

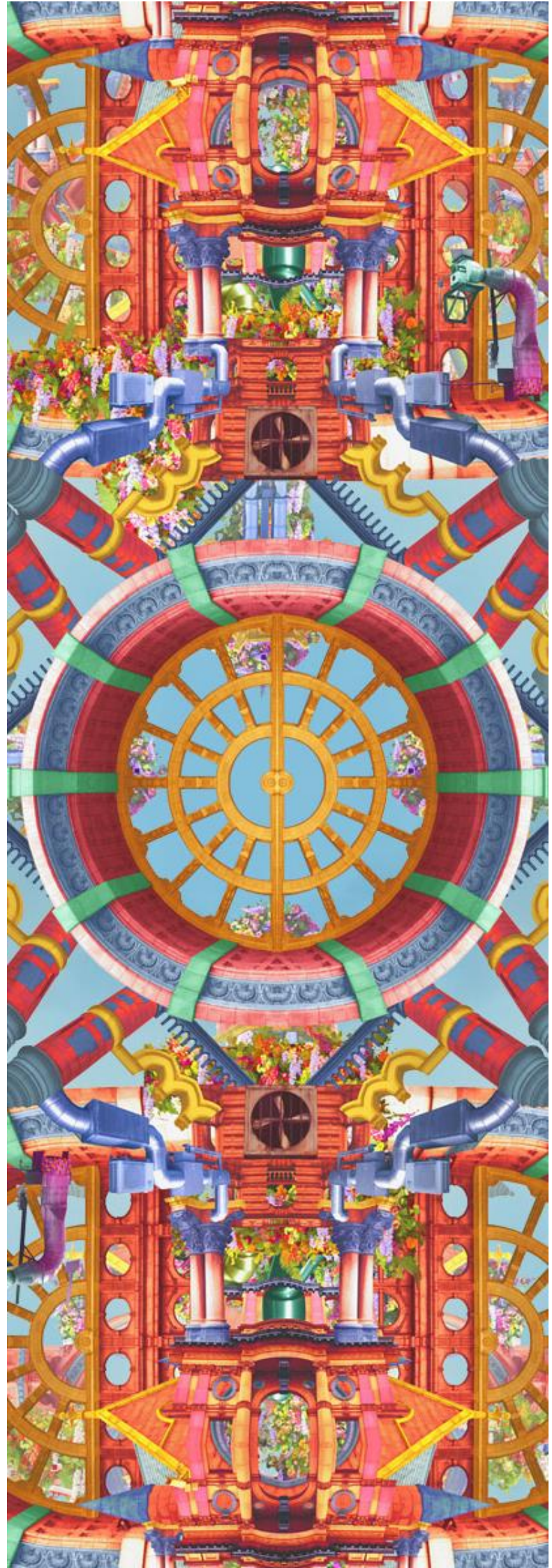


# Issue 3

February 2021

Edited by  
Hannah Levene  
Tawseef Khan  
& Tom White

Cover art by Ryan French







## **EDITORIAL ... p.1**

\*\*\*

## **ART**

Pictures of the Floating World [Ryan French] ... p.2-8

\*\*\*

## **INTERVIEW**

Niven Govinden in Conversation ... p.8-21

\*\*\*

## **WRITING**

For L. [Matt Kennedy] ... p.22-25

toast [Al Anderson] ... p.26-27

The First Two Voice Notes of a Conversation (from Manchester  
to London) [Vivien Holmes] ... p.28-29

Repetition Without Examination [Lew Furber] ... p.30-31

A Poem for My IUD [Lotte Reford] ... p.32-33

Translated Copy of Untitled Document 1

[Felix del Campo] ... p.34-38

Vehicular accident as metaphor for dermatillomania

[Ruth Horsfall] ... p.39-40

Unbound [Yas Necati] ... p.41-41

Waves [Christopher Lloyd] ... p.42-50

Rest in Relation [Monique Todd] ...p.51-54

## **Editorial**

Welcome to *Fruit!*

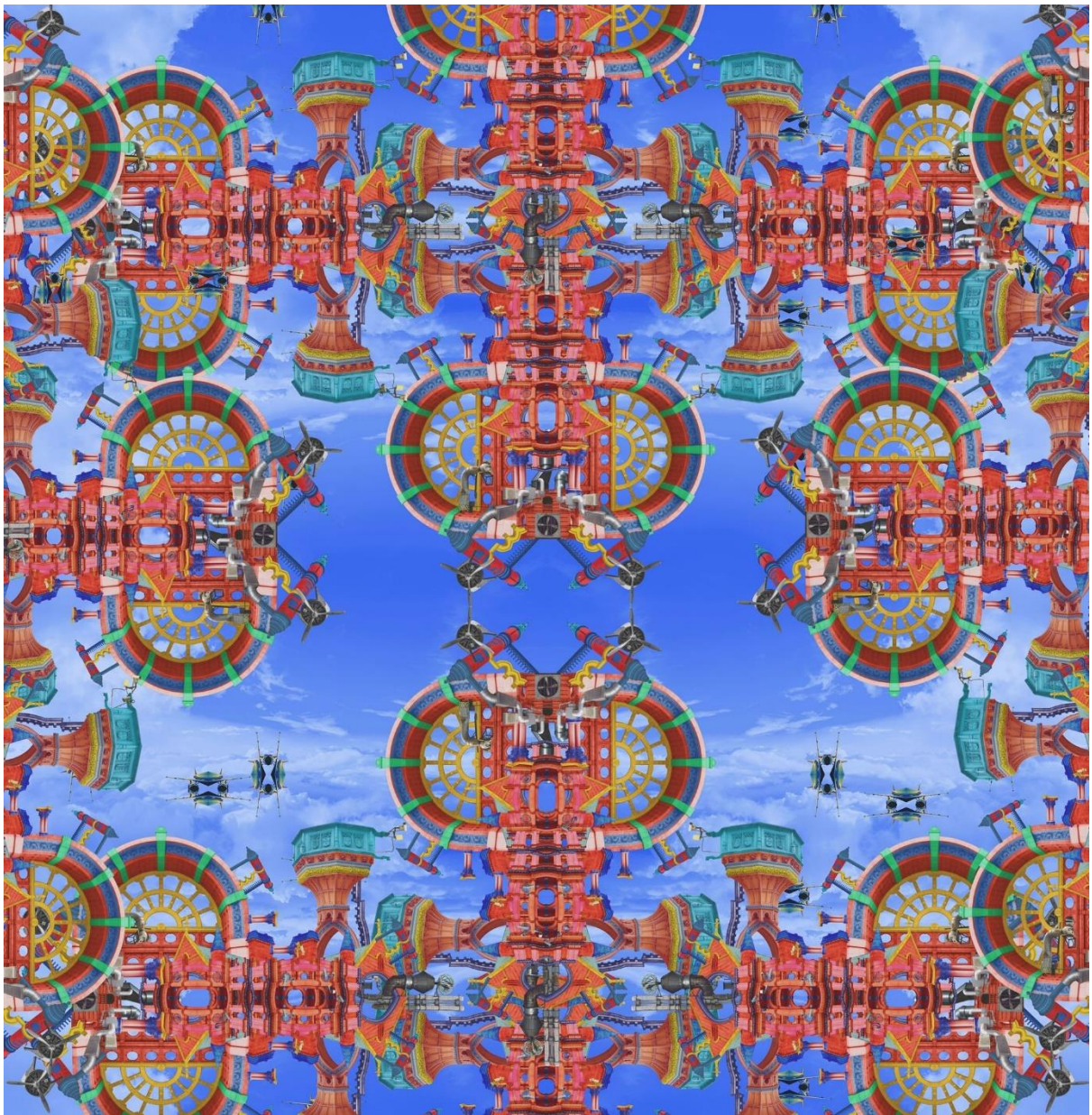
We're very excited to share issue 3 with you. Putting it together has been a slow but enjoyable process; choosing the cover art was the final step. We decided on a local artist, Ryan French whose vivid depiction of a queer utopia complements the writing that appears in this issue. While recognising the limitations that queers face, the authors in issue 3 often strive to contemplate an alternative, better future. For example, Monique Todd calls for a world where Black people can rest in public spaces. Vivian Holmes dwells on (and in) the bath, where bodies take on new meanings. Niven Govinden discusses his book *This Brutal House*, which pushes for a world where queer Black and Brown bodies are valued as much as their white counterparts. Though the present situation is especially challenging, we hope that this latest issue of *Fruit* will encourage readers to contemplate a different kind of world post-Covid. And we hope it gives you pleasure.

The Editors



**'Pictures of the Floating World'**

**[Ryan French]**













It all started when I saw the glittering pink and purple spires of the Disney Castle, front and centre in the middle of the toy aisle. It was a Cinderella playset, and it was love at first sight. I must have been about five or six years old, but even then there was a pressuring, weighted thought in the back of my young mind that it was something I shouldn't want or be allowed to have. I begged my mum for it, threw a tantrum, but unfortunately we had to leave without it in my hands.

There is a happy ending to this memory though – on Christmas morning I found it waiting for me under the tree. Still, growing up, I was always followed by that anxious shadow of societal pressure – that a boy should act a certain way and want blue and grey things, fire trucks and footballs that I had no interest in.

That memory partly inspired this series, 'Pictures of the Floating World'. My collages are a form of social commentary, I take photographs of my urban surroundings and reconfigure them into my own fantasy. They are usually a spectacle, a glittery, kitsch facade hiding a more sinister and probing message.

The urban space presents a certain dichotomy for queer people. A larger populous presents all walks of life, and more freedom can be found in the city. I was lucky to find that freedom in Manchester's Gay Village, where I am accepted for being myself and where LGBTQIA+ people, in large part, can feel comfortable. Yet queer spaces are often cordoned into such areas, marked by a rainbow flag on either end, denoting where this safe space starts and ends. This can contribute to the segregation of communities; it enforces the idea that outside of that area is the potential for danger and prejudice. As a queer person growing up in Manchester, I often felt unsafe walking home, and this deeprooted anxiety stuck to my psyche like a blueprint, programmed into my every action. I am grateful to have this place, but I can't help imagining a world where we don't need one.



These images are my imagined reconfiguration of Manchester. A Utopian, borderless paradise floating in the sky. The bright colours wash away the dull conformity of concrete and brick. For me, the collage evokes that dream-like Cinderella castle: it is no longer a symbol of shame, but of celebration. I imagined a floating fortress of sorts, able to reconfigure and adapt its protective walls to any situation. A 'futuristic Hanging Gardens of Babylon' came to mind as I evoked the imposing beauty of ancient architecture, as well as Ukiyo drawings from the Edo period of Japan (from which the project takes its name) which depict hedonism in its glory.

Walking into adulthood, with help from those around me, I acquired the autonomy to embrace who I really am and began to undo that early social programming. To live in a place truly free of prejudice and discrimination is unfortunately still a fantasy, but hopefully the floating world of the year 3021 will look a lot more like this.

Ryan Peter French is an artist currently based in Manchester. His practice spans multiple forms of media – primarily painting, illustration and digital art. The subject matter of his work lies in the human condition, our ability to share and connect experiences through visual language, and the necessity of fantasy in the face of reality. Symbolism from mythology and Jungian psychology are often a feature in the work. His artistic influences span the breadth of art history with particular reference to Dada, Surrealism, Symbolism and Art Nouveau. French is currently illustrating the queer horror graphic novel *Love Bug*, to be released in 2021, as well as exhibiting his digital works. You can find his work at: [ryanpeterfrench.com](http://ryanpeterfrench.com). He also has Twitter and Instagram: @ryanpeterfrench

Ryan French is featured in *Queer Contemporaries*, a showcase of LGBTQIA+ artists. Through painting, sculpture, drawing, performance, film, assemblage and drag, *Queer Contemporaries* presents a cross-section of contemporary queer art in the UK. The gallery show took place in August 2020 at AIR Gallery. The digital exhibition is still online and is highly recommended. The showcase is curated by directors of Short

Supply (@shortsupplymcr), Mollie Balshaw and Rebekah Beasley. We'd particularly like to thank Mollie for their suggestions regarding cover art.



## **Niven Govinden in Conversation**

*In August 2020 for the Superbia Sunday (part of Manchester Pride), and then again in January 2021, our editor, Tawseef Khan spoke with Niven Govinden. This is an edited transcript of those conversations.*

**TK: I feel like I've got to begin by asking how the last months have been. What has your pandemic experience been like?**

NG: It's been fairly mixed. Pre-pandemic, I was halfway through a new book, so I've pretty much had my head down, working and then juggling that with family concerns and everything else that's been going on. So it's been busy. I can't say it's been eventful, but it's been productive, for sure.

**TK: Congratulations on the great success of *This Brutal House*. I loved the book. The hardback came out in 2019, and before that you published a novel *All The Days And Nights* in 2014. Did *This Brutal House* take all that time to develop and write, or were you taking a break from writing?**

NG: No, it really did! It just takes me a really long time, and it did take five years! Pretty much as I was finishing *All the Days and Nights* I had an idea that I knew I wanted to write a novel about voguing and about protest. I'd been reading a lot James Baldwin, re-reading all the books that I'd first read as a teenager, and there was something in that kind of oratory that really spoke to me. And in a way, I suppose the idea for this novel's been over 10 years in the making. I'd written a short story in the mid-noughties, between novels, for a tiny little Italian magazine about the dying days of the great voguing houses. When I finished that story, I sent it to the magazine editor and the editor said to me, are you writing a novel about the ball scene? And it was a real lightbulb moment because I hadn't thought about it. And suddenly I realised that it was

something I did really want to do. Voguing has been one of my psychic touchstones forever, since I was a teenager coming of age in the late 80s, early 90s, going out, buying records, being part of a queer scene. It made sense that I wanted to do it, but I didn't want to do in a very obvious way. So I filed it away as I was working on other books. And then when I finished *All the Days and Nights*, I was just really ready to do it. But not in a sort of basic or self-explanatory, touristic kind of a way. I wanted to use voguing as a framework for a bigger set of questions that I wanted to try and answer.

**TK: What were those questions?**

NG: Well, it comes out of a response, I guess. For me, the most perfect piece of art ever made about the ball scene is Jenny Livingstone's *Paris is Burning* from 1989, which left a massive impression on me. It's a perfect piece of work. I remember when it came out there was a lot of criticism from people on the scene about Jenny Livingstone, saying she exploited people – there's lots of criticism about the film – but as a capsule of that scene, if you look at it now, it's absolutely beautiful. It is stunning, heart-breaking stuff. So I didn't want to repeat that or introduce voguing in a new way. What I wanted to do was use the concept of protest to shape an arc of a novel. A protest: beginning, middle and end, its ecosystem, the various factions within it, and to really explore that using the group-voice of the House Mother.

It's very much a novel of voices in the tradition of everyone from say, Studs Terkel to Joseph Mitchell, Greek chorus, the lot. And what I wanted to do with the Mothers' voice was to write a book that was about collective memory and a story that could feel like a previously unwritten but fictional community history from a part of the community who have been neglected within literature but also within civics, visibility within the wider society. On a very basic level, it's a story of Mothers from the legendary voguing houses. All the children start silent protests on the steps of City Hall, to bring the city's attention to the kids from their houses disappearing through homophobic and transphobic violence, structural inequality, poverty, all those things. The city has never taken the concerns of the community seriously, to look for these kids. And the Mothers



have tried to protest in every single way from political lobbying, to rioting, you know, everything they can possibly do.

It's also a book about spirituality. And they have a sort of late life religious reawakening where their questions haven't been answered in any kind of fundamental, legal, scientific, rational way. So they're starting to look into other areas that they previously rejected. You know, if I can't find answers in the real world, can I find the answer somewhere else? The sense of silence, a silent protest, to show them physically a community's presence, but also a community's collective trauma, damage, determination. So I'm looking for the novel to ask those kinds of questions, but also, to look at the city as the other sort of unspoken voice in the book as the characters say, what are the city's responsibilities for all of its citizens? What should it provide? What should it not provide? Is it the father? Or the mother? Is it the parent to everyone who lives in that city or not? And if not, why not? So those are the sorts of questions I'm thinking about.

**TK: I find the premise of the book so compelling. The image of these House Mothers, on the steps of City Hall, it's just an incredible way to start a book. And I think that you make two really big decisions in the way that you've chosen to write the book that shape our experience of it. The first is, as you mentioned, the fact that the House Mother speak with one voice. The second is that we do get to experience this world from somebody's mind and that's Teddy, one of the former children who now works in City Hall. Why did you make those two decisions?**

NG: The first decision came from an aesthetic choice; I knew that I wanted the next book that I wrote to be about collective voice. I love the weight of writing 'we'. It's very, very powerful. So I wanted to use the 'we' in a very strong way. And also, in writing stories and other longer pieces of work around the novel before that, I was writing something with a 'they' so I knew that I really loved the collective voice. Basically, I think about a novel for a while and it is an amalgamation of everything I've been thinking about in the last few years as I'm writing the last book. You commit to a book

and then you write it but as you're thinking about this one thing, you're still thinking about other things, you're having other experiences, and they just sort of add to something. And so when I finish one book, I take that time to work out what those things actually mean. I got to a point where I literally woke up one day, and I had these sentences and I wrote them down. And that was the first chapter of the book. And that's pretty much what happens for my books. I write something that is kind of my jumping off point, and I just started to run with it. And as the voice developed, I did sit back a little bit and think, 'Well, do I want to now break this down?' But for me the power is in the 'we', so to break it down into, well, X went home and had a cup of tea and Y did that, it just really dilutes it.

What I wanted to show was the facets of queer parenthood and chosen family, and queer visibility with ageing. And to show you the full panorama of what a queer chosen family is, you need to see perspectives from the children. For me, Teddy was that character, and, in a lot of ways, it's Teddy's book, because it's a very personal story. The spirit of both these voices, those narratives, combined really strongly. And then, because I was interested in bringing other voices in, there are the voices of other children, the police, the voice of the vogue caller. I wanted to reaffirm the idea that it's like an aural/oral history. So you've got lots of voices coming in. Again, they're not necessarily named. There's a whole chapter with a group of missing banji boys who just turn up and they just speak, but they're not named. They're there in as much as the Mothers are in a way. And so yeah, I'm trying to throw all those things into the mix.

**TK: And these are families that come with all of the complexity of real family. The Mothers can be incredibly demanding, they punish their children, the children are often disinterested, petulant. It's tempting to talk about surrogate families in only positive terms, so I really love that you've done that.**

NG: Well, I was very much interested in exploring the idea of imperfect parenthood. To a large degree, the Mothers' parenthood over the children is sort of involuntary. It's something that snowballed. But it's a mixture of them feeling as elders that they need to protect the kids and pass on what they know, then they realise actually, by taking in



children and starting the houses, they're actually families of their own and yes, families come with their own complexities. And they talk about it, they say, you know, we come from imperfect charters, we can't be expected to be perfect parents, and they're not, but they are the sorts of Mothers who will fight to the death for their children. And this is where they're at with the protests. They're selfish, but not, they're personally selfish sometimes but I think ultimately, it's really about the selflessness of what community and actually *family* in that kind of way means. Because when you think of voguing houses, and balls, the legendary Mothers had those vacant houses who started those scenes, and started all the houses in Harlem, they had to create their own scene, they had to create their own safe space. They weren't welcome in the pageants in Manhattan. They knew those clubs didn't want them, so they had to create their own space for themselves, and their kids.

**TK: A few years ago, I shared an apartment with one of the Mothers from ballroom scene in New York, and despite the time difference, all night all he did was talk to the children, and make sure that they were prepared for this and taking care of that. I could hear him, as I slept, advising them on whatever problems they had encountered that day. So the responsibility that these House Mothers take is very real.**

NG: Absolutely and in the book, when the kids disappear, it really affects them. You know, there's a difference between one child disappearing, and it's a tragedy and then you see a spate of children disappearing. This book isn't some kind of mystery, there's no explanation as to what happens to children, etc. It's about when children successively go missing how, as the elders of their community, they have to deal with that. And help the children in that community deal with that. And also find a way to get recognition for what is happening within a wider city network who really aren't that bothered about them.

**TK: Even though the book is serious and covers heavy subject material, there are pages of pure joy. I believe that joy is central to the queer experience, and**

**also to protest. I'm thinking of the pages dedicated to the vogue caller with the categories and the walking. Those pages are just so exuberant, and I have them on a bag somewhere.**

NG: Good bag!

**TK: It's *such* a great bag. How central was joy to this book?**

NG: Yeah, very much so. The balls are full of joy, but also then incredibly, people battle to the death at them. It's that serious. It says so much about family honour. But I didn't want to write a book that was about 'and then they went to the ball, and something was pretty', you know? That wasn't my thing – I was very, very adamant that this wasn't a primer. But I did want to have sections again, using the concept of voice to really show you the sort of colour and the fire and the joy from balls. And for me, I suppose what I love the most about balls is what a vogue caller does. It's not that far removed from hip-hop in terms of MC'ing. It's about wordplay. It's about authority. The MC is the authority, the ringmaster, is really running things and can denote success or failure, even before you've even stepped out. So, I love the sharpness of it. It's sharp, it's camp, it's brutal, it's fierce. It can cut you dead, but also completely give you life. I wanted to write passages that were like that. So there's a vogue caller chapter, which is just a vogue caller calling out categories, you know, and we love categories. / love categories. But it's interesting, those chapters can be misunderstood, depending on who is actually reading it. And publishing this book has taught me an enormous lesson or reminded me, I guess, in terms of as a reader what you bring to a book is your experience of the world and what you know, what you're open to. So those chapters in particular flummox a lot of people, in particular, a lot of older or non-queer readers who couldn't understand why you would have a chapter with categories, why there's a list and why is this list ridiculous? And it's supposed to be fierce and funny and joyful but the point of writing a chapter full of categories is that it becomes political. It's about the categories being their own categories for survival and their own vision of their place in the world. So it becomes sort of quite hypnotic, and there is this otherworldly sense to it, it has this mantra, it feels like it's its own prayer in a way. Later on in the book



there's another section where it's just telling them to walk, which is, if you think about the heat of being in the ball, right in the middle of the evening, when literally, there is no words. Actually, this book is about silence and not words, there is a point where there are no words and it's only about movement and walking and being fierce and really, really killing it. And I don't think you can get that unless you've really felt that moment – not necessarily even in the ball just from going out. And you can't expect to answer everyone's questions as they read, but I hope that for people who read it who don't necessarily understand, it will kind of open them up a little bit, thinking about that moment, that kind of lifestyle.

**TK: And I think for me, what's great about that is then the book itself becomes a protest, like, who is the book for? If you don't get it, maybe it's not for you. And it's written for people who do understand those moments and relate to them.**

NG: And yeah, I don't like to exclude readers. Definitely, definitely not. But I think in the spirit of writing in the avant garde, to really be central to the experience within the book you have to be thrown into the book without explanation. Because that is what experience is.

**TK: Comparing it to a recent television show, *Pose* glosses over a lot of some of the harsh experiences that people from the ballroom community have suffered. It gives them the opportunity to indulge in perhaps an element of fairy-tale, especially in the second season. But in *This Brutal House*, the protest does come to an end, and it doesn't necessarily succeed. We could even say that it's sabotaged. What made you end the protest in that way?**

NG: It felt like a natural evolution in terms of how I wanted the protest to unfold. I'm not necessarily into endings that feel definitive, and arcs that feel definitive, because life isn't definitive like that. I don't think you get that kind of clarity in life, per se. You can have black and white moments, yes, but it would be massively unrealistic to write about a community struggle and then end with a very – no spoilers here – black and

white ending. Shifts in society show us it isn't like that. You can see that through the progression of queer civil rights, essentially the history of queer protest in the last century. And the same thing for where we are in terms of Black Lives Matter. Societal shift comes through mass protests, but at the end of every sort of protest cycle, you may start to see societal or legislative changes, but they're never definitive. What I'm trying to explore in the book are changes that take decades to actually shift, if not more.

**TK: The great thing is that the novel ends with so much defiance. I like that we don't have a 'love wins' ending. In the end, this is about more than just legislation. This is about dignity. And no matter how much the House Mothers are mistreated by the state, they still hold on to their dignity, they still hold on to their spirituality, they're very stoic. And ending on that kind of defiant note is arguably more inspirational than a happier alternative.**

NG: Yeah, I think the book ends in a way that's very true to the spirit of the Mothers and their kind of core, and it sort of reflects their journey through the protest and where they are. So yes, for me, I really, really love that final chapter of the book, because it really does sort of solidify the power of those characters and the power of their spirit in a way that feels entirely true to me.

**TK: Definitely. Your book was probably conceived when the ballroom and voguing scene had less public attention, but it has been released in a context where it has become mainstream. Do you think that has been a good thing? How do we reflect on the place of ballroom in queer culture and in broader culture as well?**

NG: When I started writing this novel, my initial physical manifestations of what protest meant was the Occupy protests, in terms of people just sitting en mass, outside landmarks in Washington, St Paul's in London, in New York on Wall Street etc. And as I started writing it, the Black Lives Matter movement kind of coalesced from being sporadic protests in different cities around America into something that suddenly felt

like it was the national conversation. And I realised that what I was writing was going to come out in an environment where people didn't think they would ever need to protest again. Obama was in power; in the UK we'd had over a decade of a Labour government. Then you see what happens with Black Lives Matter, and the marches against Trump, and Brexit, and #MeToo, and you suddenly realise, as this book was coming out, it's coming into an environment where people really understand the importance of leaving your house and being part of a mass. There's lots you can do with your singular voice and how the digital world has given everyone the ability to amplify their voice, but actually, sometimes the physical power, the power of being a physical mass on the streets, one out of 1,000,000, out of 100,000, it's really, really important. So I was really aware of that as the book was about to come out and I was really impatient because, obviously, by the time you deliver a book you've got to wait for ages for it to come out. And I was really keen for it to be read within where we are within the cultural moment, it felt important to me, as well as where we are in terms of the visibility of queer culture within wider society.

I think that what *Drag Race* has done to bring elements of queer culture into wider societies had a massive effect on how this book is read. So there'll be a lot of people who won't necessarily read a lot of queer fiction who will read this because they saw *Drag Race* and *Pose* and it puts the book within a certain frame. How they then react to the book compared to those things? I can't say, that depends on where you come from as a reader. You know, I've had people who got it, said, 'Oh, I love *Pose*' and then I said, 'But it's not like *Pose*'. And it was never meant to be *Pose*, when I was writing the book, *Pose* it didn't exist. But what I'm interested in is writing books that sort of add to the queer canon, and add to the sum of queer experience. So it's interesting that, you know, obviously, I've written a book about voguing and it's come out at the same time as *Pose* and there was a novel by Joseph Cassara called *The House of Impossible Beauties* that came out the year before. We're using voguing as a template, but we're all using it in different ways. And that's what I really love. And that's really encapsulates the possibilities of what art can do. And if you're not queer, if you're straight, you take that for granted. There could be ten novels about cricket, and no one will be bothered about it. Now there's a whole slew of things being made



about voguing, about the ball scene, about drag culture, and they're all completely different. And some are more critical than others. Some are more avant garde than others, some use it to talk about other things, some pieces of work, sort of have a purer focus. That's brilliant. I think the more the merrier.

**TK: So then your latest novel, *Diary of a Film* is a complete 180 in terms of setting and context. It's about a director premiering his latest film at a prestigious European festival. What was your inspiration behind it?**

NG: From a reader's perspective, it probably does feel like a 180 because it is a very different book on the surface from *This Brutal House*, and indeed, when I'm writing a book, I'm very much driven by the idea that each book I'm writing is a reaction to the last one. So my inclination is always to move away from what I've done with the last work and focus on something new. I'm not really interested in repeating myself.

With *Diary of a Film*, it's a book about cinema and auteurship and creating work, and I was interested, from a framework perspective, in writing a book that really explored the making of a film and how the people who are making a film live with that process – during the making of the film and afterwards. So that's where the inspiration came from.

**TK: The book addresses themes of creativity and queer love. Why were these themes important to you? And what were you intending to explore with them?**

Yes, it's a book about creativity and the process. It is a theme that I took from my novel, *All the Days and Nights*, which was about a portrait painter working in America in the late 1970s, who is dying and assessing her life's work. When that book finished, there was something that felt tonally unfinished for me, and as I was working through *This Brutal House*, I realised that I wanted to do next was write another book that, whilst not repeating myself, was very much using the aspects of creativity, and actually, makers – people who make creative work – and using that as a canvas to explore on a bigger scale. That's why *Diary of a Film* is about the experience of an

auteur, someone who writes and directs, who literally dreams up and makes that dream of what a film can be into a reality, and in doing that, and being that excellent at it and that celebrated, the toll it takes on him, his eco-system, the people around him. So that is the main canvas of it.

In terms of queer love, there are a series of love stories in the book. There's the relationship between the director and his actors, the director with his own family, the flourishing relationship between the actors themselves, a tragic story of a relationship that's cut off in its prime from one of the other characters, Cosima, whose story is really integral to the unfolding of the book. And I guess what I wanted to explore here, in a marked difference to *This Brutal House* was more aspects of queer joy. That felt really important. Not only in terms of the relationships with the actors, but also in terms of the director maestro and his family. There's a sense of completeness and queer joy and domestic joy that felt important to envelop in their personal trajectories.

**TK: Does the protagonist's experience with the ecstatic but draining nature of creativity mirror your own creative process?**

NG: Not literally (laughs) but I guess what I'm trying to look at in *Diary of a Film* and also earlier in *All The Days and Nights*, they are both metaphors for writing and thinking about making work and actually doing that work. So in that way, they mirror some of the things I think about, but not necessarily in a literal way. I suppose I allude in *Diary of a Film* to the alchemy of how things are made. I guess that still feels like a joyful mystery to me, and I'm not necessarily that interested in deconstructing that, but just accepting that this kind of alchemy exists in the right kind of conditions, and how you go through those times with the processes you have, and I suppose, the books are about people who are trying to regain a sense of that alchemy when that alchemy has failed them.

**TK: You made some different decisions regarding the look and feel of this book compared to *This Brutal House*. This time we have a central character. And**

**stylistically, the prose has few paragraphs and quotations marks. What were you exploring through these choices?**

NG: What links the writing of *This Brutal House* and *Diary of a Film* together, and, in fact, all my books, is that I write the book, or the story, pretty much in the way that feels like the right way to do it. So when I wrote *This Brutal House*, which is very much a novel of voices, and different voices, and different ways of speaking and presenting voice and speech and consciousness, it felt like it was the right way to do it. With *Diary of a Film*, because it's written in the first person, it's 'I', it's very personal, internal, it's concentrated and philosophical. So again, writing it in a very concentrated way felt like it was the right way to do it. And as to the way its written as all one block and no punctuation, each paragraph is a block of text, it felt like it was the right way to do it. I didn't even think about breaking up the text in that way, because when you think, you don't think in paragraphs, so that is mirroring that kind of process for me. It felt logical and right.

**TK: I know that you're always finishing up a book as your latest one is being released. Could you give us some clues about what is coming next?**

NG: (Laughs) The million-dollar question I guess! I am writing a new book, yeah, for sure. There's not a lot I can talk about, because until the book is done, I'm not ready to let it out in the world. Talking about a work-in-progress seems like holding such a fragile little object in your hands, so just to make it real by even speaking about it makes it feel like it's in danger of collapsing to me. So, yeah, I'm always that way. It's different to *Diary of a Film*, for sure, but let's see what I have when I've finished it. Hopefully soon, hopefully this year, fingers crossed.

**TK: Thank you for this! You know how much I love talking to you.**

NG: My pleasure, it's been so much fun!



Niven Govinden is the author of six novels and many short stories. His work explores the imagined lives of artists, reckless Bohemians, and people with dual heritage. He writes about love, death, and how to live. Govinden's novel *This Brutal House* revives the *Pose*, *Paris is Burning*-era of New York City ballroom, and it weaves a story of queerness, protest, social justice and loss. *This Brutal House* was shortlisted for the Polari Prize and the Gordon Burns prize, and longlisted for the Jhalak Prize. His latest novel *Diary of a Film* is being published on 18 February 2021.

## For L.

[Matt Kennedy]

/

Wake before you  
My curtains are golden  
And the light spills in under them  
Filling the room with yellow  
You sleep curled on your side  
Like a baby  
Felt like I'd shown my hand when I called you baby that night  
The night you pulled me toward you again  
Both our tastes a mess in each other's mouths  
I only sleep naked when I'm with you  
And forget I can take my shirt off often  
But that's something I prefer to let you do  
I haven't ever been sure what to call home  
Everything I own is in that golden little room or  
It's with you

But when you kiss my eyelids  
I think home  
Could be here

//

A guy called pink  
Made of flesh  
Unearthed I believe in April  
A year ago  
When you inject testosterone scar tissue builds up over time and you have to force

the needle through the skin's memory layers each time you remind it you're  
trying to get closer to a truth

The sense of something underneath the surface

Gifted an opportunity to create your genesis I think you should take to telling people  
you are approaching your first birthday

This body is baby boy blue and blotched

Bruised in places that would make you blush

Did I fall or did you bite me?

There's always a gentle hue from where the needle goes in

A small swell

A slow slow death

I remember one of the arguments against HRT was that if the world began to end  
trans people would be the first to go because of our embodied dependency on  
hormones

How long do you think I have left?

A more nuanced argument would be that we are all heavily reliant on the  
pharmacopornographic system

That we all rely on something created in the context of the body politic to manoeuvre,  
ebb and flow

Flow and form flows from that tiny vial for me

Yes, I would probably be one of the first to go

But for now, I'm approaching my first birthday

///

Did you know what Napoleon said to his wife while he was away?

At a certain war

Pillaging no doubt

I was always convinced of Napoleon's stature as homoerotic

Anyway, the man was invested in an Eros that manifested in honesty

A truth that the skin replicates before we wash it away

He said

“Home in 3 days. Don’t wash.”

I began to see his point

When I found myself reluctant to wash my sheets after you left

And the clothes I had on that day

Inked with air and smoke that you had spent time in

Time breathing in

And out

I found myself even more filthy than Napoleon wanting to smoke the ends of every

cigarette bud in the bowl we decided to make our own

In case one held your taste

*IV*

You wait with a small ring of keys strapped to black pants

Sweat gathering in the palms of my hands

Here is a memory of change

A cafe filled with arrogance while we argued over who would pay

Later a space to grow decided that heteronormativity demands the boy pay

But I left boy at the door when you said “that was the first time you said my name”

I wanted to be a door you would go through

Wanted my love to be a “doing” thing

Wanted to be the rings on your fingers

Wanted to be that ring of keys

Wanted to be used to open, keep shape and decorate

Wanted to freeze again

When it’s cold here, it’s memory weather

And I remember the surface of the water

How we looked at it

Because we were too blushed to look at each other



Matt Kennedy (he/him) is a poet, activist and boxer from Cork, Ireland. He has been involved in activism pertaining to trans liberation, trans healthcare and reproductive justice for the past 5 years and is dedicated to anti-capitalist grassroots action. His master's thesis involved a queer autoethnographic exploration of his own trans masculinity and catalysed his PhD in University College Dublin on Transnormativity and the Everyday Lifeworlds of Young Trans Individuals in Ireland. Instagram: @doormattttttt

## toast

[Al Anderson]

on this bad old earth, eco-fascist  
brews hops in a shitbrown bathtub  
that's the kind of landscape  
we're working with, sis  
the only child at a birthday party  
I text you saying, Hug & mean  
the reason the sky is beautiful  
is it's ashamed  
& that means I drank red bull  
in my underwear at 10am  
was a purple gash across the far wall  
& you are a pearl  
I find under my tongue  
soft anxiety at the tail of a joy spurt  
friends don't leave but fade in a way  
less compelling than memories  
or *God* he opined before  
*always do as I do*  
*it gets me off*

Al Anderon's 'Tenderloin' is published by Blush in 2021. Some recent poems can be found in *Spam*, *Datableed*, *Spoonfeed* and *Modern Queer Poets*. He's doing a PhD at the University of East Anglia concerned with faggotry, embarrassment and the Baroque.

## The First Two Voice Notes of a Conversation (from Manchester to London) [Vivien Holmes]

*Oh! To live in this bathtub with you, my wonderful friend! You're incredible, I thank the world every day for bringing us together, you perfect being, how can you deign me with your presence? How can I begin to pay back the rewards of simply having you in the world?*

I am in the bath (a bubble bath), it's 8pm. I'm suicidal (a little bit). My mother bought me this organic bubble bath that she told me is good for the environment. It smells like honey and the last day of spring, but it didn't really do much the first time round so I used a lot more than before thinking 'oh well, it'll only do a few baths but I'll have a good time regardless and it's good she isn't calling me a man any more' but then it bubbled up with more bubbles than I really could ever do with, like a dishwasher filled with Persil. I listen back to the start of the message I sent then quickly stop it when I hear the rumble in my voice. I make a note to myself, not in an app but in my brain, to look up some of those training videos.

I'm sitting in the bath, (a bubble bath), sending voice messages to my perfect friend (far away) and not thinking about my overworked roommate and the broken dishwasher and the emails from the old landlord. Everything is mostly good for now. I am nothing but a head; the specifics of my body have vanished beneath the candlelit bubbles, great icebergs deceiving the world about the sea monster underneath. They think it's just more iceberg and they've been taught to be afraid of that but how could they know! How could they know that I am lurking and waiting, vast thighs covered in mouths opening and closing thousands of times per second. I am Bilquis! I am Leviathan!

There's a noise somewhere distant. A drip, I think from the flat above, or is the roommate back yet? They don't emerge much, strange mothman figure. The flat white



tiles skulk on the walls, staring me down, staring deep into my very soul but the joke's on them! I skulk too.

Soft love songs without pronouns bounce around the small bathroom and I pick and choose the moment I can manage not hearing the sweetness of the lyrics to hold closed my nostrils and tragus (the devil's horns block the swelling ocean) and plunge into a tiny private world. Beneath the waves I'm an undiscovered treasure, a yet-to-emerge unknowingness. I massage my face, my skin, my scalp, daring myself to look after myself and taking that dare and running with it. Self-love as per doctor's orders as per friends' orders. I blow bubbles up to the surface, let myself sink further down and feel the grit at the bottom of the tub against my back as my feet become adventurers of their own up on the craggy taps.

Up! Back into the world and into the light and the next track has started, the echoed tin of small phone speakers hiding out in the sink. The head's seaweed now drapes down, it reaches the shoulders now, and I smile. And there's a ping and a response and my heart erupts with joy and love. I slosh, I try to sit up so I swipe the swipe and dry my fingertip enough to crack open the messages, to read what lies within, to read the voice of my soulmate,

*I can't get my voice notes to work shit twat! I tried to send you one but i think it got deleted anyway. It said approximately: I'm waiting for a coach and shit it just arrived and i just started a cigarette! (I'm now on the coach). I love you and cannot wait to see you, how dare you be so nice to me you evil person, how can you think I come any way close to deserving you. I just got back from the theatre too, I got a new job! It's exciting but I'm scared.*

Vivien Holmes is a new writer based in Manchester. Her published debut 'CircuitJammer' is forthcoming in Speculative Masculinities from Galli Books in early 2021, and her self-published work can be found at [genderphage.itch.io](https://genderphage.itch.io) and [ethermech.bandcamp.com/releases](https://ethermech.bandcamp.com/releases).

## Repetition Without Examination

[Lew Furber]

The waitress said,  
as if it were not extraordinary,  
as if insanity sat far over the horizon,

as if  
– as a restaurant –  
they had at their disposal  
only bemused resignation over the matter,

as if  
the mysteries of the universe  
paled against mise-en-place,

as if  
cause and effect  
were but the dream of a madman:

'the food comes out when it's cooked.

IS

THAT

OKAY?'

[emphasis mine]

'No,' I said,  
and the waitress exploded.

Lew Furber is a writer, classical guitarist, and guitar teacher. His work has most recently appeared in *Clavmag* and *Capsule Stories*, and in 2020 he was longlisted for the *Galley Beggar Press Short Story Prize*. Find him on Twitter: @LewFurber

## A poem for my IUD

[Lotte Reford]

My partner is afraid of the dog pissing  
on graves and I wouldn't want to teach  
that sort of superstition to a child. Many of the graves  
are old and tree-eaten and by any metric the bones  
beneath them are forgotten. Is it a quiet radical act  
when I return to the sexual health clinic, yes, 30 now,  
and say Stick another one in there will you? Last time –  
which yes was five years ago believe it  
or not this was me the same creature  
but so different – the nurse said Oh good  
twenty-five, when it comes out you'll be  
ready to think about children. Sure  
I think about them often, wipe snot and things  
for money wonder about their teeth and how  
small they are, the teeth, sitting unknowing  
straight and white and soon they will be pushed  
rudely out by the real teeth which will do  
the grownup biting. When I was 22 I tried  
for the first time to get an intrauterine device  
inserted and that visit the doctor said  
after bumping up against my little cervix,  
tiny locked door, Come back when you've  
had a baby. Please get this straight,  
when you ask me to tick boxes on your forms  
I will, sure, but looking inside me doesn't mean  
you know me at all. I am as afraid as anything  
of the seeds in a pomegranate and of weird bug  
holes in leaves where larvae have chomped

and after the inserted IUD I bled for weeks and  
weeks, and it hurt like a fist  
holding itself soso tight below my belly-  
button and into my back and thighs and I had  
a cold the first time I fucked after too so stuff was coming  
from everywhere! What has my IUD seen me through:  
many strangers, the two French men, the girl with  
the cowboy boots who I met at a cheese counter,  
three countries. That's liberation, baby! Yes! In Tennessee  
I posed in front of a doorway like a shark's sharpsharpsharp  
mouth with my girlfriend and inside there were loads  
of dead hermit crabs and WHEN THEY COME  
FOR OUR GUNS WE'LL GIVE EM OUR BULLETS  
and we were so far from the sea of course the hermit  
crabs were dead, and they have no teeth. It isn't about  
what I want or don't want, more about having to bite  
so much! Honestly, I don't even know what I'm biting.  
Have you ever seen pelicans diving  
down to the shallows to eat at sunset, big beaks  
happyopen, dodging small docked boats?  
They do it every single evening, yeh, every evening  
filling up on microplastics! I watched three times, it was cool,  
but then I got food poisoning. I've got all my real teeth,  
with fillings added too, and I have  $\frac{3}{4}$  wisdom and god the world  
is beautiful, isn't it beautiful? Look at it!  
Don't you want to put your foot against its lovely teeth?

Lotte Mitchell Reford is a Glasgow-based poet, writer and editor. She has previously had work published in, among other places, *The Moth*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Hobart*, Pilot Press' Modern Queer Poets anthology, *New Writing Scotland* and *Copper Nickel*. Her first Pamphlet, *and we were so far from the sea of course the hermit crabs were dead* is upcoming from Broken Sleep Books.



# Translated Copy of Untitled Document 1

[Felix del Campo]

1

incandescent. precise. completely polished metallic it explodes, it presses, it pushes. fast fuel green fluid runs through plastic ducts and spa spa sparks it explodes, precise, incandescent, metallic polished. ups and downs it compresses he speeds up. wind hits against his face, air suffocates his nose air floods him. he quickly turning then he accelerates. they approach, roars bursting from afar he hears the gas chasing him, rumbling in, coming faster than him fast while ejected metal fluids ducts act faster and now, at his side they are, he is surrounded by brumbrumbrum. he, his chest over the shiny metallic perfect oil tank and his sharp chin fused in the solid helmet extended to the front. he, while the air on his face caresses him faster softer. he looks at them. *you don't have the balls* they say. *youdonthavetheballs* noisy words brumbrumbrum screaming roaring words surrounding him, almost like hunting him but not because words can't act, can't hurt can't be felt in your skin, because is more like words come off your skin your mouth your tongue numb from cold air, can they? or maybe no words make nobody but if we cannot word outside this he can't thinkbefeel on it outside it, whatever that means and he, with his hand on the spinning, accelerates his heart pumps his blood is fuel is green fluid flowing and very fast flowing through plastic veins leaking through his metal body from the tank to the gleaming aluminium heart: a perfect machine transforms the power of his blood by adding tons of pressure and a spark, is just this simple: in a burst, the piston goes down then up he pumps more blood to be burnt transformed liquid then gas its power compressed his hand accelerates more air soft cold in his face, more air in his lungs more fire firing faster the rough asphalt filing the rubber but he is strong he is precise he is a machine that exploding explodes he is alive he is fucking alive he has the balls pressure power transforms



very fast wind on his face. he protects himself behind his back. he is scared. with his hands firmly attached to the red cold oil tank where black angular shapes harden the silhouette, he anchors to the motorbike while his father accelerates but oh! he is so scared. he comes closer against his father's back *don't go this fast dad* he says, *please I'm scare dad please don't run this fast.* but his body is small. and he clings to the machine to his back. feeling the wild air, thinking what if he gets confused what if he fails? what if his hands rise from the tank, if his chest separates from his back? what if they are split forever? he can be dragged by the wild wind and float float float towards the sky while his father roars away and roars very fast as he tries to keep hold of the air and then he realises that the air leaks through his fingers afraid he comes closer to his father's back please *don't run* he whispers he soft, afraid to get lost afraid to disappear but his useless words, his small disappearing words don't weight don't count they stay behind him, quickly dissolving out of reach as the trees as the earth beside him: these words are powerless. *hold on to me tight* he says *you need to follow my body with your body* and the machine, its metallic body on the asphalt, moves very close very fast he can't fail won't fail



there are balls there are balls incandescent precise and polished his heart beating feeling fucking alive he slows down and in the middle of the square he stops the others follow closely but now he won he's roared louder he's run faster he's been perfect tough solid now he is untouchable but he is scared he is alone all around him shiny metallic beasts fiercely burning his blood surrounding him *not bad for someone like you* they say *you have the balls* they roar and slowly moving their body very solid and with millimetric precision matched with a walk expressionless emotionless conceived to show respect to demand respect one of them approaches him and with his five

fingers outstretched he extends his hand *we will see each other* and he with his arm afraid without expressing emotion with his open hand he grasps his hand squeezing very hard because he has the balls he has strength he is not afraid demanding respect hand shakes hand gazes intersect bodies stiff skin dead *see you soon* he says they leave



his arms vibrating but solid, he holds the handlebar, calm. behind him, his hands on his waist he is holding him, grabbing him, squeezing and bringing his chest closer towards his back, feeling his breath on the nape of his neck. he, flat dark road ahead, moving slightly on his seat seeking to feel his bulge, the little red shiny tip of his cock getting closer to his wanting butt, growing fatter as he drives his motorcycle pump pressure power transforms and they two they very fast move through the road. he controls he knows his course he is now strong they are friends he thinks he is a man and little by little his hands, while his incandescent metallic body vibrates against his fleshy body, he protecting him while his hands begin to hug him from behind. they all moves he accelerates faster heartbeats veins pumping more blood more fuel in the iron armour lust fast he slowly lifts his shirt he softly pierces with his fingers his inexperienced skin he pumps lust fast they moves faster he kisses his neck he feels his dry mouth dead mouth skin rough scratching his neck he pinches his hairy nipples and he, with his bare chest, he is a wall he stops the air and protects him from flinging away from disappearing and with one of his hands while stopping the air he reaches behind looking for his balls with one hand he grabs his ass cock erects hard against ass climbing back hot red closer closer pump oil moving lust fast power pressure transformed trees trees as they move trees air wall he sucks his back and faster he hugs him lays his cheek against his naked back where sparkling little drops blinking tenderly run through from the neck to the ass crack he licks them there salty pearls of lust melting as his tongue collapses against its fragile surface because they are friends

they protect each other *dude what the fuck are you doing?* he screaming at him his fingers squeeze his waist to warn him. in front of them a car is approaching he makes a sharp turn and they return to their way *what the fuck were you thinking about? did you lose your mind?* and he answers *nevermind I'm sorry* thinking about nothing while his thoughts disappear dragged by the useless weightless air as if it never ever existed because thoughts like this with no words make body powerless numb (I guess)



there are balls there are balls incandescent precise and polished his heart beating feeling fucking alive he slows down and in the middle of the square he stops. the others follow closely but now he won, he's roared louder he's run faster he's been perfect. tough. solid now he is untouchable but he is scared. all around him shiny metallic beasts fiercely burning his blood surrounding him and one of them approaches him, moving his body very quickly, hesitating, dodging his gaze, clutching his hand very hard digging his nails on his palm and he awaits hesitating in the middle of the round, engines roaring and his body burning his blood exploding in that metallic cave and he closer they almost touching each other's skins he spits on the ground and looks at him *don't do it again, do you understand me?* he nervous, withholding forcefully on his face all the energy released exploding inside his metallic chest all the fuel that runs through his body and burns him alive and gives him this movement *don't do it again, you don't know who we are, we will fucking destroy you faggot, go suck it off your stupid boyfriend.* he spits on his motorcycle walking away and he, confused enraged and scared starts the engine accelerates and very fast no lust he drives away very fast he trying to follow his body with his hands against his back on the protected distant solid cold oil tank clinging to his waist nailing his fingers deeper harder feeling that he disappears floating in the sky without weight trees trees pressure power transformed while the force of the roaring engine burning incandescent drives him far away far from his defenceless numb body and accelerating he, burning the memory burning his chest squeezing hard against solid back its a wall its safe he protecting him ass cock erects

hard against ass climbing back hot red closer close taking him far far far away they are friends *what the hell are you doing?* scream from his back then sharp turn avoids car coming towards them *what the hell are you're thinking* scream from his back and he tells him from his back he says: *nothing*.



Felix del Campo is a Spanish writer currently living in London. His writing explores the confusing space of translation, living memory and being lost between languages.



## Vehicular accident as metaphor for dermatillomania

[Ruth Horsfall]

I feel like I'm being reversed over by a pink truck  
filled with every childhood memory  
and the weight of the truck feels cosy  
The truck driver will be my crush  
and they will love running over me  
They won't be able to forget the look on my face  
when they tell me that I can't escape my childhood  
but that they love me regardless

My mum said she didn't feel moved by gravesites and I felt  
unbearably sad not knowing what *moves* her  
A gravesite is so insufficient to anyone's needs and I identify strongly with that

I stopped moisturising my body because I eventually would reach a point where  
no part of me was dry  
and there was nothing left to moisturise, and I would feel unbearably sad  
So now I am five different kinds of dry, depending on which part of  
my body we're talking about

I tell people I want to stop picking my scabs  
but I'm lying to them  
nothing feels as good as picking a scab feels

I feel disconnected from people when i learn they don't pick their scabs  
I want to run my hands erotically over their skin urgently, with purpose  
except I'm looking for scabs  
don't make me cum, let me pick your scabs

we'll start with your physical ones and then the emotional ones

I want to talk about my feelings forever but also

never again and I'm tired

I want to lie in bed until the plant that is growing on my chest of drawers

grows so much that it reaches down to kiss me

let me lie here with my breasts buried in my armpits

let me lie here with my chin tipped up so the tears roll down my temples

let me lie here with my mucus pooling on my upper lip

let me lie here with my shedding scalp

let me lie here with my flaking skin and picked scabs

let me lie here with my life

let me lie here with my lie

let me lie here

let me lie

let me

Ruth is a writer living in the UK, but grew up a settler on the unceded land of the Wiradjuri people. She has conventional interests such as reading and writing poetry, and Harry Styles.

## Unbound

[Yas Necati]

Tie me up

To the corner of the bed, or the lamp, or to anywhere really.

I don't often meet women who can rearrange my insides with the tug of their fingers  
and I'm not asking you to stop

In the dim lights of an AirBnB rental

you kissed my jawline and I kissed the insides of your thighs.

I feel you like the kind of music you feel just below your breasts, deep and central  
strong as a bassline

soft as an open ended chord

So here is my body

And 48 hours

And a chest unbound with stretch marks like strings

you can play

or use to bind me to furniture and fuck me however you like

Yas Necati is a writer and performance poet based in London. They explore themes of queer and trans identity, migrant identity, mental health, recovery, community and resistance in their writing. They are part of London Queer Writers, and recently set up writing groups for people of colour. When they are not immersed in poetry, they campaign on gender-based and queer based-rights, run workshops on self care, and occasionally perform as their drag act alter-ego, Turkish pop star Tarkan.

## Waves

[Christopher Lloyd]

There is a beach that nobody knows about, with dark grey sand and sewage runoff and pebbles that are bricks and endless mudflats, he told me. The first time he took me there, I was not prepared for its strangeness, even though he had warned me. I pulled the car onto a small bank by the side of the main road, swerving across traffic to do so, and nestled the bumper into the hedge. He was there waiting for me and as soon as my door was open. He grinned and dipped through a small path, bracketed by white breeze blocks and metal bars. I followed him and we emerged first into a small thicket, the ground covered with empty tv boxes, polystyrene, black bags full of litter, and rocks pushed up from the beach. Now that we were out of view of the road, he clasped the tops of my fingers, and gestured me to move quicker, so that I was by his side.

From the trees, we were then on the beach: to the left, a sewage pipe, taller than a house, and above it on the cliff a power station; to the right, a ridge of trees and bushes, behind them a business park of some kind; in front, slick mudflats, riveted with still water and dotted with seabirds. The ground was not sand nor even shingle, but brick, broken rock, as if buildings had been crumbled by a giant's hand and scattered across the bay. Further out, the tide sat still, barely moving. He said nothing as he led me down along the beach. We walked slowly, for the rocks beneath our feet were sharp and loose and difficult to traverse. Occasionally, he would see a brick with a place name or date on it, worn away to an oval rather than its original rectangle, and then call out the name. It was as if this was the only way he could say things to me, via these distorted bricks. They were local towns I knew and others that I didn't. He pointed out birds. This odd litany stood in place of speech, but I was surprised that it did not bother me. Names of things stood in place of questions, proper nouns bearing the weight of silent dialogue. I felt as though he was telling me something about himself in code: it was my job, it seemed, to puzzle it out. We found detritus on the beach: a bicycle tyre, balloons, pen. I kept a note of them on my phone, perhaps as a way of

making sense of the place, making sense of him. It became an evolving list of stuff, out of place things on a beach that itself seemed out of place.

After what seemed like half an hour of slow progress, we abruptly reached the shoreline. We skirted some of the mudflats and reached a band of rough sand darkened by the tide. He threw off his trainers and stained white socks and hurled himself into the water, splashing up to his thighs. Come join me, he said. I'll stay here, I said, it looks too cold. He looked at me in a way that seemed as though I'd hurt him, a tenderness at the corner of his eye that made me feel off-balance. But he snapped back to his usual self. Okay, but you're missing out.

I watched him move in the water, but sitting on the wet sand, as though we belonged to different elements. He was so outside of himself on that beach, free in a way from all the strictures that usually held him so tightly. Clumps of wet sand and strings of seaweed arced through the air as he dredged them up with his long toes. The water must have been cold as his ankles were whitening. I finally got him to come out and he let me dry his feet with my t-shirt; we were around the bend from the main part of the beach where people might have seen us. The threat of onlookers seemed to shape our time on that beach, even though it was a place that nobody knew, or cared to know. Once dry, he leapt up and raced back along the beach. He said he had things to do and would contact me later. Just like that, he'd slipped through the hedge and was gone.

/

Found: a dead rat, half of a green ceramic bath, a used condom, Victorian bricks, rabbit droppings (but no rabbits), a blown-out tire, a drum from an industrial-sized washing machine.

/

We'd met the week previous in a field behind the castle. That makes it sound weirder than it was, though there is something odd about how we came together and then eventually came apart. It was a summer festival, a kind of city gathering: food, games,

amusements, a few local singers. There were stalls and information booths and free badges. I saw him in a rickety red tent, billowing at the sides, while a drag queen crooned 'Ain't that a kick in the head'. It feels fated now. The queen was off-pitch and lacklustre, but her makeup gleamed in the daytime sun and I thought I had never seen someone so radiant before. She winked at me.

On the opposite side of the tent, he stood there with a friend, in a sleeveless top and baggy jeans. They seemed to have stumbled into the tent, unknowingly, and the friend was clearly mocking the singer, making faces and muttering. It was not obvious how the two men related to one another, or how they found themselves here. The one man, awkward in his body, his clothes, made darting glances my way. His eyes didn't stop moving and he shifted his weight from foot to foot. The other man, taller, stockier, had a fixed grin on his face, non-stop talking. Eventually he slipped out—I did not see him go—and almost as suddenly the man in the sleeveless top was moving towards me. He nodded, smiled, said something under his breath that I did not catch, struggled to keep his body still. His restlessness made me nervous at first and I did most of the talking (he was quiet even then) but the way he kept my gaze was unsettling, in the best possible way. His restless presence, that is, the way he remained so much *there* but simultaneously *elsewhere*, made me feel both safe and unmoored all at once.

We left the tent and wandered the stalls a bit longer; I bought us some popcorn which he over-salted. As we walked, he gorged on it, as though he hadn't eaten all day. He was very slim, but still had a kind of solidity in his frame that I liked. The afternoon went by and we talked about random things; he made jokes; I brushed against his side a few times. When I did he hardened, looked around a little. It made me feel like he was being watched, or at least felt as though he was. We eventually found a huge tree and ducked beneath its low branches. Climbing up it a few feet, we sat on a branch, legs dangling like children. I tried to throw popcorn kernels into his mouth, and he pretended to rock back and forth, as though he was going to fall to the ground below. Even that play made me nervous; he seemed like he might really drop down at any moment.

As it got dark, he said he had to leave, but would text me. We swapped numbers, and after his name—he entered it into my phone directly—he put a little x.



Every time he would then text me, it was like I was talking to a teenager, but the gesture was sweet. It endeared me to him, even though he was otherwise so elusive.

/

Most days that I saw him, he wore old grey joggers: thin at the knees, tired elastic at the waist, sagging at the bum, and frayed at the ankles. Even in the hot weather he wore them. It was either these or once-dark-blue jeans that were washed to paleness. His plain t-shirts always hung loose on him, tenting his body, but this made me want to see it more. There was something about his physicality that resisted capture, that kept me at arm's length, unable to see his outline clearly. Yet, on so many of those warm days we just sat on the beach, sometimes in small rocky coves that we built for ourselves, to protect from the breeze and the sight of people walking along. He let me scoop my hand up his back, rubbing his sharp spine. I leant in to move around the front, but he'd always pull away, not wanting me to feel his stomach and chest. We would kiss often but he never let it progress further. There was always the hint of something more, but we had nowhere to go, and he would not let anything happen on the beach.

Can't we go to your place? I would ask, and he would say, No, it's not possible. Come to mine then, I'd say, I'll drive, but he would refuse. I never knew why, even though I asked many times. He would mumble half-excuses, but I didn't want to push it as any amount of resistance from me could, I thought, make him disappear completely. If he didn't have such a pull to him, such a way of talking about the birds and the sea and the way that he liked my hair, and such a fulsome laugh, rippling across his skin, I would not have gone back. He's leading you on, my friends said more than once; he's probably straight or in denial or something, don't waste your time.

But our time on that beach never felt wasted. If anything, it opened out the days like nothing I've experienced since. Watching the water shine on the mudflats and seeing the coastline of a different country coming into view across the channel as the haze cleared, and sensing birds swoop in circles above us, his hand grasping mine beneath my thigh, time just dissolved.

/

Found: a bird's skull, a spray can, a heap of pennies, smashed wine bottles, a chapstick.

/

One day, he led me by the hand to a bank of grass running between a muddy slope and the fence at the edge of the slag heap. He wouldn't tell me where we were going, but the route to get there involved many about-turns along the headland and then down to the shore-level and back up to a worn dirt-path. His palms were moist and chapped, but his grip was so firm and solid that I felt like I was being protected. Holding my hand as if I were a child likely to get lost, he ushered me across this wet lunar landscape.

The horse was chained to a wooden peg in the ground, so brittle and flimsy that the animal could probably have broken free if it had wanted. It was scrawny and had a matted mane and muddy haunches and a dank smell. It shook its mane and huffed gently as we approached.

Hi pal, he said, and the horse shifted its weight and genuinely seemed to change expression: the horse softened, shook its neck a little and dipped its head. He pulled the horse's flank into his side. In his pocket were some carrots and an apple and he fed them to the horse one by one, the creature taking them so gently from his hand. I tried to stroke the horse's head for a while, but it did not want me or my attention. Only he could charm this creature.

After twenty minutes or so, we left. The horse huffed, turning away as though dejected. I don't know if I am projecting onto the horse now (or if I was also then) but it was startling to see it so visually changed by this man's slight presence. On the walk back the view had changed. Milky skies and deep ripples of sea across the mud. It was then that he hugged me and we kissed and he said that he really enjoyed my company and that he was so glad we'd met. I said I felt the same and that I wanted to see more of him, that we should try and find some time to meet away from this coast.

I know, he said. The conversation then fell quiet and I did not bring it up again that afternoon. Instead, we played in the mud, daring each other to walk further and further out into it, but he won as I was always more scared of getting stuck. There was a fearlessness to him that was so unexpected. He seemed so playful, so childlike, out on the mud that it seemed almost like a punishment to call him back in and walk back up to my car. Are you sure you don't want to get in and come with me? I asked. I'm sure, I can't tonight. I have to go, he said.

A furtive hug and he was gone.

/

Found: a wrench, a roll of dog-poo bags, a charm bracelet, a few nails, lager cans, newspaper that had wrapped chips, a cigarette packet.

/

The next day we took a different path and reached a stack of dark boulders that narrowed the way, so that only walkers and bikes could possibly fit through. To the side, more rocks, much bigger, formed a kind of wall, a barricade bounded by chain-link fencing. He pulled me towards one, without hesitation, away from the path. Anyone coming the other way would have seen us, but there was an element of shade here. As he ushered my body against the coarse rock, he put his hand behind my head, cushioning it so delicately, in a way that seemed at odds with our surroundings. What he could not know, and what I did not tell him (but would have, were we to have more time together), was that as a child I had fallen from a height and cracked open my skull along that fracture which had, as a baby, fused together. He was holding me together in ways that he never would understand.

He pressed me against the rock, gently pinned by his slim frame and long fingers. We kissed and nuzzled for some time. I tried to inhale him but all I could get were hints of cheap deodorant shot through with wafts of the beach and the industry around us. At times, my hands moved down around his body, trying to get more of him but he'd lift my hands back up. There was something chaste about this, but also

frustrating. We were entangled so much on that rock that I wanted to become part of him even more. After what felt like an hour, our faces red and flush, he suddenly jumped away, rearranging himself, when we heard some voices approaching. He looked out over the clifftop. I pretended to tie a shoelace. A group of young men, thick and sweaty, shuffled towards us.

Alright, he said, where you off to? I realised then that he knew the men, of course he did, and they seemed easy in one another's company, but I stood to the side, like a third wheel at a school dance. I tried to shrink myself, away from the lot of them, their masculinity worn so easily in their tracksuits. One of them spat a few times on the floor. Another flicked a gold lighter in his hand, tossing the flame in circles. Folding into myself I pretended to look at things on my phone. He neither introduced me to them, nor acknowledged I was there, even though the men were looking me up and down throughout the interaction. After a few minutes of low chatter, his voice changing in timbre and tone somehow, the men walked off. He turned to look at me and we knew something had just taken place. We both knew a shift had occurred but did not put a name or form to it. It was clear that he was someone else when I wasn't around; or even when I was. I left the beach early that afternoon and I didn't come back for a few days.

When I did, it was because he texted me, *where r u? come see me*. The directness opened up a fault line in me, as it had done from that first day when we met in the field behind the castle.

/

The summer weeks went along like this. Day after day, I'd cancel plans and skip work and avoid friends and family to be with him. We kissed and held each other. Made up stories and jokes and I would tell him things from my childhood, about my mother's hobbies and not really knowing my father. He would listen and ask thoughtful questions but never disclose much back. But, on the last day that I saw him, a day that I did not know was the final time, he told me that he had never been with another man before. Well, not with anyone before. Only the friend that I'd seen him with at that city

fair knew we were even spending time together. His other friends, I imagined, just assumed he was out on the coast, alone.

As he started talking, the words fell out, too many of them, his speech quick and breathless. He muddled up phrases and ran sentences together, so it was difficult to follow everything he was saying. There were mentions of his room, of a little sister, of maybe a broken-down car. These were glimpses into his world that I had not heard before. I ate them up. He mentioned the men that we had seen weeks earlier and how they had been lingering more often where he lived. He let on that the men had been asking him questions about who I was, whether I was the reason he wasn't with them so often. At this, I must have looked concerned as he reached out and said, it's ok don't worry, but the hesitation in his voice made me worry all the more. With him, it was hard to know what he was holding back, because he said so little. How do you make sense of such complete silence?

When I did not hear from him again, I thought the worst. There was no-one to call or tell. What could I say, that a man I had kind of been seeing but only on the beach had stopped texting? After days of leaving him messages and voicemails, he finally replied, *I'm OK but I can't see u*. I tried to call again but the number just rang and rang. The summer receded like the tide very suddenly. His torrent of words, things I'd not heard in the many weeks prior, were perhaps his final gift to me. But now that they were out, there was nowhere left to go. I worried for weeks that those men had done something to him, that they had found out who he really was, whatever that might be, and had done something to him. I imagined all kinds of scenarios and sounded hysterical as I told my friends. Whenever I passed the little gap that led to the beach my stomach felt like the mudflats, heavy and dense. For a long time, I could not go back there, could not face it. I would take the long way around and avoid the road altogether. Once I'd moved away and met other men, who never held me in quite the same way as he did, the beach receded from view.

/

Spotted: what looked like his trainers, water-logged yet blackened, as if drowned and then burned.

Christopher Lloyd (he/him) is currently a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Hertfordshire, UK. He has published widely on contemporary US culture. Christopher's poetry has appeared in *Impossible Archetype*, *—algia*, *Visual Verse* and elsewhere. He's at work on a first novel and a queer bestiary. He tweets @clloyd9.

Unrest has a fuzz – sometimes it buffs as it weakens, creating a brilliance mistaken for glow. It can look like sweat, an emblem of triumph, matching the sheen of a prized object. Unrest can stretch from recklessness (as in ‘I don’t need a break’) to curse (as in ‘I can’t get a break’). Avoiding the deathlier end is a spectator sport. ‘The only way for black people to rest in public spaces is death,’ artists Navild Acosta and Fannie Sosa say in their 2019 lecture on Black Power Naps<sup>1</sup> – a curatorial project setting out rest and leisure as an urgent reparation. The repairing in question is envisioned through new rest cartographies, where the spaces of white art institutions (and other city-based public/private spheres) are flipped for the sole repose of Black, migrant, indiginous, queer and trans folk. Mechanised and intentional, ‘healing stations’ reframe rest away from it’s assumed automated and accessible functions. For example, the ‘Pelvic Floor’ is a trampoline couched by subwoofers that act as a ‘membrane [amplifying] the vibration of our pelvic floor’. The ‘Atlantic Reconciliation Station’ is a water bed that carries the ‘ohm’ chant tremors of the subwoofer placed underneath. ‘The Atlantic is an ocean where a lot of us ended,’ Navild mentions in the lecture, ‘This installation reconciles water with black rest and rejuvenation, whilst base frequencies rebalances the stagnant waters of the body.’

Rest, normally hyper-individualised, depends on precise relations. The circuitry of Black Power Naps lays the apparatus bare, and though high tech materials aren’t essential for relaxation, a working loop of feedback is. Laughter, touch, eye contact, a smile. Knowing that you are being gestured to rest, that somebody wants you to rest, and has built this for you, has made your bed, texted you goodnight, or, through no signal other than the comfort of cross-temporal telepathy, directed you towards rest – this disarms reminders of the opposite. An explicit naming of what feels impossible, a

---

<sup>1</sup> Navild Acosta and Fannie Sosa, Presentation at the 2019 Creative Capital Artist Retreat <<https://blackpowernaps.black/>>



reconciliation with the Atlantic for instance, echoes the Drexciyan<sup>2</sup> project of re-versing necrotic geographies so that rest is neither forgetting or remembering, but between the surfaces of both.

In his essay 'Resonance of Sense'<sup>3</sup>, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy philosophises on betweenness as the origin of relation. An object makes its presence in the world, he says, through the distance between itself and others. 'Everything begins with the rebound – in the sense which it was once said of a musical instrument that it bounds or rebounds – that is, springs back and sounds in one way or another. A bound through the open is reprised or recovers itself, returns under its own momentum as it responds to itself and thus forms its own reality, its resonance.' Resonance's fullness gives way to suspension, a feeling of being held. Your body senses the atoms it's made up of. In this middle, bodies transform to mirage...parties and sex have that effect of glimmering everything. 'The real is oscillatory,' Nancy adds, 'in so far as it makes sense to speak of any 'being' whatsoever if to be is to oscillate.'

\*

Cooly G's 'Is It Gone' plays through my headphones and I get slung by surround synths and ricochets. It's a relief to be a container and get shaken empty for four minutes. The more it plays the more I start to feel my surfaces. Her voice stretches a second skin over mine that's not an extra organ but something thinner and synthetic. I become metallic when I listen to her and that's the most rest I've been getting lately. 'There is a sense in which the nervous system is being reshaped by beats for a new kind of state, for a new kind of sensory condition,' writes the British-Ghanaian writer, theorist and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun<sup>4</sup>. 'Different parts of your body are actually in different

---

<sup>2</sup> Drexciya were an American electronic music duo from Detroit (James Stinson, Gerald Donald). The Book of Drexciya is a graphic novel that explores the Afrofuturist mythology behind the duo. 'In the legend, pregnant African women thrown off slave ships gave birth to amphibious creatures known as the Drexciyan wave jumpers: great warriors of the abyss.' *Wire Magazine* <<https://www.thewire.co.uk/news/58355/the-book-of-drexciya-vol-1-published-this-week>>

<sup>3</sup> *Spectres II: Resonances* (2020)

<sup>4</sup> *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1998)

states of evolution. Your head may well be lagging quite a long way behind the rest of your body.’

The affective vector of rhythm is insidious. The head, as Eshun mentions, not only lags behind the body but is dumb to the repeat absences that make a rhythm possible. Its pattern is dictated by its holes as well as the hits; those gaps coerce a body to surrender for as long as the head doesn’t interfere. Eshun also calls this ‘neural possession’. Breath comes out easier when you are bewitched this way. Those moments are an ascension out of individuality into collectivism, a queering of edges, where we are more than our parts and can feel each other (and other things) fully. With disintegration also comes rot, and with rot comes regeneration. I love having glimpses of crevices, where I don’t have to seal myself shut. Having a subwoofer burst me open feels particularly attractive now, but also urgent too. There is so much that feels necessary to tear down, rest in this instant feels like a cop out, but I wonder about the possibilities of sinking into blissful rest to feel the crumbling of parts. What template for abolition can be mapped through the corrosion of the sheeny exteriors we’ve adopted? What’s the other side of always being ‘on’? ‘One seemingly inconsequential but prevalent linguistic figure is the machine-based designation of “sleep mode”’, notes the art critic Jonathan Crary in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*<sup>5</sup>. ‘The notion of an apparatus in a state of low-power readiness remakes the larger sense of sleep into simply a deferred or diminished condition of operationality and access. It supersedes an off/on logic, so that nothing is ever fundamentally “off” and there is never an actual state of rest.’ I no longer (just) want that rest that recuperates, refreshes, recovers, reinvigorates or re-energises. I want rest to be rebirth, repeat births – just as slimy and messy as when we left the womb. Completely dripping, screaming, hopeful and barely formed.

---

<sup>5</sup> *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013)

Monique Todd is a writer interested in togetherness/separateness, holes and gaps. She founded Pleasure Principles, an independent publishing platform tracking desire formations. Pleasure Principles has exhibited at Strange Perfume (South London Gallery, 2019), LESBIANNALE (ICA, 2019) and Mal Journal x Hard to Read: Class Acts (Mimosa House Gallery, 2019). Pleasure Principle's debut release was Black Sex in the Archives (2019) — a foldout A3 zine map locating sites and projects in London that centred black desire, intimacy, sexual health and connection.