fruit

Queer Literary Journal

Issue 7: Queer Space

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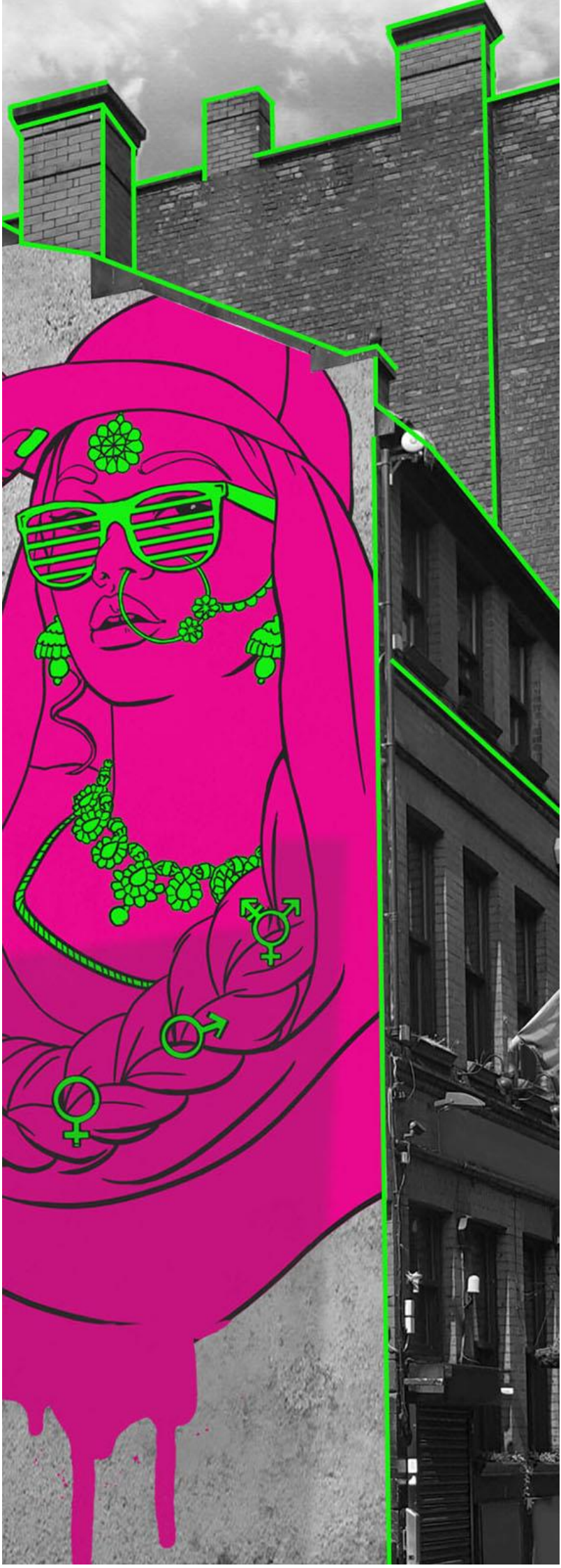


Artwork: detail of a poster for Aks Festival. Designed by Shahnawaz Memon

Editorial

Welcome to *Fruit*! The theme of this issue is queer space. At first glance, queerness might not seem related to space but actually, there are striking connections. For a start, queerness comes with its own spatial metaphor – the closet, which we're in or out of (or in *and* out of). And according to the theorist Eve Sedgwick[1], 'queer' derives from the word 'athwart', which means 'across'. So queerness then becomes a way of moving through space. But even without these abstract concepts, we don't have to think too hard to understand why we might be particularly sensitive to space. Made places are rarely designed with us in mind, so they can feel unwelcome or unsafe. Just think, for example, about needing to use the bathroom in a bar, only to be confronted with the choice: man or woman? Bad enough that we're forced to acquiesce to one of those categories but then inside, we might encounter abuse if we're perceived not to belong there.

Faced with this issue, we're forced to create our own spaces. These can be purpose-designed, such as queer bookshops or bars. Often, though, we make do with what's available. We have to be creative – as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner[2] note, the essence of queer world making is inventiveness. So a public park becomes a cruising ground because of how we use it. Or a queer clubnight pops up once a month in a borrowed hall. One benefit of borrowing a space is that it allows for movement. The Aks film festival, for example, travels to different countries, setting up an impromptu queer space wherever it lands and reaching a wide audience. (You can read all about Aks in the features section.) But there are also challenges. As Berlant and Warner note, queer spaces tend to be fragile and ephemeral, coming and going without leaving much evidence. Their physical disappearance, and their disappearance from memory, erases foundations on which new queer spaces can be imagined.

One response to the disappearance of queer spaces is to record them in writing. That's exactly what many of the writers in this issue do. In 'Old Wounds', Tom Marshman

[1] Eve Sedgwick (1993) *Tendencies*.
[2] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) 'Sex in Public'. In *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), pp.547-566.

remembers Bristol's disappeared spaces: clubs such as Winn's and Vadims, as well as The Grosvenor Hotel – 'a home for waifs and strays'. And in 'A Hot Night in July (London)', Ernesto Sarezale describes a fleeting act of queering space – walking naked through the streets – and saves it from being forgotten.

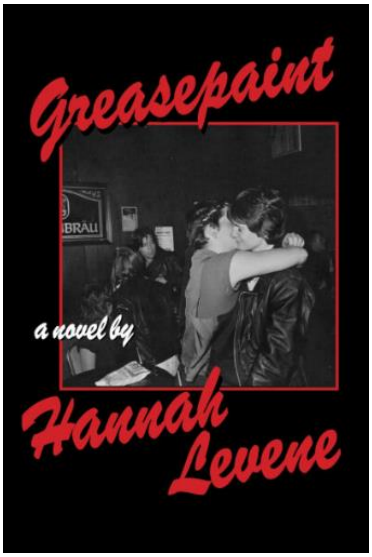
The drive to record occurs throughout the writing in this issue in other ways too. In 'Top Dad's House', Amaan Hyder reflects on the formative space of someone else's home. There are also spaces which become important because of the way they intersect with queerness to force epiphanic moments. One example is Callie Jennings' sonnet 'On Not Acknowledging I'm Also a Trans Girl at East and Chestnut, Rochester'. Another is André Le Mont Wilson's poem 'Brutha', in which a barbershop suddenly becomes a place of exclusion where his queerness alienates him.

There's also an exploration of writing *as* space. In conversation, Hannah Levene notes how her novel *Greasepaint* is an attempt to 'translate the space of the bar to the space of the page'. (You can read an extract from her novel in this issue, to see what she means.) And Cherry Potts reports on her role as publisher of the *Joy//Us* anthology – how she and her co-editor 'held space' for a variety of poets to contribute and gave them space to think about joy. In a similar way, we hope that this issue of *Fruit* will be a space for you.

A final point. If the aim of queer spaces – and queerness in general – is liberation from oppression, then we need to consider Palestine. At this very moment, Israel is subjecting the Palestinian people – including queer Palestinians – to occupation, apartheid and genocide. People in Gaza are being starved and bombed relentlessly. Spaces for Palestinians to exist in – let alone spaces for queerness – are being destroyed. As the queer Palestinian organisation alQaws reminds us, 'there is no pride in genocide.' We cannot have queer liberation without the liberation of Palestine.

‘Making Eyes at the Page’:
Hannah Levene in Conversation

Hannah Levene’s novel Greasepaint *was published earlier this year by the great Nightboat Books. It follows a cast of butch Yiddish anarchists as they meet up on Friday nights to drink, talk and sing. But it’s not just the characters who are butch – the writing is too. (Check out an extract from the novel in this issue to see what we mean.) Recommended by Isabel Waidner and included as one of* The Paris Review*’s Favorite Books of 2023,* Greasepaint *is definitely one to add to your reading list. We caught up with Hannah after the launch in New York.*



Hi Hannah. Can you describe *Greasepaint*. What is it about?

The book follows a bunch of butches around the bars every Friday night.

Can you say a little about what a butch is to you? In another interview, you mention the 1950s butch as a specific touchstone.

Yes, the 1950s butch is the specific butch style I was reading around when researching for the book, and the specific butch I was trying to write for the book too. Who is also the first iteration of the bar-butch or bar-dyke, a character who exists as a part of a scene. Not an identity – I am butch – but a mutuality, what I thought of as a self-amongst-others i.e. bar-butch.

How did the idea to write *Greasepaint* come to you and what were you trying to achieve with it?

Greasepaint is an attempt to write a butch book. I wanted to work out what butch fiction was like. So much of what exists of butch writing is oral history or memoir, and a lot of the fiction starts butch but doesn't end it. I'm not sure what came first, the characters or the bar they're in because they're so tied up together. I was looking for that specific butch in writing – the bar-butch. That hyphen's important. It's a tether and I could never write one without the other.

When you say 'a lot of the fiction starts butch but doesn't end it', what do you mean?

The lack of clarity here is intentional. Yes, I do mean the books start butch or butchly but don't end up being it, being butch. And I also mean in the same sentence that they start butch but don't end it, as in the butch they start isn't completed, is always only a start of something else, never realised. Maybe what I mean by that is they fail to write butch which, it's easy to argue, is the most butch thing to do, to fail to be it. So maybe they do deliver in that sense, in the sense that butch is always failure, the way all gender is.

You've worked a lot in poetry before. How easy was it to move into fiction? How did you go about engaging with character and narrative?

I think an 'engagement' with narrative is about as far as this book goes. I like writing whatever I go to write as a poet. It means that you keep all those things poets do in mind like not forgetting the stuff of words and doing whatever you want. But also thinking about form as a part of the telling. Characters were a great pleasure to write. I feel so warmly towards the characters, and it's been my favourite part of the book being published and being in circulation, that we can all come to know the same people I know so well, those characters. The first wave of lesbian feminist publishing was about that, about sharing books and knowing that a lesbian had come up with the words, that a lesbian had type-set and printed it, that a lesbian had designed the book,

bound it, distributed it. It was like receiving a lesbian saturated object in the post or over the counter. Like getting a signed copy of something is good because you know the author or the band have touched it too. The gay books I like don't forget they're an object that the reader wants to hold as much as read.

Did the book change significantly from its inception to its completion?

It became more solid in its aims I suppose. I realised things about the characters, how if they left the bar they'd fall apart so when they do, they do. And how they never *really* do because there's the bar stool, there's the jukebox, there *they* are and the bar is them. I became surer of what I wanted to write as I got to know the characters. The book changed as much as they developed.

Butchness is central to the book. Can you tell us something about the butch and their place in queer history? What is your interest in butchness?

The butch's part in queer history is in the role of 'The Past'. The Bad Old Days. It's funny that you use the word 'central' because I thought so much about anarchism's conceit that the centre cannot hold. And if the butch is the centre then this is still true. There is a sense that the butch cannot hold, cannot hold the onrush of second wave feminism, cannot hold down a job, cannot hold a conversation. I thought about the bar as the thing which holds the butch/book together. My interest in butchness is desire I suppose. Academic language might be: erotohistiography, see Elizabeth Freeman and Zohar Weiman Kellman or Heather Love's 'cross-historical desire and the queer impulse to forge communities between the living and the dead' or Carolyn Dinshaw's 'consistent impulse to make contact, even finally a desire for bodies to touch across time'. The butch archive is full of hot, funny people and there's barely any fiction about them. They rarely get to be the characters they played so well. I didn't want to add to an archive I wanted to take from it and to write with it. I wanted the whole thing to be a crush, for butch to be reinforced by the readers, reading them as they wanted to be read and so creating butchness in the act of reading. I wanted butch to make eyes at the reader and the reader to make reading mean making eyes at the page. This was

necessary to make a butch book because butch doesn't exist in isolation, it's not an 'I am' it's an 'I am now, because of you.'

You wrote a fantastic piece for LitHub called 'In Search of a Rare Queer Voice'. The rest of my questions all arise from what you say there. In that article, you mention that 'the butch brings the bar with them'. Can you say something about the space of the bar and its importance to the butch? How did you translate the space of the bar to the space of the page?

I wanted to translate the space of the bar to the space of the page – that's something to do with form like I was saying, and that's something to do with the crush I was talking about, and that's something about the lesbian feminist presses' fictional butch. In those early books we find the kinda butch I'm after in the bar in the first chapter of the book or the beginning of the story before they are led from darkness to light by the lesbian of the moment who had her own role to play, but I never wanted to butch to leave the bar. So, I had to write the first chapter. A whole book crushed into the first chapter. And all the butches and their whole lives crushed into the bar. And there HAD to be a CRUSH. Crushing is what creates butch. It's the inherent mutuality, the declaration is signed by more than one hand. Halberstam wrote about 'a gender fiction requiring readers', I don't know how to put it any clearer than that. A crush is somebody reading into somebody else. So, the bar was an endless crush or block of text needed to contain butch on the page.

You describe being resistant to the idea of the butch 'figured as the ghost of lesbian past, their only role cast as the beginning of the story of lesbian-feminism'. How did you go about resisting that narrative in *Greasepaint*?

The butches aren't held by time in the book they're held by the bar. They don't move through time, they move through the bar. That was the model.

You write that 'the butch in the bar is a whole unspoken language with which to keep trying to write'. What were the challenges and excitements of trying to write butch?

The challenge of writing butch is how to write a characters whose mode of communication isn't words. So many of the butches I read were undermined from the start by even speaking. My book is mostly chat actually, it just happened that way. So the challenge wasn't writing silence it was building the correct scene for butch chat. Where butch chat wasn't shoehorned in, where butch chat wasn't them puppeting some story. The butches chat in my book because they can and because they want to. They also move, they also repeat themselves, they also gesture like this and that, they also get dressed, they also sing. Singing was a way to make the butches make a noise. I thought about butch noise as much as I thought about butch language. I'm writing a new novel with D Mortimer called *But Certainly Dancing* and it's the same thing we landed on I think somehow, that language wasn't the first choice to tell you something with and how do we write that? Anyway, *Greasepaint* never explains anything to anybody, least of all butches explaining themselves. They speak yeah, but they don't tell.

You say that 'we do not communicate to explain ourselves but to find ourselves, that is, to find ourselves amongst others' and quote Camille Roy's point about 'obscurity as a social substance'. I love that idea. I agree that some kinds of obscure or opaque language can call to a community, perhaps even invite one into existence. One obvious example is Polari (a language which some gay men spoke together, up until the 1970s). Can you say something about how you engage with obscurity in *Greasepaint*?

I engage with obscurity as a social substance. I engage with it without a narrative like obscurity to clarity. To some people some things are never obscure. Butchness isn't obscure to me and neither is it to leagues of others. Anarchism isn't obscure to me. And the relationship between those two positions isn't obscure to me. ANYWAY, *Greasepaint* never explains anything to anybody, least of all butches explaining themselves. They speak yeah, but they don't tell.

We've spoken about the butch aspect of this book. But anarchism and Jewishness come into play too. Why did all those things seem to belong together?

They are all the same thing to me. Jewishness for me is an engagement with a rich history of successful and lasting anarchist action and literature. The language used to translate this anarchism is Yiddish. 1950s bar-dykes are not a pre-political entity waiting for Gay Liberation to bust down their door. To allow that history to continue is to concede to the idea that no one in the bar was oppressed by anything but their queerness – there were no bar-dykes organising as people of colour, there were no bar-dykes organising as workers, or in coalition as all these things in one body, from one body. No, there was politics in the bar because there were people in the bar. I just wrote what I thought Leslie Feinberg would've wanted like a good kid.

I'd like to argue that the book is written 'in' Yiddish, which is a language I don't speak. But by entering a world of Yiddish which I do not speak, I was able to inhabit the butch character whose relationship to language is borrowed from a symbolic order they are not a part of. The butch approach to understanding is that we both know what we are choking on, that's from Feinberg. Maybe this is speaking more to your question on obscurity. There's a great line in a Grace Paley (who I love so much) story where the character is a part of the Yiddish theatre and everyone there is Jewish apart from this one guy who she says "had fallen into the soup by accident" or something like that. And I understood that. *Greasepaint* is in that same soup. Call it what you want, an atmosphere, a scene, a stage, a backdrop, a community maybe. But I think the soup sums it up, it's the thing we're all choking on.

I'm just gonna paste in a quote here from queer musicologist Suzanne G. Cusick, from 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music; a Serious Effort Not to Think Straight' included in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* which is a great anthology on sound and queerness which I would recommend aaanddd Cusick says 'And it would be easier to say my say in Italian. It would be easier in that language that isn't mine because there, in that language, there is no illusion of the natural, native

“mother tongue” (it would be thus easier for everyone to accept the not making sense that is the lingua franca of those who live outside the symbolic order).’ Yes, I think I’m talking about obscurity as a social substance again. I suppose in simple terms I thought, well if the butch doesn’t speak, maybe the butch speaks Yiddish.

What’s the reception been like for *Greasepaint*? It got mentioned in the *Paris Review*, which is quite something.

The reception has been kind and thoughtful. It means a lot to me that people feel something towards the characters of the book, I feel very tenderly towards them, I want them to be known and to be shared, I feel like I owe them that, whatever the hell that means.

‘The Bar’s a Horse’: an Excerpt from *Greasepaint*

[Hannah Levene]

The bar’s a horse and Frankie wipes it with a rag in the same spot round and round and the bar’s delighted and shakes its mane for her. Frankie was the closest thing they had to staff that night when Joanne didn’t show up. Please, the owner had pleaded, please Frankie you know where everything is don’t you? I’ll pay you performer’s price not tender price I promise please Frankie I gotta go I gotta be somewhere I can’t close the bar, you know the ropes don’t you? Frankie’d agreed. “Ganuf” Frankie spoke to the barprop “was treated like dirt by everybody, the people who used him to drag their cart about, the kids who saw him tied up and vulnerable, the rider, whoever” Frankie rubs the bar with a rag and the bar nuzzles her hand which is full of peanuts and its big wet lips are gentle. “Everyone treated like shit thinks they’re being treated like an animal, exterminated like rats, worked like dogs, caged like lions wouldn’t it be better if we just admitted that what we were actually being treated like was men! That man has been treated like shit by man for millennia and still is and will be if we keep imagining that it’s only animals that man despises and not the poor or the queers or anybody else who can’t prove he’s a man as if being a man is what’ll save you from all the other men well (Frankie might’ve paused to spit then) being a man won’t save you from anything, certainly not from being a horse. You know what I mean?” “Um” the barprop says. Frankie wanted to hear opinions, she was desperate to be challenged, to hear notes that didn’t go together, melodies that clashed something, anything. “If” says the person at the bar “if there were a horse in New York” she says “I’d line up like all the other kids who grew up in a city and wait my turn riding him about” “Yes!” Frankie says, she loved that answer! She patted the bar heavily and it shook its behind and whinnied pat pat pat firm nearly setting off into a canter “Yes! You would! And I would too! Of course! because we, you and I, comrade we are the little boy in the book who doesn’t beat the horse but steals sugar from his mother’s cupboard to feed the horse whilst it’s made to wait still harnessed after a long day’s work in the street and who the horse shakes its mane for and makes sweet horse sounds” Frankie was excited by the idea of a horse in the city and of young people

lining up to pay their respects to it and of the mutual exchange that could happen between a large animal (who reminded her of Roz) and that line of people each one of them getting something different from the horse, some sort of love or kindness or thrill and the horse getting to meet all those people who loved it. At the bar now she imagined the horse as the bartender. The horse on its hind legs with a rag under its hoof making clean circles in the grease, the horse free pouring whisky into a heavy bottomed tumbler and clipping it across the bar into somebody's hand. The horse laying out a square napkin and placing a bottle of beer on it, and clacking coins into the till. Frankie made a crack about giving tips to a horse and the barprop drank up and went. The bar was empty. No one to talk to. The piano was set up and soon Sammy'd come in and play a little. Finished from her day job working as a typesetter at the anarchist newspaper, still with the old gang. Not Frankie though, who never saw any of them and nobody talked about Frankie with Sammy and Sammy and Frankie didn't talk about anybody. Sammy had been a typesetter for the anarchist papers since she was a kid and she'd never left. "Did you know they call it that?" Sammy'd say to girls when they asked her about her work "that stuff between all the letters you can't see? That's called furniture, I always liked that about the job" she'd say dreamily. Sammy was a dreamy type of guy, like a low note on a piano. All she did was keys, keys to type with keys to play piano. She had recurring nightmares about losing her fingers: someone accusing her of something and a judge ruling she'd have each of her fingers chopped off at the guillotine up on the stage in the bar, or worse still she was on stage with Frankie it was the finale a big number and she'd press a key and the finger would spuk pop right out of her hand and Frankie'd be singing alone. I need to diversify she'd wake up thinking, shaking her head, clammy, sweat on her forehead the big flop of her hair stuck to her skin, tangled in her eyebrows. "Delores" shaking Delores awake "Delores, Delores, how many fingers am I holding up?" holding her hands out to show Delores and Delores rolling over, grumbling "Fuck off Sam" grumble. Yeah here she is "Hey Sammy" "Hey Frankie" "Turn the sign round will ya?" [closed] and the lights go down over the bar on Frankie Gold cleaning glasses and up on the stage showing Sammy Silver practicing after hours.

genderqueer in a cruising club

[jake Stefan ferguson]

sex crackles slantwise through the haze at boltz
interloping limbic archives until i'm unbuoyed
towards the darkrooms g's arm buttressing my back
past a hallway of unattached hands tendering glimpses
backscattering me as i pass

a masculine smear

bent off into cubicled parenthesis
interlining gothic novel tryst with tremor
of SOPHIE at predrinks where reader, *they is*
just a pony he, a paraphrased rochester riding
out of pronouns from these demurral heroine annotations
into a chimeral marginalia limning smut to blear
taxonomies of genre a glimmer in this versatile dim

Aks Festival [Saadat Munir]

Poster for the 2017 Manchester Aks Festival designed by Shahnawaz Memon

Mural in the Gay Village, Manchester

Aks International Festival is an arts space that seeks to improve the representation of minorities in Pakistan through film and dialogue.

The festival began in 2014, after I travelled to Pakistan to make *Chuppan Chupai* (*Hide and Seek*), a documentary about the lives of queer and trans people living there. One of the subjects of the documentary was Neeli Rana, a veteran Khawaja Sira (indigenous transperson) leader. During the filming process, she and I became incredibly close. She was positive about the prospects of the film but after it was released in 2013, she expressed her fears that it would do nothing to improve the lives of minorities in Pakistan.

Neeli's argument was true, I realised. A film released in the West could do little to change the situation in Pakistan. As a result, I established Aks, a platform to empower minorities across Pakistan through the medium of film, art and dialogue. The first year, we held events in Lahore and Islamabad, screening thought-provoking films and exhibiting queer art that we followed up with performances and panel discussions with activists and academics. Hundreds of people attended, drawn to the films, the opportunity to meet like-minded people and the stimulating conversations.

It was such an overwhelming success that we have expanded over the years, taking the festival to different cities (Karachi, Multan and Faisalabad, for example) to reach the communities there. All of our events are free to attend, to ensure that there are fewer barriers to entry. By focusing on the indigenous Khawaja Sira community, one of the most marginalised in Pakistan, the festival has attracted rave reviews in the local media and a devoted audience of thousands.

Aks means 'reflection' or 'mirror' in Urdu. The Aks festival holds up a metaphorical mirror, hoping to improve the self-image of queer minorities and to focus public attention on their experiences. A big part of this is providing space for the artists and activists whose voices are unheard in Pakistan and across the world. Many of the Khawaja Sira community are empowered to perform and speak about their own experiences. In recent years, I have also trained volunteers on the ground to organise the festival themselves. The festival is their space; it can take the form of whatever they need it to.

Since I am Danish-Pakistani, I have also held Aks Festival in Copenhagen annually since 2015. I felt that there were very few spaces there for queer and trans people of colour to discuss their lives. Again, by platforming films which rarely make it to mainstream cinemas and art that is missing from mainstream galleries, I aim to create a safe space where minorities can meet each other, form networks and also discuss the challenges and opportunities of living in Denmark.

This cover of Fruit comes from the Manchester iteration of Aks Festival, which was held in July 2017. The poster takes a famous mural in the Gay Village and reimagines it, giving space to PoC queer representation where there was none before.

Top Dad's House [Amaan Hyder]

Top Dad's House

Top Dad wore his shoes inside his house. It was strange for me because I was brought up in a house where no one wore their shoes inside. To wear one's shoes inside was a white thing. It was to spread dirt through the house.

Top Dad wasn't dirt-blind. He would always be very aware of the possibility of stepping in dog shit in the streets around his house. If there was the possibility of that, I thought, then why wear your shoes inside? It made no sense to me.

If I was peeling a potato in Top Dad's kitchen and it fell from the counter onto the floor, I'd try to get to it as soon as possible and throw it away. If Top Dad got to it, he would wash it and put it back on the counter. We had arguments about this. He would say I was wasteful. I'd say that to eat something that had fallen on the floor was disgusting.

But it was his house, his odd rules. If I didn't get the chance to secretly throw the potato away while he wasn't looking, I'd shave a layer of flesh off – hide that layer among the heap of peel – and add the slimmed potato to the pot with the others.

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At home one day, my mother and I were looking through a drawer that was filled with wrapping paper. I remember that I picked out a sheet of paper and passed to my mother, suggesting to her that it was attractive.

I cannot recall any circumstances of the gift: what it was, who we were giving it to. All I remember is that when my mother unfolded the paper, on the underside of an ordinary graphic design were images of twinks: boys photographed from behind with their heads turned to the camera, looking serious.

I had no idea where this paper had come from. I imagined that someone (either I or my sisters or, indeed, my mother herself) had bought it at some point, not knowing what it bore.

'Chee,' my mother said.

Chee in Urdu is an expression of disgust. If one was to draw one's finger across a grimy surface, and present one's fingertip, one would make the sound *chee*. It was used to denote something that was indecent, that offended one's sensibilities or morals.

One year, noting that it was garnering a lot of attention in the media, my parents went to see the film *Black Swan*, starring Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis. When I asked my mother about it – we were together in the kitchen, she was preparing dinner for us – she said that she thought the film was in bad taste.

I heard the echo of *chee* in those English words, my own queer energy coming to the surface for a moment before taking a breath and diving again.

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Omar was Top Dad's tenant. Omar had the name of my grand-uncle: a man in our family who was unmarried and had a moustache like Poirot, and who everyone called Boss even though he was the youngest child.

When Omar brought back a date to the house, they were always men that I found incredibly attractive – older men with weathered skin, whose ancestors went through the world with a rulebook; men that I liked to see moaning, my legs wrapped around them. In this way, Omar enacted my desire. But he was more beautiful than I was. He would dye his hair in the sink of the bathroom I used in the house. I could see there the black tearstains after he had gone through that ritual.

Omar and Top Dad had briefly been involved. Top Dad tended to have slept with all of his friends and was proud of it. If we were out and he saw a man he had fucked, he would always let me know as if one should be aware of, and thus grateful for, one's lineage.

Omar hadn't chosen to live with me so I aimed to be as pleasant to him as I possibly could. In the living room when the three of us watched television, I never sat on the sofa directly opposite the screen. I left that for Top Dad and Omar. I was the guest in the house. I sat on a chair that Top Dad had found in an antiques store. Before he had the chair upholstered, whenever you sat on it, a shower of fluff would fall from the underside. 'Look at what's fallen out of your anus,' Top Dad would say to me.

Maybe the thing I liked best about Top Dad's house was that the toilet was far from his bedroom, towards the back of the house. Sometimes, after we had sex and I hadn't timed it right, I would need to sit on the toilet and I would do these big guttural farts. I had been opened up: if I did a shit then it was like, for the first time, I could feel the source of my turds. I would always check the bowl for blood. Afterwards, I would have a shower and sometimes I would need to use the toilet again, and then I would go back into the shower to clean myself a second time. I dread to think what Top Dad heard. When I got back into bed, he would just say, 'Okay?'

He would want to do a crossword together then. I wanted to lie on my front. I felt empty and full at the same time.

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In the early morning or late at night, Top Dad and I could hear Omar tramping round his bedroom (his room was directly above ours). There was a particular noise which we attributed to him maybe doing press ups.

When we heard the occasional thud, Top Dad would say, lying next to me, 'Oh Omar.'

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The child is audience to the parent and the parent watches the child on the potty and reads their school reports and washes their clothes, and disappointment moves between parents and children like an artefact.

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Me, Omar and Top Dad were all from families that were uncomfortable with us being gay. We were a trio sensitive to the reverberations of the closet. Being gay or queer to me was my own voice in my head, the language that kept me up at night, that I could not put to bed. The soundtrack to those thoughts was Top Dad's snoring. I would shove him and he would turn onto his side and say, half-asleep, 'Terribly sorry.'

I never told my mother or my father about my relationship with Top Dad. As well as us both being men, I was hesitant to reveal just how much older Top Dad was compared to me. When I was born, he was twenty. In fact, Top Dad was closer to my mother's age than he was to my own. My father was a decade older than my mother, so perhaps I was following the line my parents' had set down, in that a relationship had to be defined by a generation's lacuna.

Top Dad handled difficult emotions like my dad. When there was something upsetting on television, Top Dad would lower his chin to his chest, or put his fingers over his eyes like a visor. My father too would recoil from the room. When he was emotional he would wait a moment, and then he would go to the bathroom across the hall from the living room, the little cold room to the right as you entered the house; the nearest place to hide.

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Why do they keep their houses so cold? we would ask each other as a family. Not me and Top Dad and Omar. I'm talking about me and my parents and my sisters. By *they* we meant white people. Why did they keep their houses so cold, why did they not turn on the central heating? It was always white people with money who lived in the cold, who walked around the house in layers, needlessly.

Because I was cold in Top Dad's house, I would wear a heavy woolen brown fleece around the place. It was something my parents had bought for me, as if they had sensed my future living arrangements. My parents tended to buy me clothes for cold weather: thick socks, and things that you would wear over other things, to cover oneself up.

Top Dad did not like baggy clothes. He loved skinny jeans, for example, and always liked me to wear them. He bought me a few pairs; I wore the ones that weren't too revealing. He dressed me and I half-accepted it. He himself was tall and had long legs and walked fast. When I walked alongside him, I had to increase my pace. I would do a skip-step if we turned a corner and I was on the outside.

The thing that did it for me was how he would always run for a bus or a train if it was coming down the road and we were a little distance away. I hated that. I didn't want to race; to follow him across a street; I didn't want to be a boy again, chasing

another. Gerald Murnane says in *Border Districts* that 'what we call *time* is no more than our awareness of place after place as we move continuously through endless space.' For that period of my life, time was what I unfolded and turned over and over – revealing the graphic and boyish patterns – and then folded up again along the existing creases, and put away.

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Place After Place

Omar doesn't live with Top Dad anymore. I know that because when I reconnected with Top Dad a few years after leaving him, he told me that Omar had moved out and bought a cat. He showed me a photo of Omar with the grey, curling creature in his arms.

He then began to tell me about his new tenant – a man named Luigi who worked in retail. Of course, Luigi was Top Dad's type. Top Dad had already been through his Facebook account and showed me a photo of Luigi on the beach on holiday in his swimming trunks. He zoomed in on Luigi's crotch.

It felt strange to return to Top Dad's house. As I walked from the bedroom to the bathroom again, I wondered why I thought going back to that template of rooms would be different. But some of the floors were new, shiny: the creaky reddish floorboards – which felt like you were going to go through them if you stamped hard enough – had been replaced. I felt the boards under my feet once or twice a week, and what happened last time, by which I mean getting accustomed to what Top Dad wanted to do in bed, happened again: my arse would need a day to recover each time. I told him that I was tender in the first week and he said that I needed to do it regularly to get used to it, and that gauntlet made me want to stay.

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In Kevin Killian's *Bachelors Get Lonely*, Killian imagines a theatrical conversation between his younger self – Boy – and the middle-aged man he is at the time of writing – Man. Killian says to himself:

BOY: Oh come on, have a drink.

MAN: No thanks. But you go ahead. Have one on me.

BOY: If you weren't "me," you know, I'd be trying to seduce you. For you're exactly the sort of quizzical older guy I'm always trying to make.

Top Dad and I first connected online. Our first in person meeting was in the café of a department store where I bought us both coffees. He said something I did not like then; he had an old fashioned sense of humour and it allowed me to see quite far into the kind of man he was. He asked me within the first ten minutes of our meeting whether I was a top or bottom. It marked him for me. It caught me by surprise; I was pretty pliable then.

To 'make' someone means that you are willing to give something up. Catching up to Top Dad in the street, being in presence, even thinking of it *as* presence, was channeling my energy his way. I had given into being knocked into place, and I couldn't disentangle the shame and love in that. I was wary of decisions I made. I was willing to spend time in Top Dad's house because I missed the family home and didn't want to be in a house with my parents.

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For a very long time I would dream that I was in bed with my father. In that scenario, I would feel the large duvet over us – we were naked underneath it. I would know my mother and my sisters were downstairs in the house and the drama was that they could enter the room at any moment and see my father and myself in bed together, our heads popping out.

At the age of thirty, when I finally went to see a therapist, confessing to this story wasn't what I thought it was going to be. Those dreams were just a phobia of being caught, the therapist said. It hardly caused a reaction in him. The therapist was more interested in getting me to shut my eyes and having me narrate my unprepared thoughts. Fairytale landscapes came to mind, Northern European forests and houses.

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The reconnection with Top Dad soon fizzled out. We recovered from our amnesia of what it had been like to spend time with one another. I looked at and listened to him and I flinched from what I saw and heard. But that flinch was just a moment away from what happened between us in bed.

It was during this time I met another man (let's call him Pa) who lived at the opposite end of the city to Top Dad. His house had framed pictures covering every bit of wall: prints and photographs of temples, castles, grand houses – outlines of other places and sites that I wanted to stop and examine. But it was always a brief meet each time. I never stayed the night at Pa's house. I wanted to follow what Top Dad had done and look into the lives of as many lovers as possible. So, I went to Pa's house, to Pop's house, and so on. That kind of tour had been an ambition under the closet light. It shaped how I had wanted to see the city – though, unlike Top Dad, as blotter rather than quill.

Two Stories [Ernesto Sarezale]

A Hot Night in July (London)

It was too hot to sleep that night. I just had to get out of bed. I grabbed my keys and left the flat looking for air. As I went down the stairs, I wondered if any of my neighbours would also be awake at 3 in the morning. On a Wednesday.

I opened the front door carefully. I looked left and right. When I saw there was no one outside, I came out concealing my keys in the folds of the underpants that I had rolled around my left wrist – in case an emergency forced me to put something on in a hurry. That was all I had on me. Apart from a pair of flip-flops.

I walked along the pavement, trying to avoid the CCTV camera on my left and the speed enforcement camera across the road. I crouched behind a parked car when a 43 bus drove past. Far in the distance I saw a street cleaner walking in my direction. Boldly, I crossed the street and walked into the park. It was a nice sensation, strolling past the trees, feeling the gentle breeze over my naked body.

I stopped for a second. I noticed a human figure coming in my direction from the other end of the park. I retraced my steps, trying to hide among the shadows of the trees. It was a young man, no older than 20, wearing a baseball cap, a white t-shirt and blue denim shorts. I was hoping he hadn't spotted me and he certainly appeared indifferent. But as soon as he got close to me, he stopped and stared in my direction. I froze. I was apprehensive but, to my surprise, I didn't feel scared. His gaze was fixated on my genitals. He was panting. Then he looked up at my face and started to unbutton his shorts. He dropped them and flashed his chunky cock at me. His skin looked strikingly pale in the moonlight. He moved forward, getting very close to me. Before I knew it, I had a condom rolled over my erect penis. He massaged it with lubricant and turned around to offer me his backside. Stage fright made me lose some of my stiffness. 'Push,' he said. But, as much as I tried, I could not fully penetrate the boy. He was disappointed. He put his shorts back on in a hurry and disappeared. Without a kiss.

I was left shaking. I slipped the condom off and ran towards the road. And then, as though we had previously coordinated it, a fox crossed the street at the same time

as me, a few meters away. A car drove past. And then another. I couldn't care if they had seen me or not. But, as I went up the stairs to my apartment, I wondered if any of my neighbours would also be awake at 3.30 in the morning. On a Wednesday. In a very hot July.

When in Rome

The question was: have you ever had sex on public transport? I had to think hard, though not too hard, to remember that it did happen once. But it was so long ago. And so far away.

It was a hot May day in Rome in the mid-90s. I had spent an afternoon at Il Buco, a gay clothing-optional beach near Ostia, back in the days when nudists were plentiful and beautiful (but I digress[3]). Although I had had a lot of "fun" in the dunes (and that's a different story[4]), I was still feeling aroused when I reached the station. There were only four or five of us (all male) waiting for the train that would take us to the centre of Rome. I walked into the last carriage. It was empty except for a sexy skinhead I had seen earlier outside in wet speedos. He was now wearing khaki shorts. I noticed his attention and I sat right in front of him. That is, I guess, what a Roman does in a carriage that's virtually empty.

When the train started to move, the skinhead pulled his semi-hard cock through the leg of his shorts and started to feel my knee, moving his hand up my thigh towards my crotch, inside my baggy shorts. I wasn't wearing underpants. I leaned forward, grabbed his cock and started to suck it.

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[3] First digression: That was my first time at an Italian nudist beach and it was full of new, exciting experiences. One of these experiences was seeing people using mobile phones. Back then, the clunky black handsets were massive, almost as big as the sizeable penises of the nude men (tall, bronzed and handsome) who were speaking on them, sitting on their sunbeds, legs wide open, a glass of spritz or prosecco in their hands.

[4] Second digression: I was walking naked through the dunes towards the station. A beautiful Italian man in a sarong appeared in the distance. He waved at me and approached me with a smile. He was brown-haired, green-eyed, slim, smooth and tanned. He took a condom out of his bag and pulled it over my hard cock. He turned around, dropped his sarong, leaned forward and waited. Inexperienced, I struggled to enter his unlubricated arse. He took another condom, rolled it over the first condom and got me to fully penetrate him. *'Spinge! Spinge!'* he shouted, 'Push!' I tried to push but the position was awkward. I pulled out without coming. I don't think he came either. I never even got to see his dick. He turned his face towards me, put his sarong back on and walked off with a smile shouting: *'Ciao, bello!'*

There was another guy – skinny, dark haired, wearing thick-rimmed glasses, a flowery shirt and red three-quarter-length trousers – who suddenly appeared in our wagon, hoping – I imagine – to be allowed some “audience participation”. But before two became three, we had to interrupt our session as the train reached the next station and filled up with local commuters.

I tried to figure out how to make conversation with the fit skinhead. But he kept ignoring me and, when he pulled a book in French from his bag, I hesitated on what language to use. He left the train two stops before me.

glasses [m.v. riasanovsky]

i am at the eyeglasses store talking to another trans person about growin up on the other side of the mountain i have to drive thirty minutes up the hills and across that same mountain to get my glasses i live in the foothills where she probably became herself it is in this juncture that i am stricken by how queer route six is just by carving out our own solace of discovery i wonder what she told her parents who live in the holler near the ski park tourists love and brings all the revenue in been there three generations mine cried and asked why i would do this to them different hilly place of course closer to the capital city but right now and forever i live near the cows and the pastoral nonsense and the poverty that rich city folks romanticize sometimes i can't tell you how many spaces i have queered out here under the warm embrace of the appalachian mountains the mountains themselves are nonbinary in my humble opinion changing shape becoming new iterations over time weathering all of our pain i am not interested in designated queer spaces because out in the country that is not the way it works the queer spaces are the ones that we are actively queering in that moment queer space is process rather than longitudinally defined it is transgressive change queering space is the rejection of fixed points anywhere queering space is the *talking to cops* sticker my partner and i place on the STOP sign one of the few in our county you know there's only one whole stoplight in our entire county i am less interested in places called queer more interested in placing queerness in a verby kinda way in resistance wherever it's said that it isn't the thing oh they're not queer out there huh huh huh country folk are some of the most queer n trans people i have ever known with different kinda words for our different kind of knowings i am at the bonfire with the buds who never graduated high school talkin about the first boys they had a crush on but not calling it queer all long hair tangled isn't that queering something, knowing the esoteric truth in words not yet strangled by the ivory tower not yet flowing into our river, our trees, our embodied homes

Extract from *Old Wounds* **[Tom Marshman]**

I am in a poky dressing room waiting to go onstage, but there has been a power cut and the audience sit in darkness thinking that this is the beginning of the show. I am asked to wait by the in-house tech, who has been telling me about the sleepless nights he has been enduring with his two young kids. I barely listen to what he is saying as I am trying to get my mind and body ready for the show, if it is going to happen at all. Hopefully, the electricity will return. I am performing a show I know by heart, in a theatre I know inside out, in the city of Bristol that I know like the back of my hand. I have lived here for 50 years. I light a candle and stare at my reflection in the mirror. The shadows from the candlelight throw dark shapes on the dressing room walls, making the few items I have in front of me imposing and ghoulish: demons from my past, shameful secrets, regrets, unspoken desires, a can of hairspray, a wire wig stand and a bottle of beer for after the show.

I live in a part of Bristol that used to be quite seedy. (Despite rampant gentrification, some parts of this past remain). In the 90s, I would queue to get into the club Winn's. You had to arrive down a narrow alleyway that smelt of piss. They gave you a wrist band and you could drink as much as you liked for a tenner. After the pandemic the council hired local people who were known in the area to walk down their favorite street and be filmed. It was an attempt to encourage people back into the shops after so long of being indoors and shopping online. I was filmed in Old Market ordering a black decaffeinated Americano and perusing a selection of greeting cards.

As I wait, I find myself thinking back to earlier this evening when I was running late to the Theatre. I was marching up the street with my Lidl shopper filled with wigs, heels, extension leads and introspection. Past the cafes, the crafty lifestyle creative gift shops and the last remaining hard boozer on the street, The Long Bar. The pub is often quite rowdy with smokers leaning out the door, but this afternoon it was very quiet. A lone figure sat on his own nursing a pint. I spied him through the window. His face looked

broken and contorted. A stranger to me but as I glanced again, he looked like someone I used to know. The sight of him surprised me. I hadn't seen him around for a long time, but I could tell it was him from his familiar garish blazer that had seen better days. The bright stripes were faded and the elbows worn down.

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It occurs to me that the candle I have lit in the dressing room might trigger a smoke alarm. But it is only a tiny tea light and the room remains dingy. The darkness sits well with my current mood of remembering the dimly lit bars and clubs of my youth. I think back to the people I used to know, the people connected to this part of town, that they used to refer to as a Gay Village. I try to piece together the story of the contorted figure in The Long Bar. Was it really him I'd seen? One half of the Village's infamous power couple? The gay partnership that spanned decades? I think it must have been. Tim, of Henry and Tim fame. I had known them since the early 90s. They have status in the queer community but the younger club kidz don't get that. They had always been here in Bristol, forever middle aged and wealthy, you could smell it the minute you came across them. Their smiles were wide and they were perpetually suntanned, as if having just come back from a fancy holiday. The clothes they wore were so expensive they looked cheap: blazers, patterned shirts and shoes that shone even on the darkest of nights. They were always slightly too formal for their surroundings, which were often divey gay bars.

About one and a half miles away from Old Market are the docks, where at night seagulls take residence on a yacht, mostly undisturbed. Henry and Tim had a yacht moored there, reserved just for parties. In recent years I had heard guys in the local gay bars bragging that they had been invited onto a yacht. I had never been asked on board but I saw it on social media one morning as I lay in bed scrolling on my phone, nosing in on other people's lives, looking at photos, watching short videos.

In the photos I saw longstanding Bristol gays who'd been invited to these parties relax into these surroundings. They were successful hair salon owners, retired gay police officers, the self-made gays of Bristol dressed up in tuxedos, with cocktail glasses and wide smiles. There were comments under the photos like 'BEST PARTY EVER' and 'FAB-U-LOUS - Thank you Henry and Tim for a fab night.' The yacht was painted cream with an excess of silver, tables dotted sporadically about with vases and candelabras piled onto them. There was a mannequin covered in mosaic mirror tiles, like a human mirror ball. There were polished tiles, Greek style columns, a fully stocked bar and a desk that looked like it belonged to a Bond villain. There was a white grand piano. Someone once told me in whispered tones that there was a rag doll sitting on the piano with jet black skin, eyes rimmed in white, exaggerated red lips and frizzy hair.

I took it all in, transfixed. The place appealed to my camp sensibility and part of me wanted to be there. But I knew I would tire of the conversations quickly, which would surely lack any irony about the decor. In one video there was a young man playing a classical piece on the piano, his hands spanning the breadth of the keyboard. At the end of the recital a voice off camera said "great work" in a tone which suggested they wouldn't really know what great work was.

*

When I first met Henry and Tim I was just 18-years old, still at college, doing a BTEC in the performing arts (but in reality, we mostly did swollen up pantomimes). I was what you might call a twink; slim, blonde and ready for an adventure – though I was terrified of what adventures I might become involved in. I wore corduroy flares and a cropped T shirt with a silver heart I had stenciled on myself. At the time, Kylie was everywhere. Whenever I walked into a gay nightclub, I imagined I was in one of Kylie's music videos. All you can do is step back in time.

Her song *Step Back in Time* paid homage to the 70s disco scene. It reached number 4 in the UK singles chart in 1990 and is a mainstay of Kylie's live repertoire to this day. The video was filmed in Los Angeles. It featured Kylie and an entourage of dancers driving around downtown LA in a big red Cadillac, wearing hot pants, push up bras and rayon shirts, They posed and pulled shapes before cruising down the highway in the sunshine. Now, as I sit in the theatre, waiting to be called on stage, it reminds me of when I was bundled into the boot of someone's car in a voluntary kidnapping, by a gaggle of Bristol Queens I knew in a very transitory way, and transported from the Queens Shilling to Just nightclub, on the edge of the main shopping centre. My body was pushed and pulled as we drove around the city, especially on the roundabouts. It seemed like a fun idea at first, and saved me the effort of walking across the centre of town where the heterosexuals were rowdy and violent in the chip shops, puking and pissing in the streets. But as I lay there in the pitch darkness of the boot I began to fear for my life: what if a car smashed into us? What if the driver was high? What if they left me locked in and nobody heard me scream for help? My fears were quickly dissolved when the car stopped moving and the gays opened the boot and yelped with delight. I emerged shaken yet oozing Kylie-glam, the gays outside the bar baffled then bemused by my arrival.

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I haven't listened to Step Back in Time in a hot minute. Sometimes when I am alone in a dressing room like this, I find a pop tune on my phone and play it with my headphones in, this season's pop Princess while I stretch and get show ready.

Back in the clubs of my youth, Henry was always jazzy with his arms and hands. He had a laugh that was so loud it could be heard above the high energy dance music. There was something of an end-of-the-pier entertainer about him: his blazers, his distinctive laugh and his unflinching ability to assume the role of the host in whatever situation he found himself. I don't remember much about Tim back then; he was

younger, quieter and always alone at the bar. When I think back to this memory, I should have foreseen the troubles.

After my BTEC, I went to university in Leicester. My parents and schoolteachers already thought I was punching above my weight. They said I shouldn't have bothered with A Levels and studying and worked in a department store or hairdresser's instead. Every time I came back to Bristol and went to the club, Henry and Tim seemed to always be there. Pillars of the community, buying drinks for the pretty boys and behaving like the club was an extension of their front room. The venue might change, or the decor might be refreshed, but they were always there.

Several clubs were favored by the gays about town, although this changed over the years. There was The Oasis, my first gay club. If you knew how, you could sneak in via a garden and a wall into the NCP car park. The bar was run by two old ladies in black dresses like grieving Spanish widows. Then there was Vadims which felt like a pop video: black walls and mirrors and they played *Vogue* by Madonna. The song contained an infamous spoken-word section, in which Madonna name-checked various "Golden Age" Hollywood stars. Years later, I would perform the song, changing the names of the stars to the faces on the scene in my local gay bar:

They had style, they had grace. Dave from the Bear bar served good face.

In The Oasis, the boys in fake tan pulled out the latest moves, I never forgot the Typewriter, a move they did, them on the dance floor in an imagined typing pool to any pop anthem of the time. From what I remember they all worked in department stores, where I was to work too, several years later. There was one boy I remember most. He was the tallest, most handsome and most glowing with fake tan. He danced all night long. My perception of him was that he had it all. He worked on the Chanel counter. He was the Chanel boy – I would never get to work for such a prestigious company. He lived in The Grosvenor, a tall imposing building. A rundown lodging house, along

with other young gay people who had been kicked out by parents ashamed that they had a gay child. A home for waifs and strays. It was called a ‘hotel’, but people would live there permanently. Now, The Grosvenor Hotel is a dilapidated shell. When you step out from Temple Meads train station its name is just recognizable amongst the crumbling façade.

After a night of watching the Chanel boy dance he jumped off the top floor of the hotel and took his life. People said he had taken too many drugs and that he’d had a nasty break up. When I heard about his sad fate some days later, I was in a changing room in Next, trying on a cream roll neck sweater. The boy on the till was talking to a friend that had popped into the shop from Principles. I felt so sad that I would never become friends with the Chanel boy. Today, the hotel building stands wrapped in scaffolding and plastic sheeting. It’s an eyesore, some people say, and the council plans to demolish it, but it is still there amidst glass paneled offices and the ever-changing pace of the city. If you step out from Temple Meads train station, its name is just recognizable on the crumbling façade.

Then there was the club Leo’s, which came and went very quickly. Leo’s was the place where I fell unconscious in the toilet and pissed myself, before being woken by a bouncer at five in the morning. It was Leo’s where I was dragged onto the stage by a stripper, took an E and where I first met Justin Fashanu. Justin was a footballer who played for a variety of clubs between 1978 and 1997. Justin would come to Bristol a lot at this time. One night, after smiling across the bar at me he came up and said, “Hello, I am Justin”. Nothing came of that encounter but I heard stories about him from other boys taken to his hotel. They would wake up and he would be gone, with money for them left on the bedside table. I wanted to be one of those boys but I was too scared to go back to a famous man’s hotel and become another notch on the bedpost. I was also very scared of HIV back then, as it was marking its presence on the Bristol scene. Slowly, more and more people were beginning to be infected and they were inching closer and closer to my circle. And I didn’t want to be talked about in a way

that I heard others being talked about. People said the boys who had been with Justin were cheap that they had come in from the valleys in Wales

Justin came out publicly later in his career, becoming the first professional footballer to be openly gay. After moving to the United States in 1998, he was questioned by police when a seventeen-year-old boy accused him of sexual assault. He was charged and a warrant issued for his arrest but he had already left his flat by then. According to his suicide note, he feared he would not get a fair trial because of his homosexuality so he fled back to England, where he killed himself in London in May 1998. His suicide note stated that the sex was consensual.

He looked so handsome and I thought I could have saved him. When I saw a photograph of him in the Queer Museum in London, I imagined us together and that I could have made him happy and that he would have taken me to celebrity parties.

Henry and Tim were always at Leo's. Once, while there, they asked me to go with them to the famous Heaven in London. They told me I absolutely would love it, but I was too scared I might get lost and never find my way back to Bristol. Another time, they convinced me to go home with them. Henry and Tim lived in a penthouse flat in the center of town and one night after too many drinks (I can't remember what my drink of choice was in the 90s but it might have been Hooch as that was the latest thing), I ended up back there.

All I can remember are fleeting images, sensations, tableaus. I remember the touch. Different skins. Fluidity of bodies either side of me. One with softer skin, slighter to the touch. The other was thicker, like the fat of a pig. As I lay in the bed, in the middle, I remember how the ice in gin and tonic cracked. I held onto that glass for dear life as, naked, they took turns grinding on top of me, their clothes neatly folded and hung on a nearby velvet chair. I don't think I moved much. I remember the sound of the bath running in the morning, the taste of the Marlboro Red I smoked on the balcony just

before I left. I hadn't completely wanted to be there but I was unable to say so when they invited me. I wanted to taste the high life, but once I was there it was disappointing because it wasn't really mine to share.

When I think back, I got myself into many awkward scrapes, when I was that age. After that night, I walked directionless around the empty city centre on Sunday morning. I didn't want to go back to my damp bedsit where I lived in Clifton, the posh part of town where many rich gay men lived. Where I was invited to dinner parties or taken on shopping sprees or holidays because of my fragile, transient beauty. I probably could have settled with that, with what I was given and what was expected of me. But I didn't and now, I am here, all these years later, staring at my weary face in the darkened dressing room, waiting for the power to be switched back on and it feels like at this moment I have autonomy.

A Space for Joy: on the *Joy//Us* Anthology

[Cherry Potts]

As the director/editor of Arachne Press, I get offered plenty of work by queer writers which is informed by trauma. It's important to publish these books, but it can be exhausting. So I decided it was time to put together an anthology that would encourage queer poets to think about something they usually wouldn't – joy.

Anthologies give all writers, especially new ones, a chance to work out how they and their work fit in among their peers and a sense of community. This social dimension was important from the beginning of our anthology on queer joy, which we called *Joy//Us*. So, with my co-editor Jeremy Dixon, we held an online open meeting in January last year. Queer writers contributed their ideas, read their poems and talked about what joy meant to them, and how that showed up in their poetry. We discovered in that meeting that joy wasn't an easy thing to write about, nor even to make space for in our crowded, often difficult lives.

During the six-month call out, Jeremy ran 'Writing Queer Joy' workshops in queer bookshops and other queer spaces in Liverpool, London, Edinburgh, Sheffield, and Bristol, and online. A couple of hours of LGBTQ+ only space to get to grips with what queer joy actually meant to us, and how to express that through poetry. This wasn't a first for us, but we've never done so many workshops for one book before. They provided the intellectual and emotional space to explore this unexpectedly challenging topic and held space for the work and experience of debut poets. I attended the workshops and found it hard to write about queer joy, despite it being my idea.

Why is queer joy so difficult? Is it that we are so used to having to battle, to demand what we need – be it, rights, recognition or space to be ourselves – that we can't always recognise joy when it arrives? Talking to the poets, it seemed to be a hard emotion to access and one seen as 'too frivolous', 'indulgent' and 'a luxury'. Many of the poets hadn't known they needed to take joy seriously until they answered the call out. Once they did, they started to think of joy as radical, as I do: It is not that the book-

buying world want us to be traumatised but that is the narrative that they have come to expect. Being able to say, we're fine, actually, thanks, in fact we're better than fine, is challenging to us as much as to the rest of the world, and so it is radical.

It took all three of the workshops I attended for me to develop a new poem, based on a cherished memory and embellished with camp exaggeration. Even then, it took a review on social media for me to realise it is also *funny.* It was only when asked to consider joy and given somewhere to think about it – in the anthology, the meetings and workshops – that we gave ourselves permission to explore the concept, whether directly or through poetry. Joy is such a personal thing, it can be raucous, or it can be gentle, it can be an explosion or a whisper, and it can come from frankly bizarre circumstances. I think what we are doing in this book is making space to *notice* it.

We spent so much time creating spaces to think and write about joy that it is perhaps not surprising that many of the poems that we chose for *Joy//Us* are rooted in real places and our relationships to them, whether those spaces are national treasures (Plas Newydd), neighbourhoods (New Cross in South London), islands (Lesbos), parks (Madison Square), barbershops (Hackney) or protest camps (Greenham). Although the approach and topic are different in each, what these poems have in common is queer space – queer because of the inhabitants, the welcome we receive there, or because we make it queer by adopting it and claiming it as our own. And because of the moments recorded in these poems, those spaces, if not already queer, become queer *to us*.

For example, Steph Morris' 'Legacy' explores being the first queer couple in a street and how love spreads, making a queer space. It isn't set in some any/nowhere, but on a specific trainline, and south London neighbourhood:

> One year on, and the fellow
> next door had a boyfriend too – still does,
> and down the street there's been knock-on love.

I sometime wonder how queer spaces are experienced by other people. Do they know they are in a queer neighbourhood/ pub/ bookshop before the tipping point where it becomes a 'truth universally acknowledged'? Do straights wandering into a queer enclave feel as uncomfortable as they sometimes make us feel in their spaces?

Unlike the appropriated space of the neighbourhood in ‘Legacy’, JP Seabright’s poem ‘short back and sides’ explores the delight and all-important ease of entering a queer space by design – that of the gender-neutral barbers. As well as being a physical space, it is clearly also an emotional space created by trust and understanding:

> Less of *where are you going on your holidays?*
> More of *where are you going to pull tonight?*
>
> Endless gratitude for getting the look just right
> for the coming adventure, to dance and dazzle
> in the disco lights.
>
> *Yeah I know the place, my boyfriend works behind the bar.*
> No social pretence for our ‘pretended family relationships’
> We can bare it all here in the barber’s chair.

My poem ‘Great Queen Street’ also deals with queer space:

> I meet Greta Garbo in
> the ladies in that ex-mission hall
> on Great Queen Street where
> the lesbian archive used to be,
> sometime in the late 80s
> after a deluged lesbian strength
> march.

While I was writing this in one of Jeremy’s workshops, I couldn’t remember the exact name of the street that it references. I knew it was off Kingsway, so I used Queensway as a place holder. (There is a tradition of changing the gender of names – of places and people – in the older lesbian community and it is something I have always done.) Greta Garbo, the great Hollywood star referenced in my poem, played Queen Christina in one of her films. So when I found the *actual* street name was Great Queen Street, the poem felt it was slotting into a preexisting, preordained, space.

‘Great Queen Street’ is an almost-true poem. It is set in a space maybe ten feet square, in a building full of women, on a day when London had been filled with lesbians and rain. It is a poem freighted with the intoxication of marching with friends, taking up room on the streets, making them our own, and knowing there was a safe queer space at the end of it. I barely knew what I was writing about at the time, I found the connections afterwards. In the poem, alongside that taking up of space and owning it, there was the importance of the ways we choose to present ourselves to the world and how we know each other by the cultural icons we emulate. And perhaps, as Jeremy had found when writing about lost queer spaces of Liverpool, those spaces live on in our psyches even though they are gone, and those joyful moments (hours, days) stay with us for a lifetime.

We want this anthology to queer the spaces where it lands – the bookshops, libraries, and homes. We want LGBTQ+ readers to feel that those spaces are their spaces, because of its presence. In other words, we hope the book is a tool capable of queering space. This is a concept beautifully expressed in Lydia Fulleylove’s poem ‘Instead of a Bible’:

> Between the two narrow beds, ready to be
> shifted together and un-shifted in the morning, was a small
> cabinet and when I opened the drawer, expecting perhaps a
> Bible, there it lay, bent and battered, ready for sand-sifting
> hours of reading:
>
> *The Well of Loneliness*
>
> the words not a warning
>
> but a greeting.

Two Sonnets [Callie Jennings]

On Not Acknowledging Another Trans Girl at Milk and Washington, Boston

there's no such thing as one week pregnant
/ pre-transition but I've never been so
anywhere like this wind bit like this like
I'm this cold from petty wrath for all
the brick and money let me wing you guardian
angel snow below Chipotle where
I bought my 90s maps to somewhere I
might crack your rapid hipless stilts stir stunted
green trans elder yearns to shove you cake
estradiol and compliments and yes
you are unfurling shoots to winter you
are gonna shiver like good hell and be
okay you gotta feed your boobs babe you're not
nowhere anymore you're here hello

On Not Acknowledging I’m Also a Trans Girl at East and Chestnut, Rochester

I’ve been staring into space a lot and
I’ve been googling castration I’ve been
better is my answer but I haven’t
ever been it hasn’t snowed and hasn’t
melted for a month there’s nothing clean
and pure in childhood there’s no way to move
without the trudging grinding crunch of bones
between my teeth the small bones of my ear
the bones that come up *have to* and the liver
that haruspices to *can’t* I can’t
be sure but have I seen you on the Greyhound
why’d you stop here in a city where
the lonely rich men leave at six how do
you freeze yourself in ice until discovered

Another Country [Charlie Wührer]

Kitchen Shower

I moved countries entirely alone, seeking and finding greater obscurity. It was a clever disappearing trick, no one expected it of me. It was like levitating: the space I should have taken up, I wasn't taking up. I'd been wily. I couldn't do it again. I got too old and too high to be wily. But during this time of obscurity, when I was very young, I became good at enjoying smoking and eating spinach with excess nutmeg. I found my best clothes on the street. I was very happy with my fringe. It was the kind of fringe you could achieve only by cutting it yourself.

The obscurity of the place lay in the fact that the house numbers refused to be odd on one side and even on the other. On a bigger scale, there were a lot of things that were more hidden in the new country, like personality.

Then S moved in. In the summer, we regularly ate undercooked pasta on a bench outside our weird apartment. It was weird because the shower was in the kitchen and the toilet was in a cupboard. The men who visited struggled to fit their long bodies into the toilet cupboard. We derived great joy from making them sit to pee. More than one long man left the door ajar.

When we grew sick of pesto, we unrolled raw croissants from a can and baked them. Sometimes we ate meat salad, tiny strips of flesh in mayonnaise and pickle-shreds. In the fridge, we kept a bowl of sugar paste for waxing our legs, which we never did. For half a year, we preserved things in it, and they were as pleasing as flies in amber: a broccoli floret, a thumb of ginger, a finger of baby carrot, a fork. In the winter, we risked carbon-monoxide poisoning ourselves at night with inept fires. All seasons, we swam with dead rats in the canal, and showered in the kitchen together when we got home.

Playground

I woke one morning, paralysed. A long man who'd stayed the night with S called the paramedics. Later I took some codeine from S's hand, lipping at her palm like a horse. When I'd recovered, we took our jewellery off and skated through a thunderstorm holding hands. It wasn't sustainable. Later, she told me she was leaving. I took her to the airport. Something in my body was still jammed, and I couldn't turn my head to look at her.

See you next year, she said.

See you, I said.

There was a playground on my street. At night the kids drank beer from the corner shop and spun and seesawed and swung themselves sick, and made out with each other. S and I had done all of those things there but make out, which had happened only once, a long time ago, in another country and for the benefit of others. After returning from the airport, I swung in the dark and wept. I remembered how my unfinished teenage face had once appeared to me in the toothpaste-flecked mirror. Our faces – S must have done the same – had seemed too symmetrical to be real. We'd whispered experimentally *so beautiful* as fists pounded the bathroom door. It had been terrifying to already have reached some kind of apex. We'd also watched ourselves cry: *so beautiful.* I know now that what we meant by beautiful was symmetrical.

There are kink forums where people wax lyrical about women who cry contorted in such a way that their tears fall onto the folds or hills or straits of their bellies. In related forums, people profess their kink for women wearing puffer jackets, and staining these with their salty tears. I had simply been set on the right eye crying as many tears as the left.

The following year, S taught me how to gut mackerel. The sea was always close when I visited, and we rolled like kegs down the hill towards it by moonlight.

Bookshop

I met J in a bookshop called Another Country. The bookshop was in a country I did not call home, it was doubtful I'd ever call it home. Queers flocked to Another Country. The woman who ran it cooked Sunday roasts on hotplates in the basement for lonely kids. The number of books stacked against the walls was arguably dangerous. The bookshop was also a library, and sometimes writing classes were held there. I didn't know much about J then, only that where I was emerging, she was established. We made a circle of chairs. She came straight from the sauna in winter to give feedback. Everyone fed back. I admired her pink face and her neon leg warmers and her old website, and clicked on the links to her stories.

I was nominally straight. I had sex on washing machines, at petrol stations, in vans parked in the forest. I could not relax. I believed the birds were coming for me, the police were coming for me, the long boys were coming for me. I was wearing a bird blouse when a short boy said, *Long boys like it when you refrain from breathing in a way that fills your belly with air*.

In a valley in Spain, I slept, only slept, with N in a one-man tent. We stood close on a plateau, our closed eyes ready-for-death puckers as a herd of wild horses stampeded toward us. Everything was a potential last thing. Babybells, running in hail, hitchhiking, rice, toenail clippings. We tore the pages from books as we read them. When I got home, a woman unhooked my underwear with her teeth at a wedding in a mirrored ballroom. I jimmied oyster knives into the fault line and set about setting everything on fire. My dream-teeth fell out, I spat blood. I wrote stories and performed them in Another Country.

Gay Bar

N took me out to gay bars after I came out. She was my neighbour. She swallowed cloves of raw garlic when she was sick, and her shower was also in the kitchen. We bartered with internet and washing machine. We went to the same gay bar every Thursday and drank vodka with grass in it sitting on the pavement. It took us a long time to clock that Thursday was men's night. We may have smoked a cigar once. Most of the men wore leather jackets, and many were bald and had beards. I'd had three vodkas one night when the urge to lick a bald head overcame me.

N believed men were, generally speaking, superfluous to requirements. She had five gold stars for never having touched a dick, or maybe she had touched one, but only very limply, like how you'd shake the clammy hand of someone you don't like. What does it matter? Really, all I wanted was to marry her in two decades time. N told me she'd partied with Peaches, and I thought that was cool. She said Peaches had sprayed her with champagne, and N had tipped back her head and opened the overflowing cup of her mouth to it. She used to be a punk. She used to be a child model. I couldn't conceive of anyone cooler. She threw dinner parties with confetti and candles on the table. She'd had a girlfriend in the Cirque du Soleil who'd betrayed her. I thought about N on a tightrope, swallowing fire. She was divorced. She made plans and then executed them, she rode a motorbike. The few times she wore mascara, I was shook. It proved something big, an unlikely vulnerability when it smudged.

A decade after Vodka Thursdays, I met Peaches at a drag show, and at the bar I said aloud to myself, *What will I have*, and Peaches said, *What* will *you have*, and I said, *A gin and tonic* and Peaches said, *Good, and I will have a tequila*. I touched her shoulder as she left with her drink. N was geographically and emotionally too far away to touch Peaches' shoulder.

Another Country

BETRAYAL, J shouts. The pine trees have eyes. The dead ones are good for smashing sticks against, wood-chip fills the air and it becomes easier to breath. Mithers of mosquitoes. A backdrop of burning moss. On the card I draw, a disembodied hand in the sky holds out an overflowing cup. The dahlias are in bloom. I want to hold them in my mouth, those pompoms, fully double and spherical like golf balls. It is with regret and self-control that I do not.

Over Sichuan noodles, mouth on fire, life on fire again, blind fingers roam over a map. I claw at my seven-year itch, seeking greater obscurity. I want to channel Julie d'Aubigny, opera singer and fencer, who followed her lover to a nunnery in some other country and watched the whole thing go up in flames. Elder nuns crisping like good chicken skin.

But D undoes me. I open my thighs and undo him back, stick my hungry fingers into nectarous space, a fig unzipped. I find there are books for being strangled better. Lake ice rubs shoulders with lake ice, singing. We smash sheets of it with a small hammer and launch in past the throat, the hardest part. Afterwards, in a bar, he wraps my hair around his fist and rivets me in place.

Then we are lying on a beach in Portugal. J takes a flat, black pebble from the sea. D licks nectarine juice from his wrist. It is January, we're naked and alone, until the dogs come.

It's so beautiful, J says. The dogs stampede towards my shell collection.

Not often do I feel antagonistic, but today I say, *Wait till it dries, it'll be this dull drab grey thing*.

The dogs tussle over a conch shell. When I'd put my left ear to it and my right to the wind, the sea swashed and pulled pebbles in surround-sound. J places the flat black stone onto her tongue and lizard-flicks it into her wet mouth. My tongue knows her mouth, D's tongue knows hers. Flamingos dance on the salt marshes. Once, I see them climb each other. There are so many Germans, and there is some weeping, the damp rises, and then the walls are weeping too.

J says, *Do you want a go?*

I put the flat black pebble into my mouth, and then spit it into J's palm.

Two Poems

[André Le Mont Wilson]

Deliverance

I suppose you heard people gossip
about what they thought we were doing
in these mountains where we hike,
wearing camo purchased from Surplus City,
green paint on your face,
and none on mine,
as we play survivalists and explorers
along the creeks and canyons
of the San Fernando Valley.
But you catch me off guard
when you whisper,
“Do you like boys?”

I thought you meant,
“Do you generally like boys?”
like one would for girls,
men, women, dogs, cats?
I have nothing against boys,
being one myself,
and I like you as a friend,
a Huck to my Jim—
but when I say yes, you turn
and retreat down the mountain,
your camo cap bobbing on your head
as you crash through the brush.

I realize then you meant
“Do you like boys *sexually?*”
And I call to mind our campout on the ridge.
I had confided in you my fear
a man would rape me in the wilderness
like Ned “Squeal like a pig!” Beatty
in *Deliverance.*
And I proposed encircling our camp with barbed wire.
You said that was a good idea. We never did it.
But now, you scramble across the fire road
away from me without looking back,
fearing I would do to you what I fear for myself.

Brutha

The Brother from Another Planet
was not just a low-budget sci-fi film from the ’80s.
It’s how you Black barbers treated me
when I sat my faggy ass
in your shop on MacArthur in Oakland.

I’m a brutha from another planet
’cause you don’t see me as a brutha,
but as Tutti Frutti, good booty, Little Richard.
I lacked three-toed feet to give me away,
but you read me when I walked through your door.

I’m a bro from another plant.
I’m sitting here waiting for service
like Audrey II in *The Little Shop of Horrors*,
and you’re standing there with your razor,
fearing I would infect it with AIDS.

I’m a bruh from another pandemic.
I waited an hour while you invited customers
who came after me to sit in your barber chair.
I got the hint and left, wishing I had bled acid
through your floor like the alien you know I am.

‘Who’s Telling this Story?’: a Review of *Blackouts* by Justin Torres [Chris Lloyd]

Justin Torres, born in 1980 in New York, shot to fame with his 2011 debut, *We the Animals*. An intimate and slender book about family, queerness, and Latinx identities, the novel was later turned into a film (2018) directed by Jeremiah Zagar. Torres had studied at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and with this novel’s accolades now teaches English at UCLA. This literary success was followed by a few short stories, but only twelve years later has Torres followed up with a sophomore novel, *Blackouts*. It clearly builds on *We the Animals*, which tracks three Nuyorican brothers and their young parents in upstate New York (not unlike his own upbringing). That novel uses the first-person plural voice for much of the narrative to depict the communal nature of the three brothers’ growing up.

As the book progresses, the youngest begins to emerge from the trio because of his queerness – at first, his femininity and difference, and later his desires for other men. The third-person voice becomes first-person, and the unnamed narrator is eventually outed by his family who find a journal documenting all manner of sexual fantasies and experiences. Because he responds badly to the confrontation, lashing out and attacking them, he is taken to a psychiatric institution. He is locked up, we infer, with other queer people: ‘I sleep with peacocks and lions,’ who ‘crown [him] prince of their rank jungles,’ he says. Rendered an animal throughout the novel, he becomes even more creaturely by the book’s end.

Blackouts, I’d argue, is a kind of extension of that story as it is grounded in two spaces that house and contain queer men who in turn attempt to make sense of the institutionalisation of gender and sexuality. The two autofictional novels, read back-to-back, make for a heart-breaking diptych, and I can only hope that we don’t have to wait another twelve years for another novel.

Blackouts opens with an unnamed narrator who heads to a desert town to reach The Palace – a building ‘fallen into disrepair’ – to see Juan, a man on his deathbed. The Palace (also calling back to the royal imagery at the end of *We the Animals*) is an ambiguous and queer place where Juan and the narrator tell each other stories deep into the night. The building is an apartment complex of sorts, filled with ‘queer ducks’: ‘bitter,’ ‘broken,’ or ‘lunatic’ people at the edges of society. Juan is ‘not just thin, but skeletal,’ as sick and crumbling as the building

they stay in. The two men, we learn, met briefly when the narrator was seventeen and institutionalized for behaviour deemed queerly aberrant. (I cannot help but think the narrator could be a version of that boy in Torres' first novel). Later in life, the narrator returns to Juan in part because Juan wants him to continue his work researching the life and career of Jan Gay.

Gay, born Helen Reitman in 1902, was a lesbian researcher who worked with Magnus Hirschfield at the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, and later wrote children's books and a volume on naturism with her then partner Zhenya Gay, As part of her sexology research, she interviewed hundreds of queer people, but this work was taken over by a more famous doctor, George W. Henry. Even though Gay's interviews and studies were central to the work, Henry became famous for *Sex Variants: A Study in Homosexual Patterns* (1941), which looked at 'gay' people from a range of perspectives (personal, biological, familial, etc). In Torres' novel, Juan shares with the narrator a copy of *Sex Variants* – as well as all manner of ephemera and paperwork about sexology that he found – much of it filled with erasures and redactions. Juan's request of the narrator is to continue the archival digging.

The book's *blackouts* are thus multiple: the textual redactions (many of which we see in between the text); the narrator's seizures or losses of consciousness that he tells Juan about; and the slow death of Juan. But these blackouts are metaphorical too, gesturing to those absences and silences in the standardised record, to those people (like Jan) who were erased from their own work, and to the queer stories and lives that have been invisiblised from history. By calling attention to the queer lives that have fallen through the cracks, Torres' novel is not just a gloriously intimate and playful narrative, but a deeply political one in a time when queer lives are under threat. Across the United States and UK in particular, we are witnessing bans on drag queen story-hours, on the decimation of trans healthcare (for children *and* adults), on the questioning of equal marriage laws, the banning of queer books (especially by writers of colour) in libraries and schools, and on and on.

Indeed, Juan's invocation of Hirschfield, for instance, whose facility which was shut down and had all of its books famously burned by Nazis, brings into focus the stakes of fascistic threats against nonnormative identities from then and now. Juan tells the narrator about Jan Gay (with whom he shares a surname, for reasons the novel teases out) and her lover Zhenya who was a writer too, as well as the numerous queers that they befriended, lived with, and invited to be part of the social study. Torres' novel is nothing less than fascinating, filling in historical gaps

that I spent much of the book googling: opening tabs on my laptop to read later before plunging back into the novel.

Torres' men don't just describe Jan and Zhenya's life, but the narrator tells stories of his own life, his mixed-race parents and their complex relationship, and his lover Liam. Their conversations are packed full of personal asides and stories of intimacy which are themselves braided into larger cultural narratives and texts. As well as invoking Jan Gay, Juan frequently discusses psychoanalysis – Sigmund and Anna Freud, Carl Jung – and authors such as Kathleen Collins, whose posthumous published book of stories *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?* is discussed as part of the novel's interest in the overlooked. Collins' stories, written in the 1960s and 70s, during the Civil Rights struggle, are complex, funny, and emotive looks at interracial desire beyond the more mainstream film/tv versions we might be used to. Bringing Collins' book into the novel is Torres' way of calling repeated attention to those marginalised by normative society: queer people, Black women, women of colour generally. For instance, Juan also describes – when the men playfully riff on some scenes from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* – Edna Thomas, the 'Mexican' woman who sells flowers in the film version. He tells the narrator that Thomas was actually a Black lesbian who participated in the *Sex Variants* study and knew Jan and Zhenya. The novel is as full of real figures as it is fictional ones, so full of queer lives that I (and perhaps many other readers) don't know enough about.

The book, then, is as much *about* the queer archive as it is one. Queer Latinx men telling one another tales about their lives and their loves, about the past, about gender and sex variation, about figures whom we have forgotten. Like the work of theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz or Juana María Rodríguez, Torres is interested in the overlaps between race, sexuality, gender and class, and the multiple forms of queerness that proliferate in the margins and in the mainstream.

In telling one another – and us as readers – these stories, Torres self-consciously highlights the possibilities, but also the limitations of storytelling itself. That is, storytelling is revealed to be a gesture of endless self-reimagining as well as a failed prophylactic against inevitable endings (of Juan's life, of their time together). The narrator is a kind of Scheherazade, with a 'megalomaniacal fantasy' that his stories keep Juan alive, so he tries not 'to reach the final sentence.' When describing their 'project,' Juan clearly wants three kinds of story: how the narrator ends up at the Palace (his 'whore stories,' which are told 'in snatches, in the dark'); the *Sex Variants* narrative; and Juan's own life-story, which remains unfinished. We readers

understand that the narrator's fantasy of endless tale-telling will not keep Juan alive, that the narrative (and the life) will have to end. The use of 'story' in Torres' novel alerts us to the complexities of narrative itself.

In a recent *New Yorker* article on the ubiquity (and possible tyranny) of narrative as the dominant way of making sense of the world, Parul Sehgal notes how the 'fog' of story can often obscure the way, make us forget other ways of seeing and being. Invoking Scheherazade as the 'hardest working woman in literature,' Sehgal wants to take the shine off this romanticised figure who we are not sure even survives at the end of her endless storytelling. (Nor do we stop to remember that she's always nursing a new baby and looking after the other children as her husband murderously demands her tales). Sehgal is arguing that 'story' has often been seen and deployed as a singular, normative, teleological and homogenising structure. Its narrowness, in her eyes, also allows us to see the world more narrowly; it's a framework that often delimits and borders our imaginations, rather than opens them up. I read Torres' interest in narrative in a related light, with its relentless focus on mediation, perspective, and (re)narrativisation.

In place of story or narrative (as a singular thing), Sehgal borrows from novelist Elena Ferrante and proposes instead an aesthetic 'swarm' that does not 'contain,' nor 'console,' but allows for 'contradiction, dissonance, doubt, […] an open road.' If and when Sehgal reads Torres' novel she might see some of that swarm, that 'pure immanence' uncontained by narrative's normative scope and temporality. So often in the book, the narrator loses his sense of time – not just what day it is, but what temporality is, so immersed are they in the historical record or in fantasy. Thus, although *Blackouts* is interested in stories and who is left in or out of them, the novel as a whole – in its layering of voice, perspective, temporality, character, fact, fiction, and so on – is more akin to the openness of dialogue, the swarm of imminence, possibility, and digression. Torres is less concerned with teleology than openness, with the archive that is unsealed and let loose rather than closed and curtailed.

In an epilogue that Torres calls 'A Sort of Postface,' he acknowledges that '*Blackouts* is a work of fiction' but also notes that friends have asked him – given the time he spent in a psychiatric institution as a young person – whether Juan and the story were real. Torres writes, 'I don't care to endorse or deny that deduction,' and suggests that even the "real" figures in the book – the Gays – are turned into fictional characters here. But while Torres refuses to engage questions of fact, he slyly (and heartbreakingly) writes a near sentence-long paragraph that unspools his feelings about 'Juan's' death. If 'Juan had been real,' he says, 'there would have

been the problem of a body […] and I can't talk about that, because you must know by now that there, I would have been an awful coward…' This devastating aside, a kind of apophasis where the subject is raised by denying it, is a final emotional flourish from a brilliant and slippery writer who is more interested in the emotions of his story than its possible facticity. The final line of this 'Postface': 'And anyway, the one thing I can say for sure is that I never tried to tell the truth on anyone.' Story and swarm, truth and fiction, illumination and inevitable blackouts.

If I should dance [Shakeema Smalls]

I pass a trailer with a broken chifforobe in the front yard. The old woman there sweeps a hand across her housedress and turns toward her door. She smells the rain and won't let the dry thunder and lightning follow her inside. I watch children wrestle in a ditch. They curse each other into nicknames, stuck like mud. They untangle and run into a shed when the police lights flash. Each day they learn to rattle off the profane until it becomes trance. I pass the projects where grief rests deeper than stone. I unlock my knees and walk until I can't feel the way they cut our food stamps in the raw part of my stomach. Maybe starvation and neglect are cannon events where I must pass a test to become citizen. I dance out the wrinkles in my pocket until I can fetch another quarter. I hear the call to prayer from a man lying on the corner in his own sick, looking up and singing to the blackbirds. I see the city now because they severed the trees because they must kill everything that sings and of course the trees see everything. I lay there on the ground, shouting and breathing like air is on sale. Skipping my fingertips down the parts in my twists and watching them gather kink into forest so deep I can't even hear the train. They say we are suckers for control. I say I am a sucker. For my mouth, why not air? For my throat, why not nectar? Why would I give myself to machine when I have all this hope and pocket lint and water? I leave my offerings all the same, silver and grapes. Say: *Why would I want to dance on a plantation anyway?**

* from *Liliane*, Ntozake Shange

Golden Dreams

[J.D. Isip]

at Disney California Adventure

Appropriate it didn't last long. History
is not what theme park people come for.
The opposite, really. Escape from history,
to zing past yourself into a stratosphere
of make-believe. It's why Hollywood,
the place I lost myself in a hotel room
at sixteen with big dreams of dancing,
stupid enough to believe some producer
saw something in me, how he said it, "You
are something special" and kept repeating
special, special into my ear, I could feel
the blood and the lube and the producer
special, special, calls out to lonely boys
come sell yourself, be bigger, *special*—

Golden Dreams told the story of California,
the whitest "natives" they could pay, Whoopi
was Califia, "the spirit of this place," showing
up at the dam with Mulholland, on the cliff
where a Chinese man and his son, bamboo hats
of course, scream up to pull their basket from
the exploding rock, out of the smoke, here
comes Whoopifia, "It wasn't always easy
for folks," a part that park guests complained
about, it was too depressing to think of dying
or even other people long dead just when you
were digesting a frozen lemonade and churro,
it was all too much reality when you'd brought

the kids for a day to be a cowboy or a princess,
to be something *special*—

The producer sent my mom three checks, each
for $300, enough for rent or food, so who was I
to stop meeting him, here was water in a dry land,
who was I to pull on the rope, to scream “pull me
up,” here was where I belonged, face into the rock
getting packed in with explosives, who the fuck
was I, someone special?

The Rainbow Sanctuary [Lydia Rose]

I'm going on an adventure.

My usual café-cum-remote-workspace has recently shut down and been replaced by an over-priced high street chain that supports genocide. So I'm on a mission to find someplace else I can type up my imagination with a hot coffee and a side of boycott.

At first, I don't know which way to turn. Down an alley or over a bridge? But as the afternoon sun winks across the ripples of an oily canal, I grow more confident in my footsteps and enjoy the tap-tapping of steel-capped boots on concrete.

I reach a fork in the road. A breeze hits my right ear and I steer naturally in the same direction. I stop suddenly and wonder; is this the right way? *Yes*, a voice inside me whispers, so I hitch my backpack up and continue on my journey. My eyes dart across a cobblestone lane and the little shops that line it, searching for creative refuge. I peer through the window of a minimalist café with hard wooden chairs. *A little further*, I think.

Near the end of the lane, I notice a mural of the Progress Pride flag painted across a red brick wall. The words "The Rainbow Sanctuary" stand out in bold letters above. My heart flips with excitement. Since settling in East London, I hadn't found a queer space to fulfil my deep yearning to belong – could this be it?

I find the entrance and hoist the door open. A bell jingles and quickly fades away as I find myself surrounded by shelves stacked high with colourful books. Bunting with an assortment of LGBTQIA+ flags adorn the walls, and tables displaying a range of top reads are spaced out across a bright, open and welcoming space. *I have arrived.*

I start browsing the collection of literature, bouncing on the balls of my feet as I delve into a diverse selection of queer stories and voices. All sense of time disappears as I become totally

absorbed in the titles and blurbs of queer writers, artists, comics, scientists, social critics and political thinkers. A generous array of Black and intersectional queer analyses and memoirs pulls me into a state of transfixion, licking my lips as I flick through insightful reflections, debates and inquiries. I am in my element.

Although I'm amazed at the expansiveness of this newfound radical oasis, I feel a wave of sadness knowing how much this place would've nurtured me in my youth. If only my hometown had somewhere bookish dykes like me could feel seen and welcome, instead of all the straight-laced bars and tourist traps that drove me out.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to explore trays filled with journals and zines unravelling topics from queer ecology to polyamory. I open giant hardbacks bursting with art and photography, stories that span from gay werewolves to lesbian love affairs, and poetry collections that express diverse perspectives and experiences from the global LGBTQ+ community.

I want to gather the whole bookshop in my arms and take it all to the counter. But remembering the limits of my bank balance, I pick up one book I cannot resist: an anthology of poems by queer Palestinian writers.

'Great pick!' the cashier beams as they scan my newest literary treasure. They have pink and blue colours painted around their playful eyes and beaded into their braids, which I study with admiration. Their energy is like a warm embrace, drawing me in.

'You have so many – it was hard not to buy everything!' I grin back. I look over their shoulder and notice an espresso machine.

'You have a café here too?!'

'Yeah, hun. The seating area is just through there.' They point to an adjacent room where a cushioned sofa calls.

‘This place is amazing!’ I exclaim before I know it, and immediately feel embarrassed at my obvious over-enthusiasm.

They chuckle and reply sweetly, ‘Welcome to The Rainbow Sanctuary!’.

I check out a chalkboard menu without any prices and order my usual oat latte, hoping the mystery charge won’t be too extortionate.

‘We run a pay-what-you-can kitchen, so let me know how much I can put that down for, hun.’ The cashier smiles, waiting to add up my total. Seeing my confusion, they add, ‘We try to be inclusive of all income backgrounds… some people pay more, some pay less, but overall, it evens out and helps us all get by.’

‘Is £3 ok?’ I ask, remembering the prices at my previous go-to café and attempting to make a fair and affordable offer.

‘More than ok!’

I breathe out a sigh of relief, adjusting to this unfamiliar yet equitable system.

‘Take a seat and I’ll bring it over to you,’ they say.

‘Gracias – I mean, thank you!’.

‘¡De nada!’ they wink, and then twirl over to the coffee machine.

Clutching my new anthology, I trek into the seating area. It's a spacious room, filled with an eclectic mix of comfy chairs, upcycled tables and kitsch lamps and ornaments. As well as more flag bunting, the walls flaunt a range of campy art prints. A few people chat softly in small groups around tables, while some sit solo with a riveting book or tasty bowl of sustenance.

I find a quiet spot in a corner and sink into a snug armchair. Not long after I've laid out my laptop and glanced over my own literary work-in-progress, the friendly cashier-cum-barista places the latte onto my soon-to-be-productive-workplace-table.

'Thanks so much!' I say wholeheartedly, buzzing at the scent of fresh coffee.

'You're welcome!' They smile and hold out a flyer, 'I thought I'd give you this too'.

I take the offering and look down at a glossy A5 poster.

'We have a queer performing arts show on this evening – there'll be drag, cabaret, poetry, music…' Joy effervesces from their emphatic voice and lively hands. Although I want to join in, I'm a little unsure about changing my solitary evening plans so suddenly. 'I'm Kojo, by the way.'

'Nice to meet you, Kojo. I'm Manuela. And thanks for the flyer, it sounds really good.'

I ease into a blissful state of creative flow far quicker than usual, encouraged by the whispers of my queer comrades, becoming one with the characters and narratives that stream through my consciousness as they are written into being. The doorbell jingles as various locals come and go, bringing with them a shared connection to the rainbow and leaving with a greater sense of communal fortification. Relational and dialogical exchanges swirl in the air between us, merging like soulful melodies. Every now and then, the colourful flyer for tonight's show catches my eye. The little voice inside me grows louder, yelling *go!*

Hours later, as the late summer sun sets outside, the furniture in the room is shuffled around to create a stage area and seating for onlookers. I pack up my things and feel torn between joining the influx of people or heading home for a quiet and predictable night alone. When I peer up from my backpack, Kojo is standing before me with a friend beside them.

'Heyyy, Manuela! You going to join us hun?'

'We have virgin mojitos!' their companion says gleefully, presenting a tray of highball tumblers brimming with icy fizz and mint sprigs. My gaze travels from the drinks to her face, admiring her pretty freckles and the curve of her apple cheeks. She's busty and bodacious, and I try my hardest to keep my cool.

'Umm… ok, thank you!' I feel myself blush with desire.

After accepting a mocktail, I take a seat among the crowd. Spearmint sweetens the taste of anticipation as I sip and wait.

Diva Von Tease is our host for the evening. Adorned in sparkles, she starts off with a few light-hearted gags and then carries us with copious sass through the great peaks and troughs of her performance. We reach our lowest point as we hear her experience of transphobic taunting at a school reunion. But with a well-timed hook, Diva pokes fun at the irony of her aggressors and leaves us on a high as we're reminded of our power to resist any encroachment on our right to exist as we choose.

A range of queer performers follow, captivating the audience with unapologetic self-expression. We laugh and cheer as a topless man in a miniskirt subverts mainstream ideals of masculinity with dance moves and postures that challenge and mock a recording of a right-wing discussion on manhood. Fingers snap and mouths 'mm-hmm' as a spoken word artist critiques the co-optation of our movements by corporate rainbow-washing.

The final performer of the night strolls gracefully onto stage and lifts her mouth to the microphone as a backing track begins to play. Golden earrings in the shape of the African continent glitter against the glow of her ebony skin. Her expression is serene as her lustrous voice glides across the room and resonates with my deepest longings. Half-prayer, half-song, she calls for an end to colonial domination over our land, people and way of life. With arms raised, she sings to the ancestors to fortify us in our fight to overcome the white-supremacist-ableist-cis-heteropatriarchy that enslaves our bodies, minds and souls. As her voice guides us towards healing and reaffirms our divinity, tears stream down my cheeks. I feel a comforting hand on my shoulder, and sense Kojo at my back.

I look around and notice many eyes welling up. I cry with them, grieving a world that denies our humanity, that robs us of our time, freedom and dignity, and that violates, exploits and destroys what life it can to maintain a system of hierarchy and division.

But here, today, in this room filled with care and solidarity, there is space for us all to be.

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Two Poems

[Vidushi Rijuta]

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on a sunday afternoon, six queer friends gather for brunch.
joy thick like jam on the most loving toast,
tiresome gender left at home for now,
the sweet safe sound of the right pronouns.

we trade queer poems and talk about
life-changing words and our changing lives,
and we listen to pasoori, and then an
Indian drag queen's cover of pasoori.

we lounge, sun slipping between our fingers,
and when it rains, we sing louder,
pulling the other side of a decade closer.

we talk, chop onions, smoke,
wade deeply through our emails,
we talk about complex trauma and onion pakode,
discussion session schedules and therapy,
say brunch at 11 and eat at 4.

we have been through different versions of
the washing machines of pain, but look at this
fabric softener of a day! life, put me through
as much wringing as I need, I know I'll
never be alone again.

Thursday Morning

I am still alive and things might be improving.
The floor tiles are starting to go cold. For the first time,
winter isn't gnawing on my fingers. We are not at war.
My body is more than just nerve endings. I feed myself
tomato rice and black coffee for breakfast,
and write encouragements over as many
reports as I can. I want to do this forever.
My flatmate who is made of poems and coke and so much light
is playing Lana in the morning and the fans are off and the music
seeps out of their room like a lighthouse beacon.
My friend who knows which is the good spoon and what my worst fears are
has washed the dishes and ordered me a new mug.
Some days my heart still feels like
a crêpe paper jigsaw under construction,
but origami is possible. Better is possible.

Artist Biographies

Hannah Levene lives and writes in Norwich. Her prose and poetry has been published online at Blackbox Manifold, Hotel, Datableed, Fenwomen, and LitHub amongst others. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Roehampton exploring the composition of new butch literature. Her novel *Greasepaint* is available from Nightboat Books. She is a former co-editor of Fruit Journal.

jake stefan ferguson is a (gender)queer Irish poet in Leeds. Their poetry has been featured in Impossible Archetype, Queerlings and Poetry and Audience. An extract of their ongoing medievalist project *wulf and eadwacer and i* was longlisted for the Ivan Juritz Prize 2023 and their erasure poetry is currently displayed at the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds until November 2024 as part of their 'Forgotten Battles' exhibition.

Saadat Munir is a founder and creative director of Aks International Minorities Festival, Film - Art - Dialogue. The festival aims to illuminate the lives of transgender and queer people of colour living in Pakistan, Denmark and the UK. Munir also runs Madari Films, a production company that focuses on realistic cinema. In his short time as a filmmaker, he has been awarded several honours for his work and was an official Talent at Berlinale 2015. Apart from film production, Munir is an experienced film curator/programmer and critic, and has served as a jurist at various national and international film festivals.

Amaan Hyder is the author of the poetry collections *At Hajj* (Penned in the Margins, 2017) *and Self-Portrait With Family* (Nine Arches Press, forthcoming November 2024). As a Ledbury Poetry Critic, he has reviewed for Poetry Birmingham and the TLS. His short story 'Postpositions' was shortlisted in the 4thWrite Short Story Prize 2021. He is a tutor in the English department at Royal Holloway.

Ernesto Sarezale (@sarezale) is the penname of a Basque performance poet and film maker. Active in London's poetry scene for many years as a performer and event promoter, he has recently directed a documentary about LGBTQ+ spoken word. His poetry and short fiction has appeared in various anthologies and journals, on paper and online. He has a poetry chapbook called *In the name of the flesh*. Website: http://www.sarezale.com IG & X: @sarezale

m.v. riasanovsky is a nonbinary, queer, disabled, and autistic poet living in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains in central Virginia. They have self-published several zines and have been part of DIY/alt-lit writing communities. They are currently a grant writer and are passionate about leftist movements. You can find more of their work at mvriasanovsky.tumblr.com.

Tom Marshman has been a practicing theatre maker for 25 years, producing over 60 projects across different mediums. An overarching theme of his work is that of the outsider and their stories, particularly those that have been omitted through archival silence. Over his career he has presented work at: Bristol Old Vic, Battersea Arts Centre, Chapter Arts (Cardiff), Vauxhall Tavern (London), Gloucester Guildhall, Arnolfini (Bristol), Marlborough Theatre (Brighton) and Barbican (Plymouth). With support from a development grant, Tom has begun a writing/memoir practice through mentorship with Jack Young and Karen McLeod.

Cherry Potts is an author and editor, and winner of the Quill LGBTQ+ Prose Prize 2022. She is the Director of Arachne Press and runs the literature and music festival Solstice Shorts.

Callie Jennings (@aporianautics) received the 2023 Bennett Nieberg Transpoetic Broadside Prize. She has work in *x/y: a junk drawer of trans voices* and forthcoming in Troublemaker Firestarter, manywor(l)ds, and Fifth Wheel Press. Her newsletter is at threemachineexpression.substack.com, and chances are she's dancing.

Charlie Wührer is a queer writer and literary translator from the West Midlands, UK. She lives in Berlin. Her writing can be found in online and print literary journals and anthologies, on audio porn apps, read at events in Berlin, and on surtitle screens in theatres across Germany.

André Le Mont Wilson is a Black Queer poet in the San Francisco Bay Area, USA. His work has been published in or is forthcoming in Fourteen Poems, RFD Magazine, and *Ina: A QTBIPOC Queer Erotic Anthology*. His chapbook, *Hauntings*, won the 2022 Newfound Prose Prize.

Christopher Lloyd (he/him) is a writer and academic. He is the author of three academic books on US culture and literary studies, as well as the poetry pamphlet *Pick Up Your Feelings* (fourteen publishing, 2024), as well as poems, stories, and essays that have appeared in bath magg, annie journal, And Other Poems, PERVERSE, Fruit Journal, Lighthouse, &Change and elsewhere.

Shakeema Smalls is from Georgetown, South Carolina. Her work has been published in a variety of outlets including Honey Literary, Hayden's Ferry, Emergent Literary, Tidal Basin Review, Root Work Journal, Radius Lit, Free Black Space, Vinyl Poetry and Prose, Rigorous, and A Gathering of the Tribes Magazine, among others. She is a Tin House Workshop and VONA alum. She was a 2022 PEN Emerging Voices Fellow and a Brooklyn Poets Summer 2023 Fellow. She has upcoming work in The Ocean State Review and Foglifter Journal.

J.D. Isip's full-length poetry collections include *Kissing the Wound* (Moon Tide Press, 2023) and *Pocketing Feathers* (Sadie Girl Press, 2015). His third collection, tentatively titled *Reluctant Prophets*, will be released by Moon Tide Press in early 2025. J.D. lives in Texas with his dogs, Ivy and Bucky.

Lydia Rose is a multi-disciplinary artist specialising in creative writing and cultural organising. As a queer, neurodivergent woman of colour and an intersectional eco-feminist and abolitionist, her writing and art focus on expressing her lived experiences and building life-affirming relations and systems through radical creativity and collaboration. Her writing has been published in multiple zines and online articles, and her autobiographical story is in a book called LGBTQIA+ Phobia in the Mental Health System, which includes a collection of stories by LGBTQIA+ survivors. She also published a spoken word album last November called This Body of Mine, which includes a range of performance poems exploring topics such as sexual violence, healing, community and bodily autonomy from an intersectional feminist lens.

Vidushi Rijuta (she/her) is a queer brown woman, currently doing a full-time masters in counselling and psychotherapy, and part-time chasing after cats trying to befriend them. She loves writing about love (so naturally, about things like queerness, joy, friendship and grief).