny
Perry Lopez playing Tomas the half-naked
native guide who screamed from his bed
when Gill-Man approached and did him
in, I was bereft without Tomas before
bonding again with The Creature
who wanted love more than fight,
who wanted to be left to be himself,
a Kong in amphibian's clothing, not
a queer oddity to be hated and hunted
by pasty-chested Dicks lost in his jungle.

THE HARPOONER

WRITTEN BY: JAMES PENHA

an erasure poem
derived from Chapters 3 and 4
of *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville

The more I thought of sleeping with him, I began to twitch all over. Suppose now, he should tumble upon me? I lay perfectly still. The stranger entered and placed his candle a good way off. Such a face! dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck with blackish squares tattooed: a man in any sort of skin.

He, undressing, showed his chest and arms, his back. Still more, his legs were marked, as if dark green frogs were running up trunks of young palms. I quaked. The light extinguished, and this wild cannibal sprang into bed with me. I sang out, I could not help it now; and giving a sudden grunt he began feeling me. I opened, I felt a shock through my frame; nothing seen, and nothing heard; a supernatural hand placed in mine.

Upon waking next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. I had been his wife.

Queequeg hugging me. My sensations strange feeling Queequeg's pagan arm thrown round me. At length all the past night's events recurred, one by one, and I alive to unlock his bridegroom clasp—yet, he hugged me tightly, as naught but death should part us. I strove to rouse him—'Queequeg!'—wake!' Wriggling, hugging in that matrimonial sort of style, I succeeded in extracting a grunt; and presently, he drew back his arm, and sat up in bed, stiff as a pikestaff, looking at me. Thinks I, Queequeg, this is a very overture; I begged him as well as I could. He complied, and then proceeded, his harpoon like a marshal's baton.

MOMA, DAD, ME, AND MATISSE

WRITTEN BY: JAMES PENHA

“Matisse Picasso,” which has come to the Museum of Modern Art’s temporary home, in Queens, after triumphant appearances in Paris and London, is a marvelous exhibition with a frail hook.

--Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*

My father was philistine purely
certain ballet dancers were fags,
setting was a plot by literary show-offs to ruin a good story,
poets were fags,
Republicans were good for business,
Liberace and Rock Hudson were fags,
killing deer was sporting, and
painting was what we did to the house even under
the mirrors, stuffed heads, and velvet landscapes that didn’t know a white
from an off-white.

He’d moved up America’s ladder
welding battleships in the forties,
trucking potatoes in the fifties,
extruding aluminum patio furniture in the sixties,
and purchasing the raw materials for Swingline staples in the seventies.

I visited his office once in the plant
on an eponymous Skillman Avenue
in Long Island City.

(I had to persuade him that his wife wasn’t a whiner
but in need of a shrink.)

A bow tie accompanying his Haband knit
struck me as sadly genteel,
but we had other things to discuss.

As we always did. I had a tour of how staples were made
and boxed by tough machines and tougher men.

We lunched at an Astoria pizzeria where he’d once let his target pistol appear
beneath the knit to scrounge a better deal.

We shared a seventies pizza at fifties prices.

No toppings; mushrooms were for fags.

My father went out of business ‘round
the same time as Swingline.

Now I read how the plant is a museum
with Matisse and Picasso hanging out where
my father did.

What wears the wall nearest my father’s desk,
I wonder: harlequins or whores, nudes or bulls?
I hope it’s “The Piano Lesson”--that lonely little boy in
a world of sharps and curlicues,
sex in the corner, time on the move,
a faceless matron forlorn in the background,
no father in sight
but the boy keeps an eye
on the music.

“MOMA, Dad, Me, and Matisse.” Lunarosity March 2004: < <http://www.zianet.com/lunarosity/penha.html> >.

NICK CARRAWAY OUT IN THREE

WRITTEN BY: JAMES PENHA

I

Nick in Love

after *The Great Gatsby* chapter 1

He smiled
understandingly—
he understood
and he smiled
one of those rare smiles
with a quality,
a quality of eternal,
I don't know,
reassurance in it.
He saw me; he understood me;
he reassured me that it,
that I, was
all right to have dreamed
of what might
come across once
in life. And he did.
He looked around and faced
the whole external world for an instant,
and then concentrated on me
with an irresistible prejudice
in my favor. That smile: it
understood me just as far as I dared
to be understood, believed in me
as I would like
to believe in myself,
and assured me that he had
precisely the impression that
then at least
I hoped to convey.

II

Nick in Heat

after *The Great Gatsby* chapter 2

The elevator boy dressed soon after coming
inside Nick. “The super’ll can me humming
the funeral march if he sees that ‘out of order’
sign I left outside the shaft.” He was drumming
his fingers on the nightstand waiting to be paid
but McKee’s Leica hadn’t yet been made
the receptacle of Nick’s pleasure since the boy’s
lever engaged eagerly, but its rapidity dismayed.
When Nick had told McKee he’d “be glad,”
he’d turned to talk directly to the lad
who’d rubbed his finger tips to deal
with McKee whose C-note was judged “not bad.”
McKee promised to document the action from behind

or otherwise facelessly but Nick had to remind
the photog of his promise though the boy didn't seem to care
who was watching what as long (or short) as he could grind.
After the shot was shot and the boy had left,
McKee finally disrobed into his sheets and Nick bereft
and juxtaposed clambered out of bed and dressed
for a departure designed to be definitive if not deft.

III Nick in Retrospect

after *The Great Gatsby* Chapter 9

And as I sat there
brooding on the old,
unknown world, I thought
of my wonder when I first saw him
smile
at me who had come
to this blue lawn,
and my dream seemed
so close
that I could hardly fail to grasp it.
I did not know that it was already
behind me;
I believed in the smile,
the orgasmic future
that year by year
recedes before me.
It eluded us then,
but that's no matter—
to-morrow we will run
faster,
stretch out our arms
farther . . .
And one fine morning—

TAMING CURLS

WRITTEN BY: RANDY SANTANA HIDALGO

As if you were pulling reins,
you yanked the knots of my hair.
“I just want you to look good,”
you’d explain when confronted
about all the ways it hurt.

Through this act of careless care,
guised as genuine concern,
you attempted straightening
all the tangles in my hair.

But, dear mother, you forgot
some curls just can’t be made straight.

OR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
RLY HILLS BIRTHOU





18 
NORTHE
UNI



“WE ARE ALL BECOMING A GAMBLE” – REMEMBERING PULSE & THE QUEER HISTORY OF MOURNING

WRITTEN BY: RAINE GRAYSON

There are so many days of my life I'm thankful I journal.

There are days, however, that I wish I could forget. I wish I could tear the pages out and burn them. I wish when I burned them, the memory would burn with them and when the fire is put out I could dump the ashes and let them wisp away into non-existence.

I have tried to write about the June 12th, 2016 Pulse Orlando Night Club shooting for two years. Every year I have fallen short. I have tried to incorporate the tragedy into the plays I write, but it feels exploitive so I stop. I try to write poetry for my 49 killed, 53 wounded brothers and sisters, but I don't know how to speak to them so I stop. I try to post tributes on the anniversaries of the events, but I don't know what to say when the world is still as unsafe as it was that day so I backspace, backspace, backspace, until eventually I am silent for another year.

I recently stumbled upon the journal entry I wrote on the day of Orlando, and then another one in a diner a day or so after – scrawled after pages of inconsequential To-Do lists, appointment reminders, and doodles as if to concrete how impossible such a mass tragedy seemed.

The only way for me to jump into writing about that day is to start by transcribing my own words from those journals – to remember that, as a writer, there are always words and perhaps those words have power:

June 12th, 2016

The day of the Orlando shooting.

I don't know what to say. I have no clue how to write or respond to what has happened in my lifetime.

I know it could beans of us. I know that at any time any of us could be lost.

I vow to give up on petty infighting and love the people in my life – from all walks.

We have all done wrong, but we must hold tight to each other and fight another day.

There's something incredible about public spaces that are split down the middle. I'm in a diner N.J. Right now Fox News is playing Trump talking to Bill O'Reilly. Someone who is eating in here supports Trump. I can tell by the sticker on their car outside . I feel unsafe – and because of that I'm forced to hold my head high and look forward. In my diners at home – I can do whatever the glittery hell I want. But you never know.

You can never know if a bar will be safe or not. You can never tell if a diner, a store, someone's parents will be safe.

Public life is a necessary gamble.

Social media has become part of this public web of unsafety-safety.

We are all becoming a gamble.

The day of the shooting, I was at work. Bustling hard around my little cafe, I had no connection to the outside world and my mostly conservative clientele gave me no clue during my 7 hour shift. It was the day of the Tony Awards – I was dreaming about what snacks I would make for the viewing party for me and my friends. The minute I got out of work, it all flooded in. I sat in my car in disbelief – drove home in disbelief – sat on my couch in silence in disbelief – showered and sobbed.

I learned that a vigil would be held in a small local park. I flip-flopped between going or not at first – I was afraid to be surrounded by so much sadness – but I eventually cancelled on my Tony viewing and headed down. My then long-distance partner, now the fiancé who I live with, drove nearly three hours to attend with me.

I don't remember exactly how many people attended, but there were over 100 that came and went and at least 50 or 60 people at the sight at all times. People had created a heart out of tea lights around a small printed paper that read a memorandum for the victims. Flowers were laid around the site and people stood huddled together in the wind, holding their candles and their loved ones close. I knew almost everyone. I remember at one point looking up and counting 49 heads at random – those were the amount of friends I would have lost. The number felt impossible.

The night was silent except for crying and howling wind. The air was too heavy and when people tried to smile

or crack a joke to help cut the darkness, no one could bring themselves to find the joy. I hugged people I hadn't spoken to in years. I hugged everybody that showed up. Every once and awhile, someone would burst out in tears and the masses would swoop in to comfort them. I was greeting someone who had just arrived and saw out of the corner of my eye my partner crumple, then disappear in a mass of support. We were literally holding each other up. In times of crisis, I try to put myself on the frontline and do everything I could do help. There was nothing to do – I kept searching and searching to help hand out candles, get people safely to their cars, offer emotional support – but we all were just one mass of people who didn't know what to do but stand together as a community and keep the candles lit.

When I look back on the night of the vigil, I feel connections between that moment and the queer history of mourning. I think about Marsha P. Johnson's vigil – everyone who had known her marking where her body had been dragged out of the Hudson River with empty liquor bottles and candles, filling the inside with flowers and branches of evergreen over a handmade memorandum poster much like the one used during our vigil. Randy Wicker, videotaping as street youth remembered Marsha with stories in a way we were unable to at our vigil – because there were too many people it felt so hard to focus on any one life.

When I look back on the night of the vigil, I think about ACT UP's Ashes Action in 1992 during the AIDS crisis. How the ashes of those who were neglected by the government and died of AIDs have fertilized the white house lawn because people couldn't handle candles and vigils anymore. I think about the immensity of the AIDS quilt. How my community tried to make beauty in memorandum and also tried to make change, with tears in their eyes and loss in their hearts.

When I look back at the night of the vigil, I think about the seven burned during Upstairs Lounge fire that police refused to call arson, the five dead after a bomb was detonated in the lesbian nightclub Other Side Lounge, how someone poured gasoline into a stairwell of Capital Hill Night Club in order to set ablaze everyone inside during a New Years party. I think about all the queers that have been gunned down and beaten to death by police.

When I look back at the night of the vigil, I think about how many shooting have happened since. I think about the threatening letters left at the houses of my local trans sisters in a town that is known for being liberal. I think about how I am afraid to apply for jobs in my new hometown because there is a confederate flag hanging on a house down the street from me and someone in the neighborhood mows his lawn with a handgun in his holster and if I have suffered so many atrocious assaults for my transgender body and soul in the liberal town I just moved from – how much worse would it be here? I think about how badly I do not want to get shot and how badly I do not want the ones I love to get shot, but I know it is only a matter of time and until then I am just one of the lucky ones. I think about how I do not want to be in public because being in public at all means I am open for attack. I think about how I've come to terms with being afraid every time I am celebrating or proud. I think about how the average life expectancy of a trans woman of color is 35 years.

I think about how to be queer is to be in a constant state of mourning and to never get too comfortable because soon there will be another wave of death. To be queer is to constantly be on the outskirts or the in the middle of an epidemic of death. To be queer is to know death personally.

To the victims of the Pulse Orlando shooting,
rest in peace and rest in power.

They should not have been, but your spirits will always be with me.

Stanley Almodovar III, 23 years old

Amanda L. Alvear, 25 years old

Oscar A. Aracena Montero, 26 years old

Rodolfo Ayala Ayala, 33 years old

Antonio Davon Brown, 29 years old

Darryl Roman Burt II, 29 years old

Angel Candelario-Padro, 28 years old

Juan Chavez Martinez, 25 years old

Luis Daniel Conde, 39 years old

Cory James Connell, 21 years old

Tevin Eugene Crosby, 25 years old

Deonka Deidra Drayton, 32 years old

Simón Adrian Carrillo Fernández, 31 years old

Leroy Valentin Fernandez, 25 years old

Mercedez Marisol Flores, 26 years old

Peter Ommy Gonzalez Cruz, 22 years old

Juan Ramon Guerrero, 22 years old
Paul Terrell Henry, 41 years old
Frank Hernandez, 27 years old
Miguel Angel Honorato, 30 years old
Javier Jorge Reyes, 40 years old
Jason Benjamin Josaphat, 19 years old
Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, 30 years old
Anthony Luis Laureano Disla, 25 years old
Christopher Andrew Leinonen, 32 years old
Alejandro Barrios Martinez, 21 years old
Brenda Marquez McCool, 49 years old
Gilberto R. Silva Menendez, 25 years old
Kimberly Jean Morris, 37 years old
Akyra Monet Murray, 18 years old
Luis Omar Ocasio Capo, 20 years old
Geraldo A. Ortiz Jimenez, 25 years old
Eric Ivan Ortiz-Rivera, 36 years old
Joel Rayon Paniagua, 32 years old
Jean Carlos Mendez Perez, 35 years old
Enrique L. Rios, Jr., 25 years old
Jean Carlos Nieves Rodríguez, 27 years old
Xavier Emmanuel Serrano-Rosado, 35 years old
Christopher Joseph Sanfeliz, 24 years old
Yilmary Rodríguez Solivan, 24 years old
Edward Sotomayor Jr., 34 years old
Shane Evan Tomlinson, 33 years old
Martin Benitez Torres, 33 years old
Jonathan A. Camuy Vega, 24 years old
Juan Pablo Rivera Velázquez, 37 years old
Luis Sergio Vielma, 22 years old
Franky Jimmy DeJesus Velázquez, 50 years old
Luis Daniel Wilson-Leon, 37 years old
Jerald Arthur Wright, 31 years old

DANCING WITH THE WOMEN IN THE MOON

WRITTEN BY: CAROLYN MARTIN

Feminine? Never felt the feel.

She chews her fingernails and spits out
garden dirt. *Guess I'll die curious*
in dungarees and army boots.

She leans against the wood-worn fence
– nonchalant, disinterested – until
the Wind, gathering its nerve, strips
gravity and surfs her up a Douglas fir.

From trunk to crown, juncos, sparrows, jays
escape and clear her way through
moon-grey clouds to Mothers, Maidens,
Crones dancing on lava plains.

Let it out, she hears their song.
In circles nothing hides. She watches hard
– magnetized by breasts, hips, kohled eyes
inviting her to join their nakedness.

Someone grabs her hand, strokes her face.
Someone rouses flush-on-flesh. No shame
or blush. No retreat from who they are –
harems on the moon's nearside.

Have I been here before? she shouts
in ecstasy.

They wrap her in one bold embrace.
Let it out! She dances hard, oblivious
of the earth-bound Wind spying
through the clouds.

Previously published in Carolyn Martin, *The Way a Woman Knows* (Portland, OR: The Poetry Box, 2015)

ON POMPANO BEACH AFTER MY FATHER'S FUNERAL

WRITTEN BY: CAROLYN MARTIN

I'm glad he never knew, my mother says
as we walk the storm-sloped shore, precarious
with angry clouds and wind. My father's gone
and we're deflecting grief with talk
deeper than weather in her Florida,
gardens in my Oregon.

She tells me she's relieved I grew into myself
and never let him know. When all my mates
were feminine, she says she understood
and kept her peace.

*Your daughter's stubborn, bright, successful
on her own. Why bother with a man?*
She fed my father facts without excuse.
It worked for years, she tells me now,
and she's comforted.

I remind her of Sunday afternoons
when we owned the baseball field. He'd pepper
shots to older guys and I'd snag tosses
home, lobbing them so he could strike again.

I tell her how I loved a cowhide's feel,
my Yankees cap, the smell of leather
in summer heat. And how, at twelve, I toughed
it out when hardballs bruised and stung.
My three sons, he loved to joke
about two boys and me.

Thank God, he never knew, she intervenes
and grabs my arm. The shifting sand unsteadies her.
I stop her almost-fall and tell her how I'm hurt.
Would it have been so bad? my voice on edge.

Her light blue eyes avoid my green. My father,
her best friend, is dead and here we are, slipping
toward that ancient mother/daughter thing
about who owns what's right.

I hold her while she knocks sand from her shoes
and motions toward the car. But I won't let
it slide. *What if he knew?* I press.
Would that have been so hard?

We stop where sidewalk meets the beach,
stubborn in our stance, awkward in our pain.
I'm holding on until her voice unsteadies me.
You'd lose his love, she claims with certainty.

Without remorse, without regret
my mother, his best friend, shatters me
with what I can't conceive. She pulls away
before my voice can find its words
and stinging winds hit my face.

Previously published in *The Wild Ones*.

BURNT OUT CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

WRITTEN BY: AUSTIN SHAY

My arms shake and my breath is out of time,
staccato in and out puffs as I come down
slowly from my high. I feel the aftershocks
like burning out Christmas lights,
tiny shocks of electricity
contained within a transparent glass,
flashes of white light fading
into a peaceful silence.



A LIST FOR PROOF

WRITTEN BY: DAWN-HUNTER STROBEL

When I was born, it was a surprise that I was a girl. I sat like a boy in the womb and when my aunt dangled a ring tied to a string in front of my mother's belly, when it finally stopped turning, it pointed perpendicular to her. That meant I was a boy, no doubt. So my parents settled happily on one name and came up with no other alternatives. Then when I finally came, after 47 hours of fighting it, only screaming once I reached my mother's chest, they couldn't name me Benjamin any longer. It was 7:09 AM and the sun was rising, so Dawn. A new beginning. Something different than what they had expected.

I think about Benjamin sometimes. I think that perhaps partway through the birth canal, he became prematurely self aware, knew once he breathed air, once he was seen, he would have to be me. I think that is why he fought so long against that birthday morning light.

Later, a psychic would tell my father that he had two daughters. And he would nod. Then she would say, "I see a son as well" and he would shake his head.

Letter to Father, age 5

ihav a beeoodee in sid the wrl in mi tims for uoo futhrs and uoo
hooort

Journal, age 15:

Daddy's Pancake Recipe

1)

"In almost every encounter, human beings produce gender, behaving in the ways they heard were appropriate for their gender status, or resisting or rebelling against these norms." - Judith Lorber

When I was in elementary school, I used to bite and pinch people when they didn't do what I told them to. I wore shirts that said "you aren't the boss of me", wanted short short hair like the boys, and read so many books, my AR points posted outside the classroom door reached the ceiling. I loved that AR points chart. It showed me what was and what was not. I knew exactly where I stood, I knew precisely that I was 60 points ahead of Raymond Seal, and that made me the smartest in the class. What I didn't like was when people didn't seem to understand the chart. That's when I had to pinch them. See? It's all here in black and white; I'm the smartest so you listen to me.

My dad says it was leadership in me that I didn't know how to harness yet. I don't know why he saw violence and translated it to leadership. I don't know what that says about him, about me.

But I don't like to think about that because that doesn't fit on a chart or on a list, it isn't one thing or the other, and I don't like it when things aren't one thing or another.

"We have claimed that a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does. And does recurrently.. gender [is] a routine, a methodical and recurring accomplishment." -West and Zimmerman

Journal, age unknown
DC Trip Packing List

- shampoo/conditioner
- facewash
- baby oil
- q-tips
- clothes

Journal, age unknown
Summer List

- piano books
- baby oil
- clothes (various)
- makeup
- nail polish
- jewelry
- pads

Journal, age 16
Spring Break Packing List

- lacey underwear & bra
- voice lessons music
- charger
- chapstick
- at least 1 nice dress
- sweats & 3 pairs of pants

Journal, age unknown
Yellowstone Trip Packing List

- chapstick
- scrunchies
- q-tips
- pads
- soap
- socks

Natalie was my first friend. She attended my father's church and once when we were praying in her room, I whispered to her, parading as the voice of God, and told her she'd get a puppy. Was that the same day that we were caught in my closet kissing each others' undeveloped breasts? It didn't seem important at the time.

Lars was my second friend. I rolled around in the mud with him, his hair was the same tone of red as my mother's. He had more freckle than face except for those times when eczema broke out in little splotches on his cheeks. I loved to point out when his cheeks got those little flakey bits. I liked pointing out imperfections. I remember his hands were calloused and chapped, so I in turn would forego lotion for weeks, trying for the same effect. I remember his penis. It was the first I ever saw. I was over at his house for a play date and it was time for me to go but he was taking too long to change so I yelled at him to come out right now and say bye to me! And he did, but entirely naked.

Journal, age 16
Theories

1. Pain is inevitable in life, what you do with your pain determines who you are.
2. Every action a human makes is either an expression of love, or a call for love.
3. The words you keep and the words you cut out are equally valuable.

Journal, Age 19
Clusterfuck of a Genderfuck.

The pieces of my life do not fit together but I remember my life is a patchwork. Not ill fitted, but patchwork nonetheless.

I wonder what this says about wholeness.

When I look at my features one by one, only the roundness of my cheeks comes from my mother's side. I have my father's wide-nostril nose and my father's square jaw and my father's thick wavy hair, and my father's tangleable skin, and my father's itchy back, I remember when my mother looked at me and said "I don't know if you inherited mine and your father's libido" and I didn't know how to tell her of course I did don't you know I am my father isn't that why we fight so often isn't that what you always tell me you're acting like your father and my father's skinny frame, and my father's clefted chin and my father's crooked teeth.

Journal, age 19

Things are shifting in my soul.
Pieces of myself are coming undone – shaking loose – rearranging.
I know that I love. I know this – I know this well.

Journal, age 20

I am a verbal processor like my father.
I am depressive like my father.
I am meditative like my father.
I am good with people like my father.
I have an itchy scalp like my father.
I love the earth like my father.
I walk around campus barefoot like my father.
I think highly of myself like my father.
I am goofy like my father.

My dad has this song he wrote for me when I was born I love you like wind on the waters I've only seen him cry, like really cry, twice I love you like sun on the mountains once was in the Tetons I love you like stars in the heavens we parked by a lake and sat on rocks far away from each other darling I love you when I started to get hungry I walked over to him and saw he was crying, just from the beauty of it I love you like trees in the forest he was so taken by the majesty of the mountains, by the surface of the lake, that he cried I love you like sand on the seashore but the first time I saw him cry was after my mother said she was divorcing him I love you like fish in the ocean he gave me a stuffed bear to keep at her house to remind me of him darling I love you he cried as gave me the bear, held me and sang me his song darling I love you. After he cried, I sat. Neither healed nor broken, neither understanding or not understanding, not one thing or another, neither my mother or my father yet and already being torn between the two of them.

I have a list of love poems to boys:

To Tyler
That stupid boy who calls himself a poet I've been fucking
better have written poems about my body by now.

To the Boy I Fell in Love with, after He Glanced at Me with Light in his Eyes, Alone at the Art Museum, Taking

Pictures of the Art, Creating Art from Art
I wish you had taken pictures of me.

To Max

To Guthrie

To The Boy Who Saw I was Carrying a Book of Rilke and Recited One of His Poems from Memory

To Matt

To All the Stupid Boys

To Dane

To Oliver

To Oliver

I did not know
oh God,
I did not know
that they were all love poems to myself.
Poems to the boy in myself,
The boy I did not see
so I searched for him in others.

“To say that gender is performative is to mean that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman.” – Judith Butler

A moment: Me, donning a baseball cap. A woman, “you’re such a pretty girl but you put on that baseball cap and you look like a little boy!”

A moment: At the airport, having to go through the scanner twice because they scan me as male the first time.

A moment: At a party, me and another genderqueer friend are inadvertently blocking a doorway. A man walks by, says, “excuse me gentlemen.” Euphoria.

A moment: Me, telling my mother I am her son . My mother, “I accept your truth but you’re still my daughter.”
The sky raining so I do not have to.

A moment(s): Me, all those times growing up, looking in the reflection, wondering at how it is I exist at all, wondering at what my face would look like were I a boy. Thinking it only curiosity.

A moment: In the women’s bathroom on the 2nd floor of my residence hall waiting for the blood from my torn hymen to stop flowing. Shivering. Coming up with something to tell the boy who thought I’d had sex before. Shivering. Gathering toilet paper to clean off his bloody penis. Winding toilet paper around my underwear for the blood that might still seep out. Shivering.

Later, both of us discovering our queerness. Me, wondering if my first sex being queer sex counts as proof.

“Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time.”- Judith Butler

Note in Phone, age 20

All that surrounds me
is this unraveling
This revelry I couldn't tell
you the first thing about myself

Except that each moment is love or it is not
But even this I do not know
love has nothing to do with me

Or it could have everything to do with
me me and these incessant you are holy's
these incessant everything is holy's

the universe's constant waking
stretching tired muscles
getting stronger by tearing
unraveling
incessantly

Journal Entry, age 6

Life is a crystal ball, always turning, smooth and glassy. But you can never quite grasp it.

Journal Entry, age 19

It is the changing of the seasons that I think on most often.
The fluster of the living, the clenching and wrenching of all that survives.

My father does not know about any of this. But I imagine when I tell him, it will be in his kitchen. It will be a Saturday morning like all those Saturday mornings when I was young. I will have woken up early so we could make pancakes together, his recipe. 1 cup of flour. Everything strewn about, yet somehow all in its place. 1 teaspoon baking powder. The used restaurant chopsticks in the silverware drawer he keeps to use as plant markers in his garden. ½ teaspoon salt. The entire cabinet dedicated to stacks on stacks of plates because six years ago, he and my stepmother couldn't decide if they would be having twenty guests over regularly or not and well all these dishes are so beautiful anyway so what the heck. 1 tablespoon sugar. Or the cabinet filled with teas I spent a day organizing. 2 eggs separated. Everything where it should be. 1 cup milk. Everything spilling from its place. 1 tablespoon oil. Everything my heart, my beating heart. 1 capful vanilla.

In 1985 John Searl popularized the concept within linguistics of speech acts. They are those things we say that become true by our saying them. Most famously used is, "I now pronounce you man and wife." Of all my lists and accomplishments, my routines and need for structure, for truth, for proof, I never thought all it would take is me saying it.

I HAVE A BEAUTY INSIDE THE WORLD IN MY TIME FOR YOU FATHERS AND YOU HEART

Listen dad, what is truthful will tremble. I am dough – stretching out to hold all that I can hold. And as it turns out, I contain multitudes. Each morning, I do not know who I am. I've looked for myself in every man I've known, and found myself, what of myself I can account for, in you.

I will tell him this, he will laugh, think of that psychic who said he had a son, and search through the classifieds to find her name.



NOT STRAIGHT AND NOT 'FULLY' QUEER: A BISEXUAL WOMAN'S BIND

WRITTEN BY: VICTORIA BROOKS

Being a bi-woman tends to mean often being both the oppressed and oppressor, welcome and unwelcome, at different moments during your life and by different communities. When you are in a relationship and out with a man, many will say that you receive straight-passing privilege, meaning you are perceived as part of the straight world and not marginalised because of your sexuality. At the same time though, you will never be accepted as truly part of the straight world, since you also have relationships with women.

Simultaneously, the straight community will attempt to erase your bisexuality, with remarks such as “oh but you are clearly not gay, since you live with a man.” Your occasional, or at least impermanent membership of this community is also an issue, since the straight world requires straightness in time too, and you must ‘commit’. Like many have found, particularly women, your lack of ability to ‘stay the course’ is a trigger for straight violence and ousting from the community. At this point, you turn toward the rest of the LGBTQ community for acceptance and find that bi-phobia is rife and your apparently ‘contaminated’ vagina is not welcome in all-women bars. In short, you are not straight enough, and you are not gay enough; forever you are caught between worlds.

Currently, people have a huge stake in their identity, finding there both the site of their oppression as well as their power. With identity, there is a passport to a whole community that may back you and stand alongside you because of your identity. By aligning with that community, you will also find harm and violence done to you by dominant communities who do not see you as valid, nor as deserving of the everyday rights, opportunities and privileges that they have because of their sexuality. With being part of the LGBTQ community comes the possibility for solidarity, and of course you would be entitled to it too as a bi-woman, since you are a fully-fledged member of that famous acronym LGBTQ; you are the ‘B’, after all.

Yet, some, if not most, of the time this theoretical identity as part of the LGBTQ community is precisely this: theoretical. Theoretically you are nestled as a mainstay within the very name of the community. Practically speaking though, your position as part of the centre of this community is undermined by your apparent lack of an identity and power of your own, and not just a position of ‘between-ness’. The main culprits of this are myths, fantasies and tired tropes associated with women’s sexuality. This toxic combination appears to be the very essence of bi-phobia and that which causes closure towards bi-persons in both the straight and LGBTQ communities.

In the straight world, the bi-girl is the ‘unicorn’ or the woman that will join a straight couple in bed for the perfect threesome (or, in classic straight contradictory style, she is simultaneously a threat to a straight couple as voracious and unpredictable). Bisexual women’s relationships with women are fetishized (even by their male partners, friends and acquaintances) as conforming with heterosexual fantasies, or being simply cuddly ‘BFF’ type relationships. Ask any bi-woman and you will find that they would have heard the question “why have you not made up your mind?”, “aren’t you just greedy?” or “why did it take you so long to come out?”, or perhaps even, “why have you not come out?”

But what can hurt the most, is the biphobia that is experienced from within our own community. Rejection from the lesbian community can be both subtle as well as vociferous, just as from within the straight community. Dirtiness, as I have alluded to above, is one of the most common tropes. There tends to be this idea that bi-women are continuously having sex with men; a strange echo of the stereotype associated with women by the straight community. Often this particularly intimate rejection can masquerade as a form of physical or sexual preference, with lesbian women saying they simply cannot sleep with a woman who has sex with men. Whilst sexual taste is of course a matter for the individual, the announcement of this in these terms powerfully and hurtfully reinforces the stereotype of the dirty bisexual Barbie.

Bi-women tend to be criticised from within the community as being ‘likely to end up straight’, or likely to leave their women partners for men. While indeed there may well be women who like to be promiscuous with men and with women, this is not a condition for rejecting bi-sexual women from the LGBTQ community, but rather a reason to stand alongside them in the name of the acceptance, love and support for which the LGBTQ community is generally known. Perhaps some bisexual women will ‘end up straight’, or ‘be straight’ within periods

of their lives, but rejecting someone from a community because of their 'lack of commitment' sounds curiously like a habit associated with the straight community.

This kind of reaction to bi-women is gatekeeping and it is violent. Misogyny from within the community is just as harmful and misogyny from the straight world. We have already seen the LGBTQ community criticised for its lack of inclusion, and indeed black bi-women are subject to misogynoir, meaning their experience is one of multiple oppression as bisexual women, as well as oppression due to their race.

In this month of Pride, I hope for a rejection by both the straight allyship and the LGTBQ community of these sexist and bi-phobic tropes, and a powerful surge of kindness and curiosity that advocates ethical and joyful sexuality for the whole community. Ethical and joyful sexuality means sexuality that is not constantly at risk of harm and exclusion due to myths and assumptions and needless gatekeeping. This also means recognising that sexual experiences are different for everyone and the joys and harm we experience are radically different to what we assume about one another and means that the power of identity can be held by the whole community.

THE EIMEAR MANIFESTO

WRITTEN BY: EIMEAR BOURKE

Intro. (Offstage – to myself, drunk, in a toilet cubicle)

What does love mean?
Heart's on sleeve
But don't know how to read the contents

You've given me a label in Japanese.

Old hat, old hat,
New girl. Same you

Why is it you love everyone you meet?
Why isn't it love til it's been sealed with a death kiss?

One.
In a bed at ten.
The room is red.

I think somewhere a ventricle is filling.
Temporarily. For blood will be drawn.

Two.
Cheek to cheek.
Sunlight seeping.

I conquer lips like a British man does landmasses. But yours are
to remain
Uncharted territory

Three.
“Come into my bunk bed”
What creepy words to type.
Can you break the fourth wall in poetry?
I'm breaking down my life.

Five, seven, nine. You could take up ten stanzas
All my heart.

There's nothing I can right on you. Full stop full stop full stop...

Four.
I know I don't like men.
But you're my best friend and maybe I'll like you.

Five.
Repeat stanza three
but substitute
a double bed and brown eyes.

Bedding besties is becoming an art-form.

Six.
I'm not sure you were ever my friend
Or that you merit inclusion in this manifesto

But here we are.

Conc. (Hungover in bed, alone, suffering from “the Fear”)

I don't deserve to live (x3)

I'm never drinking again.

Is Mizzonis open yet?

I need some soakage before tonight.

HIDDEN

WRITTEN BY: KARISSA WHITSON

A kiss
We cannot share
Love
We have to hide
Silent
We are supposed to sit
Instead
I choose to scream
'I love her'
But she does not respond
Terrified
She thinks I should have kept it
Hidden





EVERYTHING I WRITE IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, SOME ARE EVEN TRUE WRITTEN BY: KAY SHAMBLIN

I wasted my childhood pretending not to be gay.
My girlhood a wash of lavender, the sun

shining on me in tender slices. I remember how it felt to be
bruised, before all the flies collected in my spoiled-fruit stomach.

*Me and a girl, snowed in with my skin aching for the warmth of her.
Me and a girl, at the edge of a lake holding hands to bridge a gap.
Me and a girl, weaving strings of flowers trembling as I hold one out to her.*

The sun hot on the soft parts of my skull that never hardened
for protection. I reach in, rearrange the core of my brain, I wade

through my memories, pull them out of the holes that rot
my brain like an apple. I won't let the worms eat them this time.

*Me and a girl, behind an old cathedral, pressing my lips to her temple.
Me and a girl, alone in a basement buried by my deafening heartbeat.
Me and a girl, chest to chest with my skin peeled back like a grape.*

I asked her what all this meant, our eyes closed
she whispered *nothing*

THE LESBIAN TWELFTH NIGHT FANTASY

WRITTEN BY: KAY SHAMBLIN

Washed up on the beach, shore broken beneath
my body all bent knee and breeches, boyish
chest nearly bare beneath you, your lipstick
smudged on my cheekbone, making a mask
of my face. I have tasted the fruit of love and its juices
still drip from my half-open lips, my hard
heart near-vulgar in the dawn with your ring folded
between my fingers. Darling, my name is a hole
in my throat, stuck behind my teeth. I confess, I can't hide
this want but i'll wear it, pray with your picture
a shining jewel at my throat. The burn
of your longing sends a singe down the stitches
of my spine, the soft parts of your eyes
are a palm peeling back my half-sewn disguise.

STRAIGHT WHITE LACES

WRITTEN BY: DOUGLAS PAYNE

Coughing up blood on a La Cienega sidewalk,
I grasp a dove in my hand and squeeze; the sun
folding into a pinhole, thin beams smothered
by slates of fog like a body rolled in a Persian rug.

Passing through retching corridors of infected shade
I speckle these toilets red, one cracked bowl
and then the next, rising and crashing stall to stall,
how many paper bags have scabbed over
with laughter like mine?

A boy at the urinal stares through my bruises,
licks his lips and singses me with eyes of a jackal,
I stretch over the stain painted tiles and reach
my fingers through his straight white laces.

He turns on his toes and my bones, my rotted ribs
twist sick and wrong like a tiny ballerina falling
toward an emergency room.

Tread of his shoes on my tongue a tomb, unmoving.
The door barks closed behind him, sink drums
a national anthem, floor coated heavy with nicotine
and Zyklon B footprints.

The light dies on a timer.

HEMLOCK

WRITTEN BY: DOUGLAS PAYNE

We boys behind the chipped, white garage wall.
His Dad's stolen watch boiling his wrist,
its face mangled by many summers; ten years old
leaned over weeds on our knees in the sweet grass,
and leaves catch their breath for a brushfire.
We take each other in our mouths.

Our mouths bear traps that clutch a mystery.
Your brother running up the stairs, my mom
at the window. The rats creep through engine
oil, and leaves purse their lips.

He and I dying behind the white wall,
his knees pressed into stale soil, his eyes
like marbles near my fingertips.

The only thing I knew was nothing.
Not how to move or what sign to
shape my dry mouth into, but I
reveled in not knowing, in discovery

of what an unclasped snap meant,
in unraveling another boy's slacks.

My mother saying the word germ,
My grandmother speaking in starts
about hygiene, the illness that small
serpents carry in a boys' closed thighs.

I knew nothing more than what was told to me.

His father punching into my screen door:
"What did you teach my kid, faggot?"

The boy who taught me secrecy and pleasure
in one breath, a knowledge forced into his
body or even so dumb a lesson as his dad's hands
only across his face, only sometimes, always hard,
and his eyes ten years old searching for a crevice
through darkness after that bruise, a light.
He saw his mother's face in his father's thighs,
said, if I give up my body can somebody love me?

Hey, I said, what did
you do, germ,
To my kid?

I saw my friend years later, walking
down our old street, the dead gray treehouse
his dad built decayed, at war with pines.
He was outrunning a drug habit, the shake
In his shoulders told me as he hugged me.

The boy out the door still more
a boy of ten than eighteen, the white chipped paint fell
from the wall of the garage like a clasp through a wound.



DON'T RAIN ON MY PARADE

WRITTEN BY: ZACHARY BENAK

Judy Morrison outed me when I was five-years-old. As a Kindergarten teacher over two decades into her career, she was adept at observing problematic behaviors in children, then disciplining them as she saw fit. In 2002, I was the child being brought to a heel, as she noted my playground habits as cause for parental concern. “Zach only plays with girls,” Mrs. Morrison told my mom at my first parent-teacher conference. And in that moment, a woman who dressed like a gay icon, with gaudy floral patterns and bulky-buttoned sweater vests, was instead a gay opponent, exposing queer behavior that was especially abnormal for a boy at St. Gerald Catholic School in suburban Nebraska.

But Mrs. Morrison was telling the truth. I spent every recess in Kindergarten with my best friend, Claire, where we would pretend to be spies and peel paint off of a red basketball pole. I had play dates with other girls, where I was allowed to try on cheap lace dresses and chiffon scarves under the guise of playing Dress Up. I had no interest in flag football, and the only reason I played soccer was for the fun costume: neon shin guards and maroon knee-high socks. Perpetually short for my age and never not scrawny, I always lacked the physicality needed for sports and roughhousing. I much preferred to think or talk, especially when it came to all things related to celebrities and pop culture.

Somewhere between Kindergarten and second grade, around the same age that I was giggling with girls on the swing sets, I got in the habit of checking the mail every day, looking forward to the biweekly arrival of my mom’s People Magazine subscription. When I was at home during the summer, my trips across the street to the mailbox came multiple times a day, eagerness running high as I waited for the next magazine issue to arrive.

I’d march across the street in my suburban neighborhood, wave to the retirees mowing their emerald lawns, and stick my toes in the warm, squishy tar that filled the road’s cracks and became gooey under the dry sun. I’d complete this ritual by opening our rusting black mailbox, hoping to find Julia Roberts’ glossy face wedged between our cable bills. When the magazine did come, I would pore over its contents, reading up on Brangelina’s latest adoptions, or the death of Anna Nicole Smith. I loved glimpsing into the lives of these beautiful people, and learning about life’s most dramatic occurrences, like affairs and suicides and drug overdoses. My love for celebrities like Sandra Bullock and Halle Berry reflected my fascination with all things femme. Oscar Red Carpets and glamorous photo shoots hinted at the many secrets lurking behind femininity, sparking my boyhood interest in girlhood. What was the difference between a skirt and a skort? What intricate processes were required for braiding hair—something I couldn’t achieve with my blonde bowl cut? And what did girls do at sleepovers? These questions didn’t stem from curiosity regarding the opposite sex—they came from jealousy. I felt excluded from the feminine narrative that I wanted to be a part of, and my revolutionary and entirely unintentional efforts to break down these barriers resulted in negative criticism, and not just from Mrs. Morrison. “I don’t remember how I felt, so I must not have cared,” my mom texted me recently, after I asked her about

Mrs. Morrison’s remark. “But I do remember you being the only boy invited to some girl’s birthday party, and listening to one mom go on and on about you only playing with girls, and I did not like her implications.” I pictured my mother enjoying a late summer breeze on the back deck of the same home that I grew up in, slowly typing on her phone, furrowing her eyebrow behind her thin black bifocals, and recalling the speculation and commentary she endured within the Midwestern Catholic community that we had both distanced ourselves from in recent years. What was it really like for her, being the mother of a boy who was always unlike others?

“I never liked those women, anyway,” my mom concluded, instinctually defensive of her son, then and now.

A few years into my Catholic school boyhood came a spellbinding theatrical debut that put my detractors to shame.

“We will be performing a play at our First Reconciliation this year,” Mrs. Ackerman announced to my class a few weeks into second grade. “And Zach will be playing the lead role!”

She smiled at me, and I reciprocated with an undeniable thrill. Mrs. Ackerman was fresh-faced and tall, with blonde highlights in her otherwise dark brown hair. A far contrast from Mrs. Morrison, Mrs. Ackerman’s youthfulness and laidback demeanor made her a popular teacher amongst students. This casting decision was flattering, but also meant that she recognized my potential.

My only performance experience thus far had been in other church-affiliated activities, but I took these events very seriously. My first grade class narrated one week of Stations of the Cross the previous Lent, and I was assigned to narrate Station Six, “Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus.” I was enamored by Veronica’s bravery, pushing her way through a crowd of heckling men to clean the blood, dirt, and sweat off Jesus’s cheeks, and wipe the tears running from his eyes as he traversed toward crucifixion. Veronica was an independent thinker, sac-

rificing her name and her status to do the right thing. It was my duty to share her courageous story with every other student forced to cram into the school's musty chapel to witness the passion play, and I read my part with clear articulation, hoisting myself up onto the step stool and speaking directly into the lectern's microphone. Noticing my ardor for performing, my mom had offered to enroll me in a weeklong acting workshop at Omaha's Rose Theatre, but I had refused the idea, not yet confident enough to participate in such a sensational activity when the other boys around me were spending their summers on baseball fields. But with this role being plopped into my lap unexpectedly, I felt inspired to throw my soul into the performance.

The first sacrament received after Baptism, Reconciliation requires seven and eight-year-olds to confess their sins to a priest and seek absolution. The tradition requires memorization of prayers like the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Act of Contrition, learning about Adam and Eve's fumble in the jungle that caused original sin, and implores young Catholic minds to think about the power of God's forgiveness. Preparation occurred every day in our religion classes, between practicing our times tables in math and memorizing words for our spelling tests. First Reconciliation was an exciting step in the trajectory of Catholic identity.

My class would be performing *The Story of Zacchaeus*, with me playing the titular character. In a refreshing Biblical critique of capitalism, Zacchaeus is a tax collector in Jericho known for being a corrupt and greedy swindler. Understandably despised by his neighbors, the townsfolk are shocked when Jesus comes to visit and chooses to dine with Zacchaeus. Awed by the power of the Messiah, Zacchaeus decides to pay for his sins and donate his money back to the lowly in the name of redemption and forgiveness—a moral appropriate to learn in preparation for Reconciliation.

In the days before the performance, the rehearsal process revealed that I had room for improvement. We practiced in the school chapel, and Mrs. Ackerman gently ushered me to the center of the altar and positioned me to face the empty pews. I held my script and read the highlighted lines, enunciating the words with intention and making sure to look up and out toward the audience.

"Great job, Zach!" Mrs. Ackerman said. "But don't be afraid to use gestures and get super loud. The whole church will need to see and hear you!"

Despite the shift from second grade teacher to director, Mrs. Ackerman maintained kindness with her notes, and encouraged me to do my best. In second grade, I was still living in a sanctuary of naiveté, blissfully unaware of words like faggot and homo. But the differences that separated me from every other boy were still on my radar, thanks to Mrs. Morrison and older boys at school, who were quick to point out and mock my high-pitched voice. At such a young age, I was made aware that my voice did not sound like a boy's, but like a girl's, squeakier and more feminine than any male classmate's, and often accompanied by a hand on my hip or a limp wrist adjacent to my torso. Now, Mrs. Ackerman was insistent that I put myself on display, that I inhabit as much space as possible using the voice and the body with which I was starting to feel uncomfortable. There was no hiding behind a lectern like with my previous readings. I wasn't sure if I could rise to the occasion with so many eyes and ears focused on me, a person that had so many things wrong with him.

"You're going to be our best Zacchaeus," Mrs. Ackerman said from the pews.

"Thank you," I said, assured, and letting my emerging permanent teeth and overbite shine through with a shy grin.

The performance of the highly anticipated play took place at St. Gerald Church, a five-minute drive away and built 35 years after the original chapel attached to the school. The church was a grey brick building arched and angled with slants, giving it a modern look that other churches in the archdiocese lacked. Inside, a row of stained-glass windows sat just beneath the ceiling, each plate designed with fuchsias, navies, and golds. The ceiling appeared to be reinforced by massive slabs of wood that stretched across the entire building, adorned with thickset nails lodged in their corners. The image of these structures seemed to invoke the story of Noah's Ark, and I loved staring up at the caramel-colored ceiling during homilies, imagining that Noah himself had built this church under God's command, and that, should any storm or flood come barreling through Nebraska, the building would act as a sanctuary. We the sheeple would be safely shepherded to the same place where we prayed and praised and lauded the same God who punished those who failed to recognize His glory.

"Jesus is in town! I hope I get to meet him!" I exclaimed as Zacchaeus, standing just before the burgundy altar, and making sure that every consonant was reverberating back to me. It was early November and Daylight Saving had just ended, the darkness of night arriving sooner and sooner. The crowd of parents and siblings gathered cozily in the church, the warm lighting making the space perfect for a mid-evening nap. But as the star of the show, I felt energized and poised to recite my lines, letting my girly voice resonate without inhibition. I pantomimed a climbing motion by outstretching my flimsy arms, moving onto the steps of the altar as Zacchaeus would have mounted a Sycamore Tree to see Jesus over the crowd.

"Zacchaeus, may I dine with you today?" asked Joey Weber, a dirty-blond haired boy playing Jesus. A few more classmates selected to portray Jerichoans dropped their jaws at Jesus's request.

"JESUS HAS CHOSEN TO STAY IN THE HOUSE OF A SINNER?" they chimed in unison, as I came down from the altar and followed Jesus stage right. In retrospect, I have no idea who adapted this script from the Bible, but the petty dialogue from the townspeople of Jericho is surprisingly true to the King James Bible version

of this story. I loved this parable as a young performer, but even as a gay adult, I still find myself invested in the dramatics of it all. For Jericho's thieving villain to steal the attention of a certified heartthrob like Jesus while the other townsfolk watch on with envy is what reality TV dreams are made of.

The play ended with Zacchaeus learning his lesson, vowing to atone for his sins. After a standing ovation from the audience, and a curtain call with a dozen eight-year-olds entangling our chubby fingers and bowing out of rhythm, we transitioned to receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation. I don't remember the details of that event, though I'm sure they do not matter. What I reveled in was the attention that I received, the pats on my back from classmates, and the "Congratulations!" from my parents and others. My performance didn't involve running or making a goal, but it required skills of memorization and articulation, and the confidence to show off these abilities in front of dozens of people. On that night, my talents were recognized. My flamboyance made me better than everyone else, my short stature made me a perfect fit for a character. I was proud of myself. Others were proud of me. And I was happy.

After the second graders received Reconciliation, Mrs. Ackerman approached my mom and me. She had straightened her usually wavy hair, and her cheeks were brushed up with pink shades of blush. She looked like she belonged on her own cover of People Magazine. Mrs. Ackerman leaned down to my level and put her arm around me. I made contact with her auburn eyes and long lashes.

"Zach, your mom told me she wants you to take acting classes at the Rose Theatre. I really think you should. You're so talented," she said.

I felt my face blushing in a way that undoubtedly matched hers, but it wasn't from embarrassment. It was the warmth of flattery, the heat that your heart reflects onto your face when you feel encouraged and seen. Mrs. Ackerman's approval was the final push I needed. I gave her a hug and said thank you. On the drive home, I told my parents that I wanted to do the acting camp.

From this exchange onward, I was simultaneously confident and naïve enough to believe that Mrs. Ackerman and other teachers at St. Gerald could view me not just as a student, but as a friend. I observed their behavior, how they stuck together at morning assembly, how Mrs. Fraser would come into our classroom during silent reading and whisper gossip to Mrs. Ackerman, her mouth shielded by a warm, freshly printed stack of arithmetic assignments. Once more, I felt a longing to be included in what wasn't meant for me. But were these desires unwarranted? After all, these women were actively making space for me, giving me the lead role in a play, cheering me on in the school spelling bees, and laughing through my recaps of soap operas like *One Life to Live* during lunch and recess.

Given the political demographics of suburban Nebraska and harsh attitudes harbored toward homosexuality in the Catholic Church, I don't think Mrs. Ackerman and her peers had any intention of fostering an environment for a queer child to be exuberant and chatty and undeniably himself. But perhaps they never read me as "queer," they just read me as "Zach," knowing I was different, but thinking that difference was special. I don't know what their intentions were then or how they'd view me now, but I do not care. The Story of Zacchaeus was the first moment I felt my talents being celebrated, with no need to reckon with or explain my flamboyance, no need to find fault in a boy who gabbed with the girls at recess, and no need to apologize for finding joy in being myself.

There were so many tears and crises and desires to change after second grade. There were a lot of hurtful nicknames and assumptions that I was my mother or sister when I answered the phone, there were attempts to subliminate my voice and my body, there were late nights in bed and sessions in the mirror, plotting how I could look or sound differently. But I always had Mrs. Ackerman and our moment post-performance, her leveling with me and telling me that I was good at doing what I loved, that my inherently queer personhood had meaning. Encouragement and pride, embracing her seven-year-old male student's vivaciousness, piping voice, the hands he put on his hips when he felt like being sassy. It was then that I was saved. Not by grace and not by Jesus, but by someone educated and kind enough to let me live out loud.

TO THE GIRL IN THE GROCERY AISLE

WRITTEN BY: LAUREN KOOPMAN

I fell in love with a girl.
Her her reached her hips
And she had a skip in her step.
When she was nervous
she touched her lips,
And her smile was like snow;
Bright, beautiful, yet cold
to the touch.

She laughed like nothing
Could ever be wrong,
And she whispered to her friends
Like everything was a secret.
She moved like a river,
Gracefully smooth
yet subtle.

I fell in love with a girl
Who I wanted to be
when I was young.
Now, I want to be beside her,
Beneath her,
next to her.

She was medicine
You didn't know you took
Yet knew you couldn't live without.
Her being was an addiction,
Her presence was a gift,
And when she looked at you,
eyes wide and full of life,
you could feel your heart
mend itself.

I fell in love with a girl
Who my father would hate
Almost as much
As he hates me.
And for that, sir,
I don't apologize
Because she is the song
Stuck in my head,
The record on repeat;
And I refuse
To stop listening.

You should see the way
She talks to people.
She speaks to strangers
Like they are old friends
When really,
She couldn't know the man
Any less.

I fell in love with a girl,
And I know you would too.
Just the way she does everything,
The way she is,
It's all so impossible to hate.

I fell in love with a girl
And she walked away.

HETERONORMAL

WRITTEN BY: TIFFANY SMALLS

Boy smiles truth
with crooked lips - a hint
of deception seems more honest. And I,
girl with firecracker heart, wonder
why I keep writing poems about boys
with fire hydrant eyes and leaky faucet tongues.
Boys who spray open to me, ignorant
of my spark. Watch me fizzle out.
Mistake it for their own brightness.
The compulsion
to write about boys.
Was the ink in the pen apprehensive
to speak - girl laughs freedom?
Girls, wind-swept wildfire, flash-flood
poetry-in-motion. Soft, magic, feverish passion,
natural loving girls.
I, coursing stream of fire, cracked-rib
heir of Sapphic daydream
girls, love girls too.

DEFINITIONS. II

WRITTEN BY: MILLY WEBSTER

bi – (*comb. form*)

twice or two

era – (*n.*) period of
time considered
as distinctive

sure – (*adj.*) free
from uncertainty
or doubt



“SO SHE’S GAY NOW?”

WRITTEN BY: MILLY WEBSTER

“so she’s gay now?”

Being a fetish

doesn’t mean acceptance

Bisexual IS: valid

Bisexual IS NOT: Being ‘woke’

it is not an acceptance letter

that determines a lesbian.

fucking stop

judging people

DEFENSE MECHANISM

WRITTEN BY: MERRILL COLE

The knock of pale
death at the front door no longer
sets the heart pounding. Carpe diem
has become a poor alibi
for reckless behavior. Shouldn't he
consider investing for retirement,
stocks and bonds
with those he loves?

The modernist imperative
that poetry be impersonal and make
Classical allusion had been
a defense mechanism
against the story, relentlessly
rammed home, where the hero
dies. Notice no "I"
in that sentence, not, or no longer,
a death sentence. Would that the self
blissfully not reappear.

The poet with HIV
might have resisted confessing
the purple details ad nauseum,
collecting notices he couldn't pay,
when not well enough to work,
the men on the streets noticing
the bruises on his shins
as he sauntered by.

He might have suspected
turning the dead men he
had once fucked into the heroes
of stories that he would tell,
would be to make phallic
monuments to himself, would be
to betray them (whose breath
heats the back
of his neck as he writes)

"Defense Mechanism" was
published in Spoon River
Poetry Review

HOW THE NIGHTINGALES LOST THEIR HANDS

WRITTEN BY: MERRILL COLE

I was going to tell you the story of a friend who died, but he was not my friend. He wanted to write it in such a way that the grief was your own, your hand wiping his forehead with the soiled handkerchief, your tears the real ones.

He was terrified the lost message was not truly lost, a nightmare refusing to fade at the moment of waking. It was as if he had become human.

You were telling him a story about how the nightingales lost their hands. You said, peace is only the silence between statues. I said, no, peace is the flag of surrender, the place where they buried their dead.

It's not fair to say he found them. You always knew what they were hiding, but you had to let someone else say it. Quite dirty, but you could see through.

The open windows, bright as oblivion. There was nothing more to cry about. He was going to tell you the story of the day I lost my voice. I felt no grief, because the nightmare ended.

It was as if you had died, your humanity the real one. There was nothing more to write about. I wanted to hold him, but I found I had no hands.

“How the Nightingales Lost Their Hands”
was published in Poetic Diversity and in
HIV Here & Now.

WARM BROTHER

WRITTEN BY: MERRILL COLE

Around my head the ghost face rolls,
unsteady halo, stolen gold,
radioactive discharge
burning off, all I could never
bring myself to bless. Lopsided man,

can you say or guess what fig leafs
your cold nakedness, the half-life
of quarter-loves, shadow figures
against the wall—all man, or
maybe doll? Who cannot touch

himself, whose pleading seems record
of an instrument that scrapes off crust
of sentiment, that wind-up talk:
I want to swallow you, I will
peel away your wings. The wet grin

slides into my undefended
mouth. Staccato laughter rings out:
hot spit flying into emptiness,
biohazard semen and piss.
This upbeat ballad played backwards,

phantom twin, an automaton
bruising out the numbers again,
x-ray trespass, you cannot see,
curse lipped in the mirror, warmer
brother—ultraviolet—almost me.

“Warm Brother” was published in HIV Here
& Now.

EVIDENCE

WRITTEN BY: MERRILL COLE

Just point to where
he touched you, mute boy,
the little bruises
spread out like bluebells

in a field that thrilled
you alone. Fading, those Polaroids
wadded into your pants
pocket, hot evidence

against you—but that night
you knew the stars wouldn't
tell what had developed. The field
went dark, just some

bleeding along the edges.

WITHOUT

WRITTEN BY: MARIE OSUNA

This is a subject that's difficult for me to write about because it is not a reflection on something in my past, it is the reality that is unfolding in my life right now. It's the thing that's been haunting my thoughts every day; it's the reason I started crying in my abnormal psych class this morning. It's something I'm so uncomfortable talking about, so I have to confess it here, in words that I'm not yet ready to say out loud.

But maybe I'm just overreacting. I didn't go through any kind of trauma, I didn't lose a loved one; someone just put a label on me that I just wasn't ready to hear.

And now I have to accept that I live my life without.

I was a bubbly, energetic twenty-year-old college student just last week. I had a boyfriend, I ate lunch surrounded by friends, I had absolutely no doubt about who I was. I was the perfectionist who smiled at everyone she passed on campus because my life, on the outside, looked normal and people are comfortable with those that are confident and normal and heterosexual and absolutely do not doubt who they are.

This week, though, I feel differently. Because I had dinner with my roommate. Because she was talking about how she missed sex with her long-distance boyfriend and I made a weird face because I've never understood those kinds of urges and because she said maybe you're asexual.

No, I said, way too fast because normal girls are not labeled with terms like that. I would never judge anyone who was asexual but still that wasn't me. I wasn't anything weird—no need to label me!—so we both finished our dinners while talking about something else.

But the contents of that conversation followed me home that night, and I climbed onto my top-bunk oasis that night with my laptop in hand, opening the internet to a private browser before typing in words that were still way too honest for me to admit out loud. Am I Asexual?

I poured over page after page, sometimes nodding, sometimes scared, and once laughing out loud (If given the choice, would you choose to eat a delicious dessert over having sex? Hell yes). I took a quiz. Then I took another. Every result came back the same: maybe this label fit me after all. That didn't make it any less terrifying.

Here's an important piece of advice for you: Googling something you're unsure about will always make you feel worse. Google the symptoms of your minor cold, and the internet will tell you that it's cancer. Google a question about your sexuality, and you're left with an overwhelming label that feels like the diagnosis leading up to the end of your life. And the internet does not provide the proper counseling you need to get through something like that.

I was angry, at first. Angry that I couldn't take this realization back. Angry that I couldn't keep pretending that I was attracted to a boy that I wasn't, that I couldn't keep thinking 'I'm just not ready yet.' Angry at myself, for not being capable of normality.

I thought about the hopeful advice I read on each of the websites. One in every hundred people identifies as asexual! Your sexuality, in the end, can only be defined by you! Think about this as long as you need to, you have support!

Too many exclamation points, if you ask me, for a realization that feels very similar to drowning. I knew I had to admit to my boyfriend that I only liked him as a friend, but so much inside me was still fighting to just be normal. I thought about faking an interest in sex—I'd only have to keep it up for the rest of my life. I really thought, for just a little while, that I could feign being a sexy, sensual, normal human being.

But I knew those ideas were impossible. I knew that pretending to enjoy a relationship that I didn't would only make both of us feel worse, and that faking an interest in sex would only damage me day after day until I broke.

So I told my boyfriend that I thought it would be better if we were just friends. I left out the haunting 'A' word and went with a more classic break-up model: I'm just so busy right now / I respect you too much to drag you through this / I hope we can still be friends. I didn't feel that I owed him my sexuality; especially not when the word 'asexual' is still one that I can't say out loud to myself.

That basically brings me here. The core facts about me are still the same: same name, major, hometown, GPA, coffee order, favorite book, on and on. The only change about me was that I went from someone who just isn't ready yet to someone that might never be interested. This isn't something I talk about with people, I'm still trying to process my emotions for myself. I'm not ready to say the word out loud, to admit that this is really happening to me. Part of me is stuck on this ridiculous idea of being normal, and the other part doesn't know what normal even means.

But I know this: when I think about my future, and I know that I have the choice to never engage in an act that most people my age are consumed with want for, it makes me smile. I could live my life without, and still feel like I haven't missed anything at all. I think that's a good start.



WHADDYA GOT?

WRITTEN BY: MUHAMMAD SHAREEF

The first time I saw Marlon Brando on screen was when I watched *The Godfather*. I was a junior in college who developed the shady habit of bailing out on my friends to stay alone in my room on the weekends. They thought that I was an elitist square who considered himself to be too pristine to indulge in hedonist behavior. Their assumptions were wrong and far from the truth, but I digress. I remember enjoying *The Godfather* so much that I ended up watching part two and three that same night. The first film was my favorite of the trilogy, and this was chiefly due to Brando's presence throughout the movie. Before I knew it, the pronounced jaw of Vito Corleone and his mumbling words turned me into a devote fan of Marlon Brando.

I would binge-watch the movies he starred in during the Golden Age of Hollywood, quote his famous lines (I could've been a contender!), and started to take immense pride in rocking white t-shirts. I would never admit it back then, but one of the major things that caused me to gravitate towards Brando's mystique was his masculinity and sexuality. He was like a superhero in my eyes because he managed to do the impossible; Brando was a bisexual man who unintentionally asserted himself as the poster child of American masculinity.

Brando's representation was a big deal for me at the time because I was struggling to understand my dual attraction. He became a vehicle for me to navigate in a monosexual world that catered to heteronormative standards. Brando once said, "Like a large number of men, I, too, have had homosexual experiences and I am not ashamed." Today I understand who I am, but my willingness to love myself used to be clouded by shame.

The question of my sexuality never came to my mind during childhood or high school years. My primary attractions, urges, crushes, kisses, and heartbreaks were always adjacent to women. Boys were my friends, teammates, and confidants but nothing beyond the platonic department. However, after my first year in college, things changed. My sexuality unfolded and hit me like a sledgehammer. Coming to terms with my sexuality was a violent process because I made feeble efforts to divorce myself from my fluidity. I could not understand how I can be attracted to women my entire life and suddenly harbor certain feelings towards the same-sex. Everything around me was binary. You were either straight or gay. I did not know sexuality is a spectrum and is not always concrete for many people. I had a looming question above my head that compromised my happiness for many years.

Toxic ideologies like hypermasculinity and internalized biphobia reinforced my resistance towards my sexual orientation. I did not want to compromise my image, especially being a respected athlete in school. Above everything else, my colossal fear of being disqualified from loving, dating, and sleeping with women crippled my ability to face my sexuality head-on. A female colleague of mine who volunteered with me in Namibia expressed the consensus view of heterosexual and, ironic enough, bisexual women as well. She said, "I would never mess with a double-dabber." Her opinion was disappointing, heartbreaking, but not surprising. Bisexual men have to deal with the stigma of same-sex intimacy while facing a world that refuses to recognize our existence

"Men can't be bisexual." I've heard this statement from many characters. I heard it from Jesus lovers, closet residents, pseudo-feminists, and other individuals who probably still believe in Santa Claus and trickle-down economics. I've witnessed the misguided phrase leave the lips of the man who worships David Bowie and the "straight" woman who flagrantly indulges in female lovemaking. I found it challenging to claim my bisexuality because no one took my identity seriously. Straight and gay individuals may disagree on hundreds of things, but both parties join hands in denying me a seat at the table. In Kenji Yoshino's words, "The first investment monosexuals have in bisexual erasure is an interest in stabilizing sexual orientation." Besides the uphill battle of not fitting into the heterosexual paradigm, I have to deal with the universal belief of monosexism. I am exhausted.

I learned the importance of not caring what others think makes it easier for me to be at peace with who I am. My identity undermines conventional notions of sexuality; therefore, no one can tell me what I am or how to live my life.

Johnny Strabler, Marlon Brando's character in *The Wild One*, famously says, "Nobody tells me what to do." Out of all of the many faces Brando wore for the screen, Strabler is arguably the closest to who he was in real life. Brando refused to follow the crowd and did not entertain anything that interrupted his rhythm in life. The only thing that exceeded his masculinity and raw energy was his peculiar and unique ability to display his femi-

nine side in the midst of all of his magnesium. Nothing about Brando was inflexible; his fluidity allowed him to be intimate with the masculine and feminine, which contributed to his rebellious attitude, on and off screen, and genius abilities that changed the way artists approach acting. I am not an actor nor am I a public figure in the slightest, but like Brando, I am a man whose inherent identity disrupts traditional beliefs.

Coming out, or even finding peace of mind, as a bisexual is never easy.

One has to come out while simultaneously negotiate their identity with the world. The LGBT population has made tremendous progress in today's society but bisexual erasure and biphobia, within and outside of the community, has created an "invisible majority." Everything regarding human nature is multifaceted, complicated, messy, and beautiful; therefore, our sexualities are no different. The looming question that was above my head robbed ripe years of my twenties; excruciating psychological pain and anxiety were familiar to me as oxygen. Today, the conundrum converted to self-assertion and shaped my character.

"What are you?" asked the attractive lady who wishes to alleviate herself from the possibility that monosexuality is not the norm.

My answer to her is a quote directly from Johnny Strabler's character and one of the most famous lines in cinema history: "Whaddya got?"

BEHIND TRUANT VAGABOND

WRITTEN BY: TRAVIS LAU

(behind
truant
vagabond)

I wade through the
 thickness
where the
world
 seems to be keeping
 secrets from me

(behind
truant
vagabond)

but this sodden
 place has marks
 where I left them

to keep from
 getting lost

(behind
truant
vagabond)

even as I take
 the path
 they say
 will never

bring you
 back
any breath
 closer to

that house
that doesn't
 even bear
 its foundations

anymore.

(behind
truant
vagabond)

Here I lay
 wet with youth
 I would rather
 disavow

but the
 body always
 always
 knows.





PRIDE

WRITTEN BY: MARINA MONTENEGRO

I watched the crowd
of rainbow flags,
the music, the community,
and the love.

You cannot take our Pride.
Our heads will always be held higher
than the weapons that you dare
to aim in our direction.
Sticks and stones
will break our bones
But bullets cannot silence us.

HE IS BEAUTIFUL LIKE A RAINBOW

WRITTEN BY: MERCURY MARVIN SUNDERLAND

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and when the world ends, he is still there
because this was never a story of pride parade floats
this was a rebellion created by black trans women throwing bricks at cops
stonewall was a riot
my love is not celebrated by supreme court legalization of monogamous marriage,
or flags held up in business windows to attract money
it is not found
in your rainbow capitalism
when historically those same places have always held us down
beaten us and thrown us out in the streets

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and right now i am sitting on the street where i went
to a nightclub
with my friend from band
and i remember how that night i was reminded for a second
of stonewall
because i am a gay trans white man and she is a straight cis peruvian woman
and together as one gay trans and one latina we made up the three groups that had been targeted

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and when he smiles, my world flourishes
and his laugh can echo its way into my heart
with a love of books and disney and cats
i couldn't be more grateful to find him
but the truth is
something you care for becomes more meaningful when you have to fight for it
and us gays
have always been fighting harder than you have
yet you complain
because you want your straight pride parade
because you think our world is nothing but a cute tidbit found inside of a pink triangle
but you never think
of the way that the pink triangle originated in our own genocide

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and my love as a man to other men was never made for your consumption
i was never meant to simply be your favorite porn category
or your token friend for whenever you need your full queer resource center
i have my privacy
that you do not respect
but i don't tendril into your's
you say you're not homophobic
but the way that you go out of your way to not acknowledge my partner's gender
even though i have explicitly stated it numerous times the same way you'd mention your's
shows me otherwise
the way that you flinch when i mention my relations
shows me otherwise
you visibly jump
at the sound of it
because i didn't know you were a faggot
god forbid
that i shatter your hetero world

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and the way that men love other men should not be foreign to you
you think of yourself as strong and intelligent
yet you get so confused and don't understand
when i say that i'm gay
i really don't think
that's a hard concept
to understand
that i can be a man
who loves other men

he is beautiful like a rainbow
i walk with him across rainbow crosswalks
reach him miles away
my love fights harder than your's
every activist campaign
is brought in
because we love ourselves and our friends and chosen family
who know the angry police raids
and the gunfire shots
staining our blood in pride month
it used to be believed that blood was blue in your body
and red outside
funny how that mixes and creates purple
when it stains the dance floor
but that isn't true
blood remains red no matter where it is
every rainbow begins with red
because our rebellion originated with our sorrows
and how we loved something different
funny how
every fight for justice is always started by injustices
it's almost as if
we just wanna have human rights
every fight
in its time
is seen as unreasonable
but yet generations later they pretend they were with you all along

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and my love is not easy to find
it isn't easy to find the right one
but here i have found him
in a mess of everything else

he is beautiful like a rainbow
a man who wasn't your pride parade gimmick
instead he is another man i never knew i'd know
stronger than the stuff of fairytales
because fact is stranger than fiction
and reality is stranger than fantasy

he is beautiful like a rainbow
the man who i can't express enough about having found,
a cutesy antique found on the shelf
my back is weary from a long day of gay and i know he will always be a part of myself
complimenting each other to the daybreak
my love cannot be found in the same space as your's
it is usually found hidden away in the dressing drawer or cupboard so no one will see
but i would like to use the space you've always taken away from me

you give me an inch and claim that's enough
but you've always had the bigger and upper hand
always preferred more
if i have to see another forced unnecessary no chemistry hetero story again
i think i will puke
because you think we see ourselves everywhere
but just for once can at least we be everywhere
because you've had a lifetime of everywhere
but we've had a lifetime of hidden

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and my love is more than just your stereotyped view of grindr profiles and a different home than your's,
my love is men who are gentle and soft
and don't find straight people romanticization of abuse funny
my love is the man who majors in literature and wants to travel the world in disney parks
and always has a kind ear
and holds me into a safety found nowhere else
my love is beautiful like a rainbow
he isn't made for your consumption

he is beautiful like a rainbow
a quiet walk in a forest that doesn't end
winter leaves rot and a world grows from it

he is beautiful like a rainbow
the man i never thought i'd know
who measures his money in how many bags of dollar-store candy can one buy
who tells me not to buy a thirty-dollar crate of gushers off of amazon
because then i'd be called the gushers guy
for the rest of my life

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and now i finally do understand
the songs and stories
i wish i could find myself in the songs and stories
i finally do understand
a thing as simple as the small sketchbook covered in drawings of rainbows and cats
given for christmas
i finally do understand
why all the hardship is so much more worth it
i wish i didn't have to go through it though but
i finally do understand

he is beautiful like a rainbow
and now i finally do understand.





CONTRIBUTOR *Notes*

Douglas Payne is a queer, disabled poet from San Diego, CA. His work has appeared in *decomp Magazine*, *SCAB Magazine*, *Angel City Review*, the daily blog of author Dennis Cooper, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Salted Rook*, was published in 2017 by Chest-O-Drawers Press. He received an MFA in Poetry from Arizona State University in 2019.

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Victoria Brooks is a writer and researcher on sexual ethics. She has published academic, media and fictional pieces on the connection between philosophy and sex. She uses her queer desire to create new worlds, and to challenge ethical frameworks that do not fit women's sexualities. Her book *Fucking Law: the search for her sexual ethics is out in June 2019 for Zero Books*. She is currently working on an academic project on consent and queer sex clubs, and she is writing a full length fiction work on queer sexuality.

Edward M. Choen's novel, "\$250,000," was published by Putnam; his non fiction books by Prima, Prentice-Hall, Limelight Editions, SUNY Press. He has published over 40 stories in literary journals and in the anthologies, *A GAY AND GRAY ANTHOLOGY* (NewTown Writers), *MENTSH* (Alyson), *FOUND TRIBE* (Sherman Asher), *MAMMOTH BOOK OF NEW GAY EROTICA* (Constable & Robinson) and *CHILD OF MY CHILD* (Gelles-Cole).

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Merrill Cole's poems have appeared in such venues as *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. He is the author of *The Other Orpheus: A Poetics of Modern Homosexuality and the translator, from the German of the 1923 Dances of Vice, Horror, and Ecstasy*. Cole is Professor of English at Western Illinois University.

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Dawn-Hunter Strobel is 21 years old and doesn't plan for his roaring 20's to be anything but spectacular. That will, of course, include becoming a prolific author and gaining worldwide fame and fortune. If that doesn't work out, he'll just stick with his BA in Theatre from Willamette University and try his hand at the more performative arts. Heralding from a long line of artists, creative thinkers, and drama makers (theatre and otherwise), he thinks either of these lines of work will suit him just fine.

Eimear Bourke is an Irish idealist and perpetual dreamer. Raised in Navan, Co. Meath, she currently lives with her girlfriend in Dublin 6W. Driven by a belief in purpose and fatalism, her poems are shaped by themes such as nature, interpersonal relationships, sexuality and memory. She is inspired by Rita Ann Higgins and Yrsa Daley-Ward.

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Randy Santana Hidalgo is an emerging writer, with only one published poem in *The Pulp*, *SUNY Orange's Literary Journal*.

Mercury is a 2013, 2014, 2015 winner of ACT Theater's Young Playwright's Program, a 2015, 2016 selected playwright for ACT Theater's 14:48 HS, a 2016 winner of the Jack Straw Young Writer's Program, a 2016 selected participant for the Seattle Talent Show hosted by Rainier Beach High School, and was hired as a paid representative of Youth Speaks Seattle in 2016. In 2017 alone, he was selected for and won the 2017 Youth Speaks Seattle Grand Slam, and went off as one of the top five youth slam poets representing Seattle at Brave New Voices 2017, an international slam poetry tournament treated as America's national tournament, and was selected to perform slam poetry alongside former Seattle mayor candidate Nikkita Oliver at the University of Washington. In 2018 his illustrations were selected for *While Supplies Last*, an art show hosted by Anthony White, a Cornish College of the Arts graduate. In 2019 his artwork was featured by the UglyDolls company and he received his first literary journal acceptance from Northwest Missouri State University's *Fearsome Critters Literary Magazine Volume Two*, his second from the February 2019 issue of *Arcadia University's Marathon Literary Review*, his third and fourth from *Across & Through Literary Magazine*, his fifth from *The Dollhouse Literary Magazine*, and his sixth from University of California Riverside's *Santa Ana River Review*. He was also selected as a 2019 Editor's Pick for the Brian Mill Press Poetry Month Contest.

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