

Issue 4

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EDITORIAL ... p.1

FEATURE

Patruni Sastry in Conversation ... p.2

Drag Affair [Patruni Sastry] ... p.10

WRITING

House Rules: an Ode to Heather Lewis [Emma Filtness] ... p.18

Make Me Feel, Mighty Queer [Giulia Astesani] ... p.20

magic fortune fish [Flo Reynolds] ... p.27

Sponsored Post; or, Grief [Misha Solomon] ... p.29

Two Soliloquies [Paul Stephenson] ... p.31

Magic Waters [Sam Elkin] ... p.38

Bargaining [Lisa Jones] ... p.44

Shaving [Kayleigh Jayshree] ... p.49

tiny tykes: burr edition [Madeleine Han & Irene Hsu] ... p.50

REVIEW

More Than a Fractured Self: a Review of *The Mirror*

Season [Shiane D. Jacocks] ...p.57

Editorial

Tiny tykes speak, burrs send selfies, and micro-pests – neither alive or dead – have communal ethics of their own. In ‘tiny tykes: burr edition’, Madeleine Han & Irene Hsu surface unsuspecting interrelations, a thread that runs through the international contributions in issue 4, where normative positions are flipped and dissected. Shiane D. Jacocks reviews Anna-Marie McLemore’s magical realist telling of memory, trauma and healing in *The Mirror Season*; Kayleigh Jayshree narrows in on the delicate, reverberating impact of razor rituals; and our cover artist, Patruni Sastry, speaks on the importance of collaboration, empathy and ‘co-body existence’ in drag – a personal annotation of their ‘anti-beauty’ performance art and the Indian drag traditions they platform.

We hope this collection of new queer writing opens up space to breathe, even as our catastrophic present feels looming, overwhelming and endlessly demanding. What worlds can we find compressed under demands for productivity? What other voices can we listen to that might not remotely sound like our own? What does it mean to move towards softness, warmth and magic?

Monique Todd

Patruni Sastry in Conversation with Tawseef Khan

To audiences that don't already know you, how would you introduce yourself?

My name is Patruni Sastry and I am a performer from Hyderabad, India. My pronouns they/them/one. I identify as a gender maverique, which is a type of non-binary identity, and my sexuality is that I am a pomosexual (somebody who rejects or doesn't fit certain labels for attraction). I love to do drag, but I am also a classically trained dancer and I use my art to share information and educate.

When did you first get into dance?

My interest in dance started at the age of five. The reason for that was a Telugu movie by a wonderful actress called Ramya Krishnan. In the movie, the heroine is rejected by the hero and she's angry, she screams out loud and she dances. I thought that whenever somebody was angry, you had to scream out loud and dance, and only then would they be heard. That's how my tryst with dance started. Whenever my mom wouldn't give me a chocolate, or whenever my father wasn't giving in to my demand, I would scream out loud and dance. Seeing that, my father decided to put me into formal dance training, which is how I started learning Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi. It's been twelve years since I have been learning and performing as a dancer.

You have spoken of 'radiating social awareness' through dance. Why is this important to you? And why is dance the appropriate medium for this?

Social awareness is something that can be communicated in multiple ways. For me, that way was dance, because dance became an early language for me to explore. It became a medium for me to go ahead and talk about multiple subjects without using

a single word. And because the body becomes a part of the art when I'm communicating, I can discuss situations like gender, sexuality, caste, colour, where sometimes even the words are a taboo. In those situations, it might be really hard to go ahead and use certain words, but you can communicate it through a non-verbal storytelling, which dance allows you to do.

Also, any time you practice a particular artform, it has the ability to move from one place to another. It can be entertaining, but at the same time remain in the audience's mind long after the event. It normalises a topic by being robustly present in our art. For example, I can't talk explicitly about sexual education in a scenario where these conversations are highly controversial and polarised, but I can do a dance on sexual education and still go ahead and educate people. Indeed, that was the connecting cord, the very reason for me continuing to dance today.

When you are trying to tell a particular story or discuss a particular issue through dance, do you choose a specific dance style, or do you mix the different styles and techniques that you have learned?

Initially, when I first started dancing, I was sticking to Bharatnatyam, Kuchipudi and Orissi dance, which are my classically-trained roots. But it was not always appropriate to stick to them. The reason why I say appropriate is again, these languages – I see each and every dance form as a language of the body – have come from a certain space, were created by a certain people, nurtured by a certain system. For example, Bharatnatyam was patronised by a certain caste in India. Some of these dances are religiously centred and performed in temples. But when I present these to audience that goes beyond this entire demography and beyond the culture of space this artform comes from, there is a disconnect. In order to ensure that I connect with my audience, I have had to reimagine my dance. That is why I no longer stick to one particular style. I use the vocabulary of whatever I have learnt from the traditional styles and then produce something which is absolutely my own expression. That is why I call my way of telling stories as something which is inspired by the German Expressionist

movement. I use the framework of German Expressionist dance and an Indian vocabulary to create a sort of Indian Expressionism. And that helps me to reach out to a larger and more inclusive and more diverse audience.

Though you have been exploring issues through dance for a number of years, you only turned to drag in 2019. What prompted this change?

Practicing dance for a significant period of time took me into multiple forms of dancing. I became interested in Butoh, which is a Japanese dance form, and then in performance art. When I considered the idea of performance art versus dance, that was when I came across the idea of drag. I never wanted to be a drag artist because the placement of drag where I come from, in terms of what I was seeing at that point in time, was modelled on drag imported from the West. And I couldn't relate to that. It was only after a certain amount of time, I was pushed towards it. I wanted to create a drag scene to my city, Hyderabad, because there were no drag performers there. I approached many people who I thought might be interested in doing drag. There were lots of people who were not interested in getting involved and I grew tired of constantly asking people. Then one of my friends turned to me and said, 'Why can't you perform in drag?' and that's when the entire question started. I only wanted to do drag to create representation in my city, but when I started doing drag, I fell in love with the artform. And that pushed me to examine my art again, and consider how dance and drag could be combined.

You describe your drag with reference to an avatar, a 'Suffocated Art Specimen'. What do you mean by this?

Suffocation was an intriguing word for me, that I wanted to use and acknowledge in my work. Suffocation is something that we are all subjected to. It might be political suffocation, suffocation due to patriarchy, abuse, heteronormativity or gender norms. It might be suffocation due to any other kind of power play. Everybody, in one way or

another, is suffocated. And then in terms of 'Art Specimen', I treat each and every look I put on, or every creation I use my body for, as a specimen of art, an example of art that can be stored – like a piece in a museum. I call my body the specimen because that is where the experimentation happens. In the process of making art, of educating others, I suffocate myself.

My style of drag is known as 'Tranimal' drag, because I use a lot of things on my face to hide my features or my identity. I don't want to reveal my humanity to people when I perform in drag. That's why it's incredibly important for me to be absurd and obscured when I'm in drag, to be understood by a name that has no traditional human connotation.

Are there any differences in the two forms: are the spaces, audiences, receptions any different?

There is a huge difference between drag and dance, but I see now that it is merging. I want to fall in the middle, where I can do both my drag and my dance in the same space and at the same time. Having said that, dance audiences and drag audiences are very different; dance can be done at any time, but drag comes with gender performance. You bring your gender into the forefront; you present it to an audience. That is one of the reasons why drag isn't always encouraged in mainstream society. People are often baffled when I show up in drag for a dance performance. That is a little bit of a challenge for me. But dance spaces remain everywhere. By contrast, we don't have drag spaces because the variant vision of how drag is seen in the first place. Because the mainstream doesn't always want to see a gender performance, for example, a man dressing up as a woman. The body is not something that needs to be seen in that way because of the heteronormative nature of our societies. But while dance spaces are always available, finding the right space for my drag has taken a little bit of time. There were spaces that were unwilling to host me because of my drag presentation. But this, too, is changing slowly.

What can you tell us about drag as an artform in India?

Drag has been performed in India for centuries. The first time the word 'drag' was coined in Sanskrit was around 800 BC. It has been performed across the different regions of India without people realising that drag is what they are doing. It's only as a part of British colonisation that drag was discouraged as part of the laws that targeted sexual and gender minorities.

It's worth knowing that the concept of drag, however, was copied and put into Shakespearean theatre, and that's how the idea of drag moved from India to the West. Drag evolved in European theatre and then moved into the activist space, then the club space, then came back to television and became a popular thing. But in India, drag was always performed in folk art forms as well as in classical art and theatre. Eventually, when women began occupying these spaces, the men who were impersonating or presenting themselves as women, took a backseat. And then is when drag began to diminish. Still, every state in India has one or another form of drag which is being performed, but it's never seen as a good thing. It's always a taboo.

However, when the renaissance of drag is happening in India, we are looking into and applying Western concepts of drag, and that is something that needs to be changed. We should see drag as something that has been there and has been fruitful in the same space for centuries. We should create our own versions of it, rather than going ahead and copying something that is from the outside. And that, I think, is slowly happening.

How is your work received in India?

In India, drag is received well in queer circles, but is still not given equal importance to dance, music and theatre in the mainstream. That is a huge ceiling that we must break. When thinking about drag, I think it's important to consider how we can remake it.

What is the selling point of it? And that is where we are right now. Currently, there are around 35 drag artists all over India. To bring a greater awareness of Indian drag and the different forms of drag in India, how they exist in conversation with Western drag but also our own traditions, I made a website called DragVanti. We also held our first drag conference encompassing the academic study and conversations around drag. It has a drag directory of all the drag artists in India and aims to put the spotlight on each of them.

Drag Affair:

Co-Bonding Drag for Mental Healing, Collaboration and Empathy through Touch [Patruni Sastry]



I am Patruni Sastry, a gender maverique pomosexual drag performer, performance artist and expressionist dancer from Hyderabad, India. I have been engaged in classical dance and performance art for more than 3 years now and recently developed an artistic curiosity in pursuing drag as an alternative expression. Drag is an art form where a person dresses up in exaggerated costumes and makeup, usually as the opposite gender, and performs. Ever since I was exposed to drag, I saw the richness of this wonderful artform. I understood its ability to become a language to raise awareness on, for example, LGBTQIA+ issues, menstrual health, sexual health, gender awareness and fighting against casteism, homophobia, fascism, climate change.

My style of drag is known as 'Tranimal drag', a drag format rooted in performance art. Unlike traditional drag where beauty, class and elegance are given attention, tranimal drag talks about 'anti beauty'. It's a postmodern approach to drag where costumes are made of trash material, and makeup and clothing are randomly applied. The measure of success is how a daily object can defy fashion and be turned into a piece of art. My drag name is S.A.S, which stands for Suffocated Art Specimen. It's about bringing a balance between activism and art together. As a part of this, I have started an online space for drag called as 'Dragvanti', where I bring rare Indian drag traditions to a wider audience.



This pandemic has been difficult on us all. With restrictions on gatherings of people, on human connections, staying at home challenged my mental health. It was hard to disconnect from the fear and anxiety that surrounded us. The restrictions also had a profound impact on my art. I couldn't imagine making art without human touch, without physically interacting with other people. Though I created some self-portraits and

digital performances, as I did the same thing again and again, it started to feel redundant. I missed being physically involved with a space. I missed the time it took to create art and the sense of an audience waiting to absorb it. The freshness and excitement of art was something that I missed. My artmaking had grown stale.



As the number of Covid cases in India began to subside and restrictions were loosened, spaces re-opened and people were able to meet again. The idea of making art outside of my home began to feel accessible again. I have always been possessive about my art: my philosophies, my interpretations, my inspirations, my creations and my emotions come together to create my drag. The obsessive fusion and attention to detail is evident in my work. But after everything we had experienced collectively, I felt it was time to loosen up and embrace the idea of collaboration.



At first glance we assume that drag is created by an individual. It is embodied by a single person, is potentially the result of a singular vision. But drag takes the effort of more than one person to truly stand out, whether it's the fashion designer who makes your dresses, the wigmaker you buy your hair from, or the photographer who takes your photographs. Drag is an inherently collaborative art form. Collaboration is what makes drag sing. And yet, drag queens hardly ever collaborate – at least they are unwilling to hand themselves completely over to somebody else's vision. Most drag artists are so particular with their mug that they would never dream of being touched by someone else. But in India, where the drag community is healthy and mutually supportive, the obsession with controlling one's drag isn't as strong. It's the perfect place for creative exchange.



It was around 5th Jan 2021 when I bumped into a colleague and friend Xen. Xen is an incredibly creative being who understands my drag well. I thought that we would make the perfect collaborative partners. Since Xen is an AFAB person (assigned female at birth), I thought it would be great to bring two differently gendered bodies into a creative exchange. We decided that our collaboration should try and capture the exchange of drag energy, a therapeutic flow to each other. Xen came up with the idea of embracing a dis-formed, unstructured vision of art. Art that embraced randomness as opposed to being rigid and ordered. This was the key that led to the creation of our piece.



We talked about our ideas and prepared them for a while. Then, on 28th of March 2021, we decided to hold a performance piece at Café Paaka in Hyderabad. It was an open-air performance with space for a few walk-ins. We called the performance 'Drag Affair', a drag re-union which aimed at returning the aesthetics of human touch to art. Despite social distancing being the norm, we prepared one another in drag using the viscosity of human touch. We had a pile of trash, clothes, broken jewelry, dresses, decoration items, makeup materials in front of us. We became each other's muse. We became the canvas for the creation of new alter egos.



I picked up some basic stockings and covered Xen's face, whereas she smeared gold paint on mine. I decked her up with some trashy wires and bulbs, as she added more glitter and more gold. The performance was impulsive and improvisational, and as we continued, I decided to embrace a more deformed idea of drag. Xen's vision was more classically beautiful, but still postmodern.



This entire process was captured by our photographer, Akhil Komaravelli. The pictures and stills documented how we shed social distancing to create cohesive art. We followed covid norms by getting tested before and after the performance. But it felt important to open our bodies up, which had been locked for more than a year, to experience the art of another. We surrendered ourselves to one another. What we created was more dynamic as a result. The performance felt therapeutic.



When we finished dressing each other up, we looked at what the other had created. The photographs captured dynamic images of gender-less, gender-bending beings. Our creations created a neutral gender experience, blurred our 'biological skin'. This is the power of drag. Drag can teach empathy and sisterhood. It can be therapy, used to address mental health and co-body existence. Drag has opened new doors for me, has shown me that it can be a vehicle for reconnecting with people in our current times, for sharing energy and building trust. For overcoming the barriers that keep us away from one another. It has been incredibly rewarding.



Photography by Akhil Komaravelli

Patruni Chidananda Sastry is a classical dancer, intrapreneur and customer service expert. Patruni started dancing at the age of seven and their unique style called 'Expressionism' is a new way to tell stories of awareness to the society. Patruni has also been performing the Indian Tranimal style of drag, which draws inspiration from folk artforms such as Pagativesham and Behroopiya. They have given more than a thousand performances and five hundred digital shows in India and across the world. They have been a Tedx speaker five times, and a keynote speaker at Deloitte, Uber, Amazon, Microsoft and many other organizations. They co-founded Dragvanti an online website for the drag community in India.

House Rules: An Ode to Heather Lewis

[Emma Filtness]

Fourteenish when I picked it up in the library sale for ten pence at the little satellite branch by the Danesholme shops, not sure what the title implied, thought the crop on the cover applied only to the horses, and I still liked horsey reads back then, at fourteenish, grew up on wholesome books where wholesome girls called Jinny spent summers riding chestnut Arabs with exotic names and the only thing they wanted to feel between their legs was the soft see-sawing rhythm of a broad cantering back through a well-oiled saddle, and I think even then my body was, on some instinctual level, aware of the eroticism of this act, this thrilling coupling like a dry-humping, and when I took that risky book home to read in bed what I found instead was tender and dripping, not tender as in gentle and warming but tender as in meat after a repeated beating from a hammer specifically designed for the purpose, tender as in bruised and aching, yet completely delicious, and that was the rub of it all, right there, that intriguing juxtaposition of pleasure and pain, its frank exploration of sexuality and shame, and whilst I had, at fourteenish, encountered sex in novels, those Everyman's hardback classics donated to the school library, it was mostly chaste and abstract, or vague and troubling – *Hardy, Hawthorne, Tolstoy, I'm looking at you* – and in those hazy silhouette montages of popular screen romances from the late 80s into the 90s I watched and re-watched on my VHS-player, I was ill-prepared for the moment a character worked her whole fist in, I was as surprised as the protagonist that this unimaginable thing was even possible, that it is something women do, and later when I looked at that quiet girl in the upper sixth, as I often did, with her strawberry hair and wide pear hips, I thought of this, of what we could do with our fists, though of course we never did, there, in that dilapidated New Town I steadily read my way out of, as books are, of course, an education, this one a rude awakening, a kick, a siren, my eyes opened wide to what it meant to be a young woman in this world, from casual

harassment on public transport, and the cloistered violence of family, to the complex, knotted messes of lives and what we carry with us, and not least that frisson found between pleasure and pain, and its transactional nature, and writing this some twenty years later, in search of a copy of that book online, knowing the High Risk imprint is gone, and that little library, too, I seek reviews and stumble, instead, across the news that the author, Heather Lewis, ended her life in 2002.

Emma Filtness lectures in Creative Writing at Brunel University London. She works primarily across poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. As a queer, disabled writer brought up in a working-class steel town, she is interested in marginalised voices, bodies, and the relationship between identity and place. Her poem 'The Overburden' was placed in the Northern Poetry Library's Poem of the North competition, her visual poetry featured in online exhibitions from Mellom Press and Poem Atlas, and she has work in anthologies from Broken Sleep Books and at *3:AM Magazine*, among others. Follow her on Twitter @Em_Filtness and find her poetry project exploring nature and the dark feminine on Instagram @cultofflora

Make Me Feel, Mighty Queer

[Giulia Astesani]



I'm standing on a traghetto pier in Venice. I must be 5 or 6 years old

My small hands are holding tightly onto a big black hat, which has a blue feather and a golden and red ribbon of some sort attached to it.

The hat is part of a much more intricate carnival costume.

Red fabric boots cover my shoes and part of my legs, puffy black trousers are popping out from under a red and gold vest with a shiny cross printed in the middle, and a black plastic sword is kept in place by a strip of golden cloth around my waist.

Under the vest, a white shirt covers my arms, and a red cape is falling onto my back, and to finish the costume off, my favourite detail – a black moustache drawn over my upper lip.

I'm dressed up as D'Artagnan, one of the three musketeers. From the photograph, it appears to be a sunny day, and I look excited, I can almost recall the smell of the costume — a synthetic smell of something that has been kept in plastic for a long time

(Re)visiting.

It's not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex. Gendered self-consciousness has, mercifully, a flickering nature. (Nelson)

Message n1

I've seen vids of crocodiles in a gender reveal party and I'm like...evolution will do its job.

It is September 2020 and a violent wild-fire in California which resulted in extensive damage, evacuation, and land loss, was started by what the news described as a 'smoke-generating pyrotechnic device' used in a gender reveal party.

The result of this news is that I get lost in a YouTube black hole for hours.

Balloons blow up ejecting blue or pink confetti into the air, and awful looking cakes are cut open to show the party guests whether the expectant couple will give birth to a little boy or a girl.

During my descent into the gender reveal nightmare, I realise how many of these celebrations went from slightly to terribly wrong, and I stumble into yet another video and yet another fire.

The video dates back a couple of years. It is 2018 in Arizona, the camera is recording a black shooting target surrounded by tall, dry grass. The words 'Boy or Girl' are handwritten on it, and soon the target, which I learn is packed with explosives, is shot by the father-to-be with a high-powered rifle.

A big blue cloud violently leaks out into the air and shortly afterwards the grass starts burning, all the while the voice of a man nervously suggests packing everything up and leaving, before the video cuts out.

The fire ended up destroying 47,000 acres and resulted in \$8 million in damages, not to mention all the people who had to be evacuated.

Never before had I watched unfolding in a slow-motion video, the damage that heteronormativity can wreak.

'We may, ultimately, want more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers' (Halberstam)

Message n2

You both look extra gay.

I remember coming back home, you told me the porter had asked if we were both 'real' women. He couldn't make sense of the fact we were a couple. He said he knew of Elton John, but that's how far his knowledge got. You told him we were married. I don't know if that made things better or worse.

I think about that a lot. Being queer and married.

The night of our wedding I remember joking with a friend and telling them: 'I can't believe I married a lesbian'.

Is desire, always a desire for recognition?

In an interview dating back 1993, Judith Butler describes to the interviewer *the painful irony of being implicated in the very forms of power that one explicitly opposes and trying to understand what kind of agency might be derived from that situation.*

Am I bad at being queer?

Message n3

What are your biggest turn-ons?

I was at the archive yesterday, and I read about someone getting off by looking at a National Geographic's cover.

Death queers, old queens, sad butches, lonely hearts, diesel dykes, leather, cocks, straps.

As it was a boarding school, on games day we were able to go to the dormitories together. One day she drew me in through the door and ran her hands over my breast and kissed me passionately. Then she put her hands under my skirt and drew down my knickers. Her hand seemed to shoot to my sex, and she soon had me very damp. She then put me on the bed and proceeded to spank me, slow but not painfully. Ever since then I have always preferred a woman. (Sandra Bellamy, Liverpool)

We were sitting in the director's office at the bank, he asked his assistant to bring the documents in, so my husband and I could sign them.

My.

Husband.

And.

I.

You nor I have any issues in being read as a different gender from the one we identify with, but he knew that you were my wife, he just couldn't (wouldn't?) say it.

I often think about the irony of the whole thing - his inability to let go of normative expectations and language resulted in the sudden fashioning of a much more gender-bending scenario than the one we were experiencing.

Queer unhappiness offers a rather deviant form of fertility (Ahmed)

Message n4:

There is a new girl in my work.

She's a lesbian

Fucking unicorn!

I'm weirdly happy about having another lesbian at my workplace

I keep visualising the same image.

I'm standing in front of a lush, beautiful landscape, I can see its edges, but one imposing building is obscuring my view.

And I suddenly realise that everyone else is looking at the same building.

Please, *Vacate the here and now. (Munoz)*

It's my birthday, and I just ingested some ecstasy.

I'm high, my grip on reality is loosening, and rational thoughts are pushed back into a corner by feelings of amusement and inexplicable joy. While all of this is happening, for a fleeting moment I realise that one big building that was obstructing my view is no longer there.

When I wake up the day after, slightly dizzy and tired, I wonder if that feeling can be experienced without being chemically induced.

Can we be happy even when we are sad?

Message n5

You are bad lesbians!!

It's the 1st of December 2020, yesterday it was our wedding anniversary, it is three years that we are legally bound to each other which is strange since it's almost a year that we have not lived together, and almost 7 years since we first met.

How do you tell a story that does not want to be told?

Everyone keeps sending me messages about loops, open loops and loops that needs ending.

I'm not sure what they mean.

Am I stuck in a loop? In light of this thought, yesterday I accessed the government website and started filing for divorce.

The application starts by asking: has your marriage broken down irretrievably (it can't be saved?)

Tick yes to continue the application.

I find it quite odd the idea that relationships might break irreversibly like objects.

Last week I put three of my favourite jumpers in the washing machine and even though I used the supposedly right setting **they** all came out half the size and so became unwearable, as much as I tried, I could just no longer fit into them.

So, I am standing there looking at my shrunken jumpers thinking they have lots more in common with my marriage than what I could ever imagined.

Yes. Continue application.

Grounds for divorce:

1. Adultery – it is important to note that you can only rely on this ground if your spouse has had sexual intercourse with a member of the opposite sex. You cannot rely on adultery if your spouse has committed adultery with a person of the same sex.

Could we just fucking abolish not even gender but people. I think I'm done. (Lang)

As if the ending of love wasn't painful enough. This whole thing is starting to feel like a scam.

Message n6

Queer the world!

To be a fag is not enough to be 'queer'. It's necessary to subject your own identity to critique. (Preciado)

It's the opening of my show in Milan, and I spend a big part of the evening trying to respond to people's question 'what is Queer'?

Many of these people are not asking what's my take on queerness, or my interpretation of it but to give them a definition of a term they've never encountered before.

I think that after all, that's fair. Italy has no historical connection to the word *Queer*.

I could spend the night repeating to people how activists in the US and UK have reappropriated the word, how it was an insult, like *culattone*, *checca*, *finocchio*, offensive words to describe gay men in Italy. Then I scan into my brain trying to find offensive words for lesbians, but there aren't any.

I then think that the absence of words is as revelatory as their presence.

I then think that I hardly use the word *lesbica* when I describe myself in Italy.

I then think I use a word that has no heritage or context in my country to describe myself and my identity.

I then think that maybe I don't use the word *lesbica* because it feels dirty, offensive and that perhaps it makes me feel uncomfortable.

I then think that's fucked up.

I then think I should use it more often.

I then think that before I thought of myself as queer, before I even began to understand what queer is, I thought of myself as a lesbian.

I then think about my last summer in Italy. Whilst at the bar watching the Italian women's football team playing against Australia during the world cup, Serena asked me how I identify.

I then think I didn't really know how to answer, but I told her as a woman and as a lesbian, and that I also liked the word dyke.

I then think how it was the first time in history that a women's game was broadcast on a channel belonging to Italy's national television.

Giulia Astesani (b.1987) is an artist, lecturer and PhD candidate at Royal College of Art, she lives and work in London. Astesani's current work and research is centred on how queer bodies navigate the ambivalent feelings of needing recognition while searching for different narratives of happiness. Through an expanded performative and writing practice, her work engages with an active process of archiving queer lives while critically questioning contemporary representations of queerness. Drawing from feminist and queer theory, archival material, pop culture and autobiographical fragments, it focuses on queer women and the gender non-conforming. In her work, she prioritises the use of feeling and emotions as valuable tools for research, proposing strategies of unknowing, un-doing and unbecoming in opposition to oppressive normative narratives of progress, success and happiness.

magic fortune fish

[Flo Reynolds]

the MAGIC FORTUNE FISH hears the call of the wild
throws off their sentimentality
commits to magenta plasticity
it is time to risk their integrity

meanwhile HAND is a heavy device
HAND threatens to devour their self
HAND is a hole in our concept of ipseity

*scene: the MAGIC FORTUNE FISH
has found a rapport with the jumper
and their self to be amorphous in moral character
they have always known they have a sacred destiny
HAND (a moribund orifice) releases
out pops an egg: small and spherical
with smooth tangerine shell*

*now as they circle
their eyebeams crisscross the chamber
resting everywhere but the desired object
yet see the jealous moving head
plastic spoon measures, spinning top
possible nutcracker, whiff of gunpowder
between these things lingers a heat haze*

HAND: dare you, fickle stickleback
call yourself by your holonym
or passionately curl up in your entirety?
O magic fortune fish
i am encased in my own matrix
read my palm tune me?

*at this the MAGIC FORTUNE FISH duplicates their self
and takes over the village*

Flo Reynolds is a writer, artist and literature producer based in Norwich, UK. Their work explores ecology, embodiment, queerness and chaos, and their debut pamphlet, the other body, is forthcoming from Guillemot Press in 2021. Flo edits Vessel zine, and their writing can be found in *The White Review*, *Stand*, *The Interpreter's House*, *amberflora*, *Magma*, *Datableed* and at floreynolds.com

Guillaume brings me one (1) Quaker Crispy Minis White Cheddar Flavour Large Rice Cake on an IKEA Dinera light pink side plate (8").

Thank you, merci, Guillaume, my boyfriend, I say.

Earlier, my boyfriend Guillaume and I were working on a one-thousand (1000)-piece jigsaw puzzle by Fits (stylized as fits, in cursive font). All of *fits's* "small-batch puzzles" "feature unique art from artists around the world." This puzzle, the one the love of my life Guillaume and I have halfway completed, is called Tiger Queen and the "illustration was done by Lay Hoon Ho from Vancouver, Canada."

The puzzle comes in a light pink box. It is the same shade of pink, often called Millennial Pink, as the IKEA Dinera side plate (8") off which I ate my one (1) Quaker Crispy Minis White Cheddar Flavour Large Rice Cake. It is the same shade of pink as the upper layer of the Hay pillar candle (designed by Lex Pott) that my amazing partner Guillaume bought me for my thirtieth (30th) birthday.

My uncut lover Guillaume and I are raising our lack (0) of children in an interfaith (2) household and so earlier we attempted to dislodge the hardened wax from the candle cups (9) of our Via Maris Trace Chanukiah (currently out of stock) in a colour they call Clay, which is in fact a crepuscular shade of Millennial Pink. We also have an indoor non-denominational wreath, which was expensive, but not at all pink.

I am so lucky to have such a devoted same-gender life partner and to be surrounded by the colour that has come to define my very generation. For instance, my IKEA Dinera side plate (8") is not alone — it came alongside six (6) plates (10"), five (5) other side plates (8"), and six (6) bowls (large enough for a dinner portion for my lithe and increasingly toned boyfriend Guillaume but a bit small for me). When I showed my

best friend Lexa, with whom I attended Columbia University in the City of New York, and alongside whom I graduated *summa cum laude*, a photo of the puzzle, she said "Of course you have a trendy puzzle that matches your home decor." I am so lucky to have such friends and such a reputation!

Still, I often wonder about my foreskin. It, too, would have been Millennial Pink, and I believe, had it not been taken from me, that my life might be even more complete.

Misha Solomon (he/him) is a queer poet in and of Tiohti:áke/Montréal. His first chapbook, *FLORALS*, was published by above/ground press in 2020. His work is forthcoming in *yolk*. He publishes one gay little poem each week through his Substack (<https://somegaypoems.substack.com/>).

Two Soliloquies

[Paul Stephenson]

Solo Guy in a Spanish Club

after Browning's Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister

A-r-g-h! This pedant hoes my achy reeve!
edges his fangs while gliding—go!
Hard jelly rebels this bro sees,
majigs jutting my hilly mojo!
Eager? Busyboy beefsteak trim?
Thought theft: take the pelt jarhead
or nerd-leather yob bade in brim?
What hefty rite of ruthless cred!

Late Jedi mash-up on the stake:
my adobe yeti in breezy gear,
a ruddy livid lager uptake,
the genic Aragon, toned for leer.
Bite on this lenticular burl? His scar
gives hope of oak glass fount;
an egret to sting with fists of jar?
an evergreen bod to hold account?

If only! Wheels to gab a foyer used,
to lodge with card though bad of chef!
Eighth dude, soon I'm self-abused,
flarf giving gag it's blondest Leffe!
Deckhand played to snag official,
we're fit of gut and up for fraud;
a merger of wit and heat utensil!

(yeah, yeah, kilt threads, chaos affords!)

Dave's, cheesy! Crush on Borodin,
but this swish oyster's conflag vain:
all witness chicks and savvy eking,
sterling yeses, RSVP trained.
Bla-bla...Luddism, thighs like lick-girder
—babe-baiting their dad rescue-glue;
brigading Tates or Tweety cursers?
(heavy-heeled, betrothy nests some flew!)

Here comes buff Hector, mind-affected,
loving the hurl of never-queues,
all cupping, vitals lotioned,
addict of go-go, the pedi-peruse.
No—I like them raring on my plate,
over their eyes to pull the wool –
leave pumpkin duos to grind their fate;
shelve old designs of cock-and-bull!

Oh, young marlins! I am avid,
weeding out the gruffalos; sure!
Honing in on songbirds vivid,
tanked up for the rumpy floor.
Sad or glowing? Any stubble?
Fit of orb and gritty fly?
Straight—a bit of Bernie Rubble?
Closing on slight of build and shy!

They grab for texts in sharkskin tech,
infusing me with fantail gob;
I bind their whim with blind fanatic,

snatch them with my Shinto fob.
With Byron, Basho, Burns, I stint,
harking ardent of the abbey,
spinning tonic doused with hints
of how I'll manage Pondicherry!

If my scruffy acidulous kicks,
I pipe an odour fresh—and toot!
dimple my slender high-end trick
to bank the goof so grouseey-cute;
The fig leaf from these buds I off,
fell the elfish hornbag page,
flip the giddy, unhassle the hoff,
dictum duff the doughnut cage!

Org, that's satin!—bugsy me new,
kissed with glee and ghee and errs,
applaud glad actors with their cues,
forgive the fake, the musk and burrs.
The boozy blast, we'll pose hibiscus,
tofu-tongued for kindred hinds!
Our trend befits the plug-in gratis,
Age? Star sign? L-u-r-r-v the lost and find!

Dressing Porsche (from Cottage to Couture)

after Browning's Porphyria's Lover

The hem sprain started hard alright,
the sullen winos foul as storks,
worn tools through deco'd doors of flight,
toddling a vain waltz down the walk:
I slimmed her garb with tabs of gawk.

When, a gilded prophet; sizing
up hotbeds of clambering stir,
aisled the cheerless greyscale leering,
bladed a dash, uncoated a blur,
kwik-fitted a gig for tallest girls:

all righteous drop of cuffs and gargle,
oiled by glue and bounty hybrid,
kegs and bag fans on the haggle;
lasses suggled on discs they did,
damned by spliff relief relived.

ATMs torn out spouted whistle,
bidding them shots of bite and shine,
D&G tribes yelled their gristle,
topping up made-up waifs with lines;
the spree of earrings eared it fine!

R-r-r-umbling a reign of sloven—Porsche's
web of risky feral-gut shred,
done strutting obsidian wares
for gym prof payoff; nose-frosted
in hits of the tooth circus tread.

Paddles of cult had parting-combed
their cod in glugs of bluff 'n' stub,
suddening oughts wiv' kindly snow,
hugs lobbed like figgy rub-a-dub:
she huffed her thong to ro-ro-rehab.

Dude, I dyed a look-a-like spoof,
hooped a pyro cash-cow number,
zipped up Porsche's progress: sunroof,
nerd-nice gearbox, leather slumber;
I spat hip lightning thru December!

Then gagging waste in kind, kind, fire,
lagging pyres in gothic hooch: I knew
the kerr-ching! of quaff and choir;
from lungs of burly log flame-strewn,
old myths, our mess that thrust a flue.

I wranglered to kebab her shelf,
quick-wiped the site of vegan oak,
scoring to void her held-up wealf!
No ash cloud grief for lippy folk,
lolling freebies, my caste was stoked!

Undone, lightened, exed of dresses,
Porsche's vacant—but chequely-nursed
by brag brigades blurting kisses,
the papping herd of hoardy purse;
... a gust of TV not rehearsed!

Shock! Upbeat fling upon the atoll:

schooning the tosh and lugging garf,
she glances has-beens, somehow-stills,
the chutneyed flex of pec and calf,
LIVE, goes and gauges with the yoof!

They gush the show and she's a HIT!
bronzes back to her charcy gaff.
Digging debris, pretty titbits,
siblings chatty, we sift the chaff;
she needs me—'cos I sew and stuff ;-)

Notes on the process

I was interested in dramatic monologue and ventriloquising poems by generating narratives driven by predictive text. I badly retyped into my phone (fuelled by white wine) every line of Browning's poems at least five times, noting what the phone generated, to then see how a possible new, contemporary narrative might emerge. When I say, badly retyping, I mean purposefully 'comedy typing' in the way that French & Saunders used to do, a sort of attempt at misfiring. They did it on an actual typewriter prop; I did it on the tiny keypad of an iPhone 5. I just let the random renderings of the poem push me towards a new story. I did this three times: the first poem, 'Blast Muchness' (after My Last Duchess), was published in Magma issue 68 'Margins' (summer 2017) and I managed to actually read it to an audience in the LRB bookshop. 'Blast Muchness' was contemporary, full of technology, while these other two are directly queerer. Why Browning? I was taking part in the Jerwood/Arvon mentoring scheme at the time, with Patience Agbabi as my mentor. I'd applied for the scheme because I was at the time really interested in living statues, and had even gone over to the international living statues festival up in Arnhem. My idea was to explore the dramatic monologue and work on a series of poems around them. But I admit, I was intimidated by the Browning poems and didn't know how I could respond or seek to

develop 21st century voices around the living statues. So perhaps my (desperate) starting point was to try to corrupt the existing text...

Paul Stephenson studied modern languages. He took part in the Jerwood/Arvon mentoring scheme and has an MA in Creative Writing from the Manchester Writing School. He has published three pamphlets: *Those People* (Smith/Doorstop, 2015), which won the Poetry Business competition, *The Days that Followed Paris* (HappenStance, 2016), written in the four weeks following the November 2015 terrorist attacks, and *Selfie with Waterlilies* (Paper Swans Press, 2017). He lives between Cambridge and Brussels where he takes photos of all the art nouveau doors at insta: paulstep456 / paulstep.com / @stephenson_pj

I've found that the best way to deal with the considerable anxiety of taking my clothes off in public is to act just like the entitled cis white man I am perceived to be. Anything less attracts unwanted attention.

My local pool had just reopened after lockdown 2.0, and my efforts at this carefree affect were being hampered by the need to adhere to strict new safety protocols upon entry. Each step was a potential for self-betrayal. First, I had to sanitise my small hands at the hygiene station and then gaze at the reversed image of myself in a video camera until it had recorded my body temperature. Next, I had to project my name loudly and assertively enough through my mask for the fit, young man at the reception desk to tick my name off his booking list. I confirmed to him that I hadn't been overseas in the last fourteen days, wasn't feeling unwell and had no reason to believe I might have been exposed to COVID-19. Finally, he affixed a neon pink paper band around my wrist with the time I had to exit the facility by, and gave me the all-clear to enter the pool area.

Once inside, I strode over to vacant plastic chairs lined up neatly on the grassed area. I dumped my bag and mask on the first available chair and stripped down quickly and confidently. Why would I be at all concerned about my too-large hips, or the pink slashes across both sides of my chest like the Joker's mouth? I'd elected to have the 'pie wedge' mastectomy technique, where the surgeon kept your nipples attached to your body and made horizontal incisions around them in an effort to retain their physical sensitivity. It had worked, and my nipples stood to attention, responding to the still cool weather.

My fellow patrons were obediently following the 'no talking' signs, a new rule designed to limit the release of potentially infectious speech droplets. Pools and most other things had been shut for months as the virus lingered in Victoria, and the freedom to immerse our bodies in water seemed something that should be taken seriously. We therefore entered the pool like it was a cathedral, silent and deferential to the onlooking

staff. Bodies were colder and paler than usual, having been bundled up inside over winter.

I put my tinted goggles on, plunged underwater in one quick motion, feeling the cool water enveloping my soft, furry body. As I popped my head above the surface, I could hear the daily COVID-19 numbers being announced on commercial radio. On a good day, the number of cases was in the teens, and so today was a good day because the news presenter announced that we only had twelve.

As I looked around the pool, I noticed an unusually large contingent of yellow and red clad lifeguards on duty. They paced around the pool; their faces hardened by genuine anxiety stemming from the possibility of getting infected by a patron mid-rescue. I felt a need to impress them, to show them that I was fit and healthy, absolutely not a drowning risk. I didn't want them to scrutinise my redesigned body, and hoped that they would hover near a more vulnerable swimmer. But stroke after stroke, as I kicked my legs hard enough to keep me horizontal, I found myself in communion with the distorted tiles below. They reminded me of Balga swimming pool where I'd learnt a basic approximation of swimming back in 1990, when my family migrated from Great Britain to Perth, Western Australia.

In 1990, my family had moved from Aylesbury to the new working-class suburb of Marangaroo. It was full of Anglo Australians, Indigenous families and new migrants from all directions. We bought a cheap, three bedroom, one-bathroom, single storey brick house that looked almost exactly like the others, except that it had a letterbox shaped like a koala that I was very taken with.

When my parents turned up to the local primary school to enrol me and my older brother in years 2 and 4, the school administrators asked if we knew how to swim. My mum explained that we'd learnt a basic doggy paddle on a freezing cold day at an English aquatic centre. Since my brother and I had shown little interest in going again after the initial trial, it had fallen off our list of things to do. The administrators told our parents that as new Australians, it was vital that we get enrolled in a summer swimming program so that we could join age-appropriate swimming lessons with our classmates when the new school year started.

On the first day of Balga swimming pool's holiday program, I reported to the light blue wading pool with a bunch of kids half my size to learn to hold my breath underwater. I wore my brother's old swimming trunks and an oversized white T-shirt, because I refused to wear a girl's swimming costume. My swimming instructor, an older man with white chest hair, initially praised me for my commitment to 'Slip Slop Slap', a skin cancer campaign slogan that encouraged young Aussies to 'slip' on a T-shirt, 'slop' on sunscreen and 'slap' on a hat while out in the sun. When he realized that I didn't have girls' bathers on underneath, he told me that I could finish the first lesson but that I'd have to get my parents to buy me proper bathers before the next one. I cried on the way home, vowing to my mum that I wouldn't learn to swim at all if I had to wear girls' bathers. My dad couldn't stand me wearing "boys' clothes" and drove me straight to the local St Vincent De Paul Opportunity-Shop, where he insisted on buying whatever there was in my size. A saggy black one-piece with neon yellow and pink frills cost 20 cents. We took it home.

The next day at the pool I felt clownish and awkward in my girls' bathers, and so, I refused to take my T-shirt off again when I got into the wading pool. When the swimming instructor came near, I dunked my head in the water and blew bubbles as hard as I could in the hope that I would be promoted to the next level, where there might be a nicer teacher who'd let me wear what I wanted.

I was promoted to a bigger pool, where the water was a darker navy. My new swimming instructor was a young woman with blonde hair. She immediately told me that I would never pass her class without taking off my T-shirt. I wouldn't be able to swim the twenty-five-metre pool with my shirt bobbing all around me. I kept my shirt on, and instead tried to avoid her disapproving gaze during lessons. As a result, I never really got the hang of breathing underwater. For the rest of the summer, I failed to be promoted again and again, while smaller and smaller children joined me in her class, only to move on to the big pool after a week or two. At the end of one lesson, where I kept grabbing onto the reassuring sides of the pool while I was meant to be independently sculling for 25 seconds, I exasperated her to the point that she told me that if I didn't learn to swim properly, I'd end up being sucked into the "Blue Hole" – a naturally occurring death trap at our local Trigg beach, like the other silly children that hadn't learnt to swim.

I hated these days at the pool. We couldn't even go home after the classes finished since my Mum didn't know how to drive yet, and it sometimes took Dad hours to come and get us, even though our house was in the next suburb over. I'd pester Mum to buy me popcorn or a bag of sour cola bottles, which I'd sit and eat under the taut white umbrellas on the grass while my brother splashed around in the pool. I looked around at all the other children like they were a foreign species as they ran around pushing and shoving each other, diving in and then screeching gleefully while apparently trying to drown each other. I scanned all of the surf brands attached to the boys' board shorts that were completely unfamiliar to me. Mambo, Hot Tuna, Billabong and Quicksilver. I yearned to have a pair of my own.

The Balga Swimming Pool was effectively segregated. The Aboriginal kids would splash around on one side of the pool, and everyone else stayed on the other side. It was as if there was an invisible forcefield between the two groups of playful and seemingly carefree kids. There weren't any signs enforcing this rule, and so I asked Mum why it was like this. Mum, never one to mince words, said that she'd decided that Western Australians were very racist, and that as far as she could tell from their poolside banter, the children were even worse than their parents.

Everything in Western Australia was about water. We went on trips to Underwater World, where I loved to rub the heads of the port Jackson sharks in the touch pool. We went to Mundaring Weir and read about the tragic hero C.Y O'Connor, who was said to have designed a magnificent pipeline to pump water from the weir all the way out to the goldfields, but then tragically shot himself at Fremantle Beach when the pumps wouldn't turn on.

The number one topic on Channel 7 news was water restrictions and the ongoing drought, and the number one community talking point was when you were allowed to water your lawn. Perversely though, Western Australians were absolutely terrified of the rain, which bucketed down about four times a year in huge sheets, unlike in England, where it was common for it to drizzle all day for six months or more.

In 1992, my brother and I, trying to be the best new Australians we could, sat glued to the TV to cheer on the athletes wearing green and gold spandex at the Barcelona Olympics. I felt frustrated though. Why were they always showing the swimming, and not something interesting like basketball or Tae Kwon Do? The public's

obsession with Kieran Perkins' quest for gold in the 1500 metres was so overwhelming that his signature ended up on the side of our milk cartons for the rest of the decade – a permanent reminder that in Australia, swimming was king. I made it my life's mission to avoid the pool.

I considered all this while launching myself up and down the roped lane. Struggling to catch my breath at the side of the pool, I noticed a woman in her late twenties with long brown hair. She was looking at me with a strange smile. I didn't understand the meaning of this expression until I realized I'd pulled my chest out of the pool. She had clocked me as trans, and was giving me the overly-inclusive 'you are welcome here' smile that cisgender people sometimes gave to trans people to convey their support for our right to exist. It was hard to know what to do with a smile like that. I dunked myself back into the water. I held my breath there for long enough to feel alone again, but not long enough for a lifeguard to try and rescue me.

Of course, I knew she meant well, but all it did was confirm my suspicions that people were, in fact, staring at my chest. Did I care? I wasn't sure.

After years of avoiding the pool, I'd taken up swimming to address the lower back pain which was starting to take over my life. I felt nervous about doing this, as I tried my best to avoid gendered spaces wherever possible, such was my dysphoria. I hated using women's changerooms, in which, as an androgenous-looking person, I was regularly stared at and made to feel unwelcome. But as local swimming pools started to offer gender neutral change rooms, my confidence about swimming increased. After learning about an annual trans and gender diverse swim night, I realised that my body had the right to be at a public pool.

Before I had top surgery in 2018, I encountered scores of other trans masculine people writing about how liberating it was to finally swim shirtless. But after the procedure, I realized that my scars would continue to mark me out as different, either as trans, or as the presumed victim of a car accident.

Did it matter what the woman who'd noticed me thought? Perhaps my atypical body would inspire her to worry less about what she looked like in her bathers. Perhaps she hadn't even seen my scars at all, and ruminating about my childhood had made me nervous and hypervigilant.

And what did I have to be ashamed of, when it came to my body? It had taken me up and down the pool for thirty minutes, though I had hardly moved for 6 months during lockdown. I tried to feel thankful for my body, and grateful that it wasn't battling the illness that had taken so many lives and closed our city for so long. There, in those aqua depths, I felt a moment of self-acceptance, perhaps even a moment of love for myself.

It comes and goes, this bodily contentment. Every ambling lap of the pool in my idiosyncratic stroke won't turn me into the scar-free Adonis I sometimes want to be. But it might just bring me closer to the emotional equilibrium I have longed for since I first stepped into the troubled waters of Balga swimming pool.

Sam Elkin is a trans masculine writer, arts worker and producer of the podcasts *Transgender Warriors*, *Transdemic* and *Queer View Mirror*. Born in the UK and raised on Noongar land, Sam now lives on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation in Melbourne, Australia. Sam is currently working on a debut collection of essays about gender identity and the law.

The sun glared through thin lilac curtains patterned with naïvely drawn stick-figure women skipping in platform heels, the word SHOPAHOLIC snaking across rippled fabric in a disorientating cursive font.

Pamela was lying on the top bunk, surrounded by the dust-covered artefacts of her daughters' teenage years, all for some reason fuchsia-pink and fake-furred and engraved with overconfident diamanté slogans. GLAMOUR ALERT!, 200% FEISTY, UH-OH! BABE WITH ATTITUDE - they all seemed to cry out with the same tacked-on assertiveness, plasticky totems for shy girls to hide behind.

The room was a useless time capsule, a shrine to an era for which nobody felt nostalgic yet, not even the girls themselves. Pamela stared uncomprehendingly at a semi-deflated miniature armchair designed to seat a Nokia 3310, wondering if such a thing could ever decompose. The dilapidating dull-tuna wallpaper made her feel hungover every morning.

She was trying to sell it all on ebay, piece by piece. A malformed plastic alien keyring with its fingers gnarled into a redundant thumbs-up had received 0 Bids.

She could hear the atonal chirrup of Chris's morning alarm through the wall, followed by the equally familiar sounds of his shuffles and sighs. She listened from the child-sized bed, her feet hanging over the edge of the mattress and through the bars of the Funky Chick! branded bedframe, as he scratched and yawned and dithered over screeching clothes-hangers, the floorboards aching under his novelty-slippered feet. She'd gotten used to her husband's half-presence, which lingered like a benign ghost or a socially withdrawn Gumtree flatmate.

He'd begun snoring on purpose about five weeks ago. Pamela knew it was fake snoring because of its hammy, Hanna-Barbera-cartoon quality and because it was happening only now, after 28 muted years punctuated very occasionally by a cry in the night for a deceased pet. Chris was snoring to help both of them out, to gently provoke the next phase of their inevitable separation. Pamela feigned frustration for a night or two, before offering to go and sleep in the bunk bed in the girls' room, temporarily.

"Oh, are you sure? I feel terrible. You'll be cold."

"It's fine, you're the one with the early start and I'm always too hot these days."

"Alright, well, I'll put the electric blanket over Lauren's old mattress for you just in case."

Pamela had felt surprisingly depressed by the swiftness of things, as if she'd expected a bit more fake arguing to follow on from the fake snoring. The electric blanket hummed suspiciously through the weeks that followed, its yellowed Woolworths tag sticking up at the edge of the mattress and making no promises about fire safety or nocturnal death.

She felt a stabbing pain in her lower back and realised that she'd slept on top of the plastic alien again. With her fingers she traced the outline of the backwards imprint that its oversized face had left on her flesh, and resolved to bin the thing if there were no new bids by now.

The laptop lay at the bottom of the bed, its battery frying quietly with overuse. Her eyes had been fixed to the screen for most of these solitary hours in the girls' room. She checked her ebay messages: one, from someone called SylviaBratwurst666, simply said, RE: Fun Alien Fashion Keyring:

"Hey there. Blast from the past!!!!"

Pamela never spoke to people on the internet, preferring to lurk and worry instead. She had an inactive Facebook page with a generic Microsoft image of a sunflower as the profile photo, a choice that had taken her six months. She would spend hours online reading about the dangers of hours spent online, like the story of the elderly woman who had gone missing from a residential care home after discovering she'd been made into a meme by her grandson. The boy had posted an hour-and-a-half-long apology video in which he urged viewers to visit his online store and purchase 'FIND MY GRAN' t-shirts, all of which featured the original meme stretched inexpertly across neon yellow polyester and an advert for a protein supplement on the back.

Unused to raw contact, Pamela typed each letter slowly, conscientiously:

"Ha ha."

She knew that "Ha ha" made no sense, as she hadn't been told a joke as such; but "Blast from the past!!!!" was obviously meant to be funny in some way because of the number of exclamation marks. It was the wispy outline of a joke, a distant relative – the kind of thing you'd at least smile and exhale at in a face-to-face conversation.

"Ha ha. Yes. Happy bidding my friend!"

That sounded deranged, but was at least in keeping with the tone of the original message. Alone in the house with Chris, Pamela had felt her social skills atrophying, especially since their interactions had dwindled to a handful of uneasy chance meetings in the kitchen or hallway. Unpractised, their words would bump into each other, the well-intentioned collisions occurring once or twice a day: surplus "sorrys" and "thank yous" and unnecessary questions about milk, stock phrases and wan mannerisms exchanged in the absence of anything substantial to say to one another.

No reply from Sylvia. Pamela refreshed the page.

She gazed up at the flaking Artex ceiling and thought about a coastal walk she and Chris had taken in 2004; the memories returned in a sequence of soothing soft-focus filtered images, like an advert for an ethical bank.

One New Message, but it was from ebay itself, issuing a friendly reminder that users were not permitted to sell livestock or counterfeit CDs after a recent spate of illegal activity; one seller had been caught shipping ten crates of frogspawn and a bootleg copy of *No Parlez* by Paul Young, much sought-after by collectors for its unflattering cover photo of the singer taken voyeuristically through a Ladbrokes window.

She remembered restaurants, the girls solemnly crayoning their HRH Princess of Wales Memorial Colouring Books, Chris ruining the meal by staring suspiciously at his fork and saying “How many different mouths has this been in before mine?”

She stared for ten minutes at some grey hairs that had recently started sprouting on her lower legs, then wrote again to Sylvia:

“Do you come here often? Ha ha.”

Ha ha. She was getting the hang of this.

Chris had turned on Smooth FM in the shower, ‘Would I Lie To You?’ by Charles & Eddie vaguely discernable through the sound of her estranged husband yelping “Ooh-ah-ooh!” under the hot running water and mingling with the synthetic Alpine Musk of the 2-in-1 shampoo that always made him smell like a second-hand car.

No reply. She looked up ‘How to tell if a girl likes you’, but all the results on Yahoo Answers were written by and for 14 year old boys. She tried again:

‘How to tell if a girl likes you and you can only talk on ebay and you are 53 and a woman and you have been with the same man for almost 30 years because getting married seemed like a solution at the time and Seventeen Magazine said it was just a

normal phase all girls go through with their friends and it was just practice for the real thing only the real thing has been like a play, a bad local play with non-professional actors who've been forced into it by the Job Centre, and there aren't even any fights or any dialogue at all, it just withers away while I start to get grey hair growing around my ankles and he smirks to himself at wry comments on Newsnight Review and drinks hot squash from a mug that says Allergic To Mornings and I hate him, I HATE HIM'

Your search did not match any existing terms. Suggestions:

- *Make sure that all words are spelled correctly.*
- *Try different keywords.*
- *Try more general keywords.*

Pamela slid back beneath the Born To Party! bedspread.

Lisa Jones is a writer and performer from Glasgow. Her amplified muttering has been just-about-heard at the *SWC New Writing Showcase*, *PRRPL Kitty: Queer Spoken Word & Music Night*, *Project Café*, *Hug and Pint*, *Sonnet Youth*, and *CCA*. Her writing has featured in *Product Magazine*, *From Glasgow to Saturn*, *Femmes Uncut*, *Flying Moon Festival*, the Hunterian Museum journal *Alcohol in the Archives*, *GAADA*, *The Queer Dot*, *Forest Publications*, and *Neon Horror: Queer Horror Anthology*. She has produced two issues of a zine on domestic tedium titled *Happy Birthday, Glen and Phyllis*, and a collaborative zine with photographer Audrey Bizouerne. She also sings and performs spoken word with the band *Dragged Up*. Find her at lisajones.mystrikingly.com and on Instagram (@concernedsmile).

Shaving

[Kayleigh Jayshree]

Dad crouches in the mirror on Sunday night and holds the razor, demonstrating over his stubble. Sorry, he says. I couldn't find a pink one.

I shave, following his instructions. I look in the mirror. I finally look like a girl, but I still don't feel like one.

I sit at the table in the school cafeteria. My bully turns around, bursts into laughter. I have a five o'clock shadow. I'm eleven.

Kayleigh Jayshree (she/they) is a short fiction writer based in England. She has been published by *Lunate Fiction* and *The Hearth Magazine*, and has work forthcoming in *Mixed Magazine*, *Polyphony*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears* and *The Bitchin' Kitsch*. She often writes about her mixed heritage and bipolar disorder.

tiny tykes: burr edition [Madeleine Han & Irene Hsu]

benny, host #1: welcome back to another episode of tiny tykes! i'm host #1, benny—

oscar, host #2: and i'm host #2, oscar—

benny: and we're here to explore the big wide world of tiny things we'd normally prefer to crush, flush, or spritz with RAID.

oscar: but here on our show, we open our minds. that's right, we give them a second life, and a chance to show us what they really get up to, when they're not in our hair—

benny: [with gusto] *literally*.

oscar: last week we popped in on the lives of five common fruit flies, begging them to satiate our curiosity and answer the question at the tip-top of our minds: why on earth do you die after only three inhales of this sweet, sweet life? this week, we turn to another household dread.

[drumroll; cue jingle]

benny: the barnacle of velcro. the unwanted houseguest after an otherwise refreshing hike out. those pesky things: burrs. [beat] shells? seeds? pests? plant poop? who are they, and what are they up to, really?

per yooj, our crew got up-close and personal with our brand new burr buds. we asked the tough questions: why do you hurt? where do you go? do you ever have a destination in mind? and why, oh why, do you stick to everything you touch? tune in to hear their deepest desires.

oscar: our first guest is a true tik tok star of generation burr-z. known as “bri burr” on his socials, he’s amassed hundreds of online followers for his travel vlogs and vegan recipe content – not bad, for a shell.

bri burr: [off screen] i’m a SEED!

oscar: whoops-a-daisy! not bad, for a *seed*! [wink] stick around after the break for an inside look at the life of our guest and how he landed on that “good vibes” life.

[title segment: a day in the life of bri burr]

11:00am i take a selfie of my starry, naked body at a 45-degree angle & post it to my close friend’s story. a dandelion weed i’ve been flirting with immediately dms me. looking good. what can i say? it’s what close friends are for.

12:00pm gotta get my daily workout on. i livestream myself throwing open the door, letting the wind blow me around the block. being a burr means i can’t get covid, & the humans who follow me can’t get enough. it’s like 2019 all over again! i’m getting vertigo! sick flow, bro!

1:00pm time for brunch. i don’t have to eat much – the cooking’s mostly for the ‘gram. i’m livestreaming today, shredding some herbs up with my pasta, singing a little herbalicious song: roooosemary! basil, bay, and thyyyyme! your so sexy aha, one commenter gushes.

5:00pm got some bad news. my bud at the bronx zoo just texted saying that he has covid. i can’t believe it – when i first blew into the city, he let me camp out in his mane for three whole months. i text him back, stat. sending thoughts & prayers, man. things just got real.

6:00pm i’m on the google. apparently covid can make your hair fall out? and avocado shakes taste like gasoline? dang.

9:00pm i do a round of the house, tucking away my camera, petting my succulents, feeding the cats. then it’s lights out.

11:00pm i can't sleep. i admit, sometimes i dream about changing up my life, deleting all my accounts, moving house. i even texted a friend the other day that i was ready to hop out the window to catch a breeze, maybe land in someone's fuzzy neon sweater. she was like, get real. you've got fans who love you & a perfect life. you know, #firstworldproblems. i pause. then i decide to text her a selfie i know i look good in. you're totally right. #stayhumble #grateful #blessed

benny: well folks, we can't have our avocado shakes and drink them too. let's give it up for bri burr! up next we have a classic tale of burr-meets-whale, whale-meets-burr heartbreak from burr anonymous. i've gotta admit, i wasn't even sure burrs were capable of love, were you? but boy oh boy, we love love on this show so let's head on over to listen to this burr's sad ol' valentine tune.

[intertitle: my sticky sticky valentine]

burr anonymous: hi, hello – can you hear me? is this working? ok, great – so first things first, if your name is ruth and you've got the most beautiful voice on this earth, i love you, you're the one for me, i've been looking for you all this time, come find me at ventura beach the next full moon.

for everyone else, here's the thing: being a burr is all about working thru your attachments. i go from sock to paw to sock. no one sees it as a connection except me. you know – i cling, you fling. what can i say, i'm a child of diaspora. is there any other destiny for me? little did i know there was – there is.

for all of you out there, afraid to love, not knowing if your soulmate's real, they are, goddammit! last year, i got snapped out of a beach towel, spent four lonely nights stuck on the beach. the fifth moon, something massive rolled over me. did you know baby whales have fur? have you ever felt a whale sing? o baby! i snagged on. my whole body vibrated. i've never fallen so hard for another furry thing. she told me her name was ruth. she sung the whole night, gasping for breath in between, told me about a patch of plankton up north she was seeking. then, high tide washed us back out. i

thought it was our time for plankton, but she told me it was time for me to go: “you’ve caused me nothing but an itch.”

can you believe it? a flop of a fin, and i’m cast out again. you can be the most well-adjusted burr in town, but man, does it hurt. i don’t want to come off a sadburr, but heartbreak is being lost at sea, no kidding. and well it’s been a year and it was just my luck this show came to me, they promised to scour the seas—

oscar: folks, pardon the interruption, but i just want to assure you that here at tiny tykes, we don’t do promises, but we do do ethical standards. [cackles] anyway, can it get more depressing than that? i hate to be a downer folks, but it sure can! we asked for funny stories, but it turns out the bar was too high! let’s hear from burrseph van burrvitt.

[intertitle: a funny not-so-funny story]

burrseph van burrvitt: oh, you wanted a funny story? i got one for you.

every winter i take a big long nap to store my energy for the spring. this year i decided to camp out in my yard, since i’ve got no one to bother & nowhere else to go. it was like being brushed under the carpet at first, i barely felt the snow, but before long, there i was, buried three feet under in my own backyard. i yelled for hours, but nobody noticed until my uncle’s dog sniffed me out. it’s me, i shouted into his snout, but my uncle didn’t hear. typical uncle ernie. i even caught a ride on its collar & made it all the way to the house. then the dog scratched me out under the dinner table & there i was, splayed on the tile, as if i had been in the wrong. my uncle shot back in his chair, nearly quashing me with his foot. what are you doing here! he shouted. the nerve! i was furious. he drove me home in his pocket, & i made sure to leave a hole in that sucker. two days later i got a text. take it easy. my family says i’m the sensitive one. take it easy. take it easy. it’s my mantra when i brush my teeth. i say it every morning and every night, & i’m starting to think it’s me, but also not me. you know what i mean? i get the feeling it’s bigger, bigger than me. like, when my best friend j mailed me a foam

roller for my birthday & when i got stuck, she came over & pulled me out by my legs, apologizing the whole time. this never happens to me, she said—

benny: [nervous laughter] what a laugh, huh! i'm just going to stop you right there, burrseph! it's a rough 'n' tumble world out here, but let's take a cue from bri burr – positive vibes only! speaking of which, we got ourselves an itty bitty burr baby! [cooing] what a burr baby! van burrvitt's little baby burr cousin, she's a little camera-shy, and her parents haven't consented to her coming on-air, so we'll be whisper-reading a super secret special note she wrote just for our viewers. we don't quite get it ourselves, but who doesn't love a bit of baby talk—

van burrvitt: she's a renowned poet, you a**hole—

benny: we're all about viewers' choice on this show, so we'll let you decide. is it a poem? a code? bibbidy-bobbedy-baby-boop? what's the meaning of it all?

[intertitle: checking in with burr baby]

little burr sticks her little hooks into the cover little burr won't let go
and u can't make her. little burr just wants to
u know
play mario kart in bed w her freed up feet or smash cheezits into her face
or watch cartoons on a monday or snooze or sleep or dream
in another world where we've all become burrs like cockle burrs or nightshades
or herb bennets or burdocks or lopseeds or rose
did u know we burrs are in the family of rose anyway
we all become burrs & our houses are sunflower stems
glued up with sap & we wipe our butts w/ seaweed. we bury the pooley sea
weed in the mud & we take turns petting the mud w/ our prickly burr
feet till the mud starts to rumble & purr yep like a cat
then we know it's happy then we know we're happy
bc then we can throw our feet in the mud & throw our faces up at the sun
so when ur sick i'll grind up a piece of me for some got-better tea
& when i get sunburnt & scaly i'll have a sugar coated piece of u
to be good as new.
so, i, little burr, want to live in that squelchy soft cat-mud world
won't u let me dream bc anyone who wants me out of bed just wants
something out of me & that's a big no-no for me

[library voice: LITTLE BURR STICKS HER LITTLE HOOKS INTO THE COVERS.
LITTLE BURR WON'T LET GO

AND U CAN'T MAKE HER. LITTLE BURR JUST WANTS TO
U KNOW

PLAY MARIOKART IN BED WITH HER FREED UP ARMS OR SMASH CHEEZITS
INTO HER FACE OR WATCH CARTOONS ON A MONDAY. OR SNOOZE OR
SLEEP OR DREAM IN ANOTHER WORLD WHERE WE'VE ALL BECOME BURRS
LIKE COCKLEBURS OR NIGHTSHADES OR HERB BENNETS OR BURDOCKS OR
LOPSEEDS OR ROSE

DID U KNOW WE BURRS ARE IN THE FAMILY OF ROSE ANYWAY

WE ALL BECOME BURRS & OUR HOUSES ARE SUNFLOWER STEMS

GLUED UP WITH SAP & WE WIPE OUR BUTTS W/ SEAWEED. WE BURY THE
POOEY SEAWEED IN THE MUD & WE TAKE TURNS PETTING THE MUD W/ OUR

PRICKLY BURR FEET TILL THE MUD STARTS TO RUMBLE & PURR
YUP LIKE A CAT
THEN WE KNOW IT'S HAPPY THEN WE KNOW WE'RE HAPPY
BC THEN WE CAN THROW OUR FEET IN THE MUD & THROW OUR FACES UP
AT THE SUN
SO WHEN UR SICK I'LL GRIND UP A PIECE OF ME FOR SOME GET-BETTER TEA
& WHEN I GET SUNBURNT & SCALY I'LL HAVE A SUGAR COATED PIECE OF U
TO BE GOOD AS NEW
SO, I, LITTLE BURR, WANT TO LIVE IN THAT SQUELCHY SOFT CAT-MUD WORLD
WON'T U LET ME DREAM BC ANYONE WHO WANTS ME OUT OF BED JUST
WANTS SOMETHING OUT OF ME & THAT'S A BIG NO-NO FOR ME]

benny: well, folks. poem, code, or bibbidy-bobbedy-baby-boop? you know where to vote! we can't say that this one will be winning any burrlitzers anytime soon, but we love to see potential in our young people. stories that inspire from all walks of life – that's what we're all about here on tiny tykes. i'm benny—

oscar: and i'm oscar – your hosts! – make sure to join us next week when we dive deep into – you guessed it – belly button fuzz!

Madeleine Han (she/her) is a writer and researcher. She co-facilitates a high school writing workshop with Irene Hsu in the Bay Area, where they both grew up.

Irene Hsu (they) is a writer and researcher with one foot in South Bay and the other in Brooklyn.

More Than a Fractured Self: a Review of *The Mirror Season* by Anna-Marie McLemore

[Shiane D. Jacocks]

Content warnings: sexual assault/harassment, queerphobia, bullying, self-harm,

PTSD

Representation: Latinx, queer, pansexuality

What do healing and consent look like? How do we find comfort and safety in a world that wants to tear us apart? How do we allow ourselves space to be more than a fractured version of our past selves? These questions frame explorations of trauma and healing in *The Mirror Season*, the latest young adult novel by Mexican-American author Anna-Marie McLemore.

A queer, magical realist retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen* (*La Reina de las Nieves*), *The Mirror Season* follows Graciela Cristales, a queer Mexican American girl and Lock, a white cisgendered boy, who are both sexually assaulted at the same party. While Ciela remembers what has happened, Lock does not, and she carries this burden for the both of them. This secret, kept away from her friends and family, troubles the magical and intuitive abilities inherited from her bisabuela, nurtured at her family's pastelería. Even her surroundings start to contort and negate – leaves turn into ice crystals and trees vanish – signaling instability, pain and uncertainty.

McLemore does not diminish or disregard the violence both characters have endured, speaking to their longing for the parts of themselves that feel distant and unreachable. Lines like 'I dream of pale fingers pulling me apart like sugar dough' reveal how the

assault has infiltrated Celia's passion for baking, a passion that grounds her in her identity and family roots.

In order to cope with seeing the perpetrators daily at high school, Ciela only allows herself to resurface pieces from the assault. As a result, the assault is always present in her mind but never properly addressed. Her strategies for recovery also compromise the rituals that gave pleasure; she stops wearing red lipstick as it reminds her of that night. Lock's methods of coping are equally compromised. He occupies himself with crocheting to ease his anxiety and chooses to attend therapy, but doesn't keep up with his sessions. When Ciela confronts Lock with the whole truth, he resists and asks, 'has knowing helped you?' Both feel that their word against their white, rich assaulters will not be believed.

All too often survivors are told or expected to avoid sex altogether after an assault. The blame is often applied to the person who was hurt; there is no room for grey areas or complex reflections of sexuality and identity. Those who have been sexually assaulted need to be given support and room to follow nonlinear routes towards healing. In an interview with Diverse Books¹, McLemore says:

I wrote about Ciela, a queer Latina girl, because that's how I identified when I was assaulted. That was my experience. And it's still part of my experience as a nonbinary survivor. I am Latinx, I am queer, I still have part of me that identifies as a girl. I'm also trans and nonbinary, and there's part of me that identifies as a boy. So I had to write about a survivor who's a queer Latina girl and a survivor who's a boy because I am queer, I am Latinx, I am a girl, I am a boy, and I am a survivor.

McLemore gives these characters room to reclaim these parts of themselves. Ciela and Lock are careful with each other, gently relearning how to be close and safe

¹ <https://diversebooks.org/qa-with-anna-marie-mclemore-the-mirror-season/>

through friendship and trust. They learn that they are more than the ‘bad things’ they experienced. *The Mirror Season* promises readers that they can be, too.

Shiane D. Jacocks (they/them) is a writer of most forms: poetry, prose, and nonfiction. They have received their MFA, with a minor in Gender & Sexuality. They are interested in work centered around queerness, trauma, healing, and activist work. They were the prose editor for *Puerto del Sol* and have been published in *The Pacific Review*, *The FEM*, *IE Voice*, *Black Voice News*, *Social Justice zine v.4*, *Brown Recluse Distro*, *Ventanas*, *Mentalrealness mag*, and *Bleeding Thunder* (upcoming). They are currently working on zines, reviews, and a book about wolves and witches. You can follow them on Twitter @shianejacocks or Instagram @princepeachecake.