



Issue 9

April 2026

Editors

Tom White

Tawseef Khan

Artwork by Shane Allison



EDITORIAL ...p. 1

FEATURES: Saleem Haddad on *Floodlines* ...p. 2

An extract from *Floodlines* ...p. 11

ART: Shane Allison ...p. 16

WRITING

Polari Catullus [Jennifer Ingleheart] ...p. 20

Fruity Booty [Amy Grandvoinet] ...p. 23

Free Schapelle [elise tyson] ...p. 25

The Style [Nirris Nagendrarajah] ...p. 28

Self-Portrait as a "Soutpiel" in a Drought [Sheridan Walter] ...p. 30

Extract from *The Ayatollah's Gaze* [Majid Parsa] ...p. 32

a note on the type [Redd Glass] ...p. 38

Two Poems [Costantino Toth] ...p. 40

Mastro's [Gianna Starble] ...p. 43

Lesbians in Appalachia [Abigail Cain] ...p. 48

Diseases of Civilization [Callie Jennings] ...p. 50

Infinite Largesse [Rachel Sykes] ...p. 53

This Theatre, Your Prompt [Christopher Barnes] ...p. 57

Samson [Peterson Toscano] ...p. 59

A Ghost at a Festival [Satrio Nindyo Istiko] ...p. 63

Supakinetique [Dom Birch] ...p. 67

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES ...p. 70

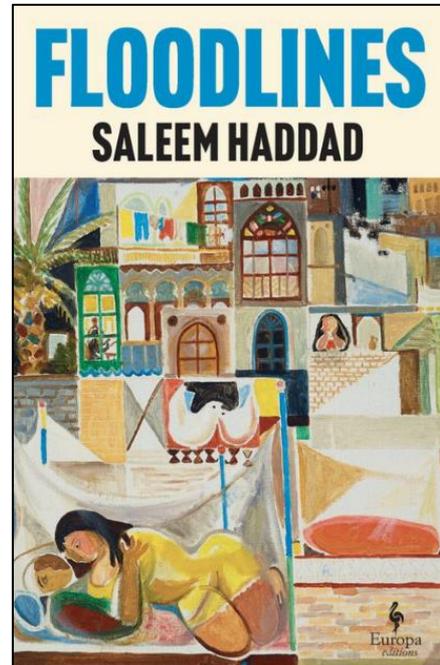
Editorial

Welcome to issue 9 of Fruit. We've had a bit of a makeover, so hopefully we're looking fresh – and the striking cover art by Shane Allison certainly helps! Despite the zhuzh, you'll find Fruit as accessible as ever: read it online, download the PDF or listen to the writers read their work.

We've got pretty much everything covered in this issue – from Abigail Cain's lesbians in Appalachia to Peterson Toscano's struggle with a dildo; from Christopher Barnes' empty stage sets to Nirris Nagendrarajah's close-up with Monica Vitti. We're especially excited to share an interview with Saleem Haddad, author of *Guapa*, and an extract from his new novel *Floodlines*. Haddad points out how 'queerness becomes one of the most potent ways in which estrangement can be experienced' and that is a useful lens through which to consider some of the work in this issue. Rachel Sykes, Majid Parsa and elise tyson explore childhood experiences of not fitting in. In 'Ghost at a Festival', Satrio Nindyo Istiko unpacks the experience of isolation as an adult, arising from the narrator's HIV diagnosis and cultural dislocation. Then there is the work of making up for that estrangement – of putting things together, however disparate they may seem: Shane Allison collages found material in his art, while Jennifer Ingleheart marries Polari with Catullus. And there's finding a way of writing that fits the difference you feel, and the joy of that, which Dom Birch and Amy Grandvoinet achieve with their typographic performances: 'Party 4 you ! Just you !'

Saleem Haddad in Conversation

Joseph Devine catches up with Saleem Haddad, critically acclaimed author of Guapa, about his new novel. Set in 2014 Iraq, Floodlines focusses on three estranged sisters – Mediha, Zainab, and Ishtar – as they reconnect over the discovery of their late father’s lost paintings. Adding to the mix is Zainab’s son Nizar, recently separated from long-time partner Alfie, whose experiences a war correspondent continue to haunt him. Floodlines is a novel with epic sweep, ranging back in time and weaving through various countries to explore the impact of family secrets and betrayal in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.



Firstly, congratulations on your sophomore novel, *Floodlines*. *Guapa* is one of my favourite books (one of the few I have read twice, in fact!) so I had high expectations, which I must say you have exceeded. The scope of the novel is impressive, especially given its relatively short length. How did you achieve such a brevity of language while juggling so many complex themes?

It means so much to hear that, both about *Guapa* and *Floodlines*. Thank you. While I was writing *Floodlines* I was aware that it was very different from *Guapa*, so there was a part of me that wasn't certain how it would be received by those who loved my first novel.

The brevity comes down to my brilliant agent who worked with me to uncover the heart of the story, and my fantastically ruthless editor who trimmed the remaining fat. Fundamentally, I think working on a novel for such a long period of time helps deepen

the layers of the story, especially when you leave long breaks in between edits to let the novel (and yourself) breathe and grow.

I remember you mentioning a few years ago that an early draft was over 900 pages. I can see how easily this story could have been much longer, but the finished product does not feel rushed or truncated. How did you manage what must have been a tough editing process? And how did you decide what to take out and what had to stay in?

I think the longest the manuscript got to was 220,000 words. I would have liked to have produced a longer manuscript, but the commercial demands of publishing did not allow it, and this forced me to ask myself tough questions about what I felt was the heart of the story I wanted to tell. I had a lot more characters, with entire sections set in the 1940s and 1920s. Ultimately, for me, the conflict between the three sisters was the story I was most fascinated by, so all the other stuff had to go. Then it became a process of trying to understand what so fascinated me about these women and their relationships.

Queerness is obviously an important element in your writing, but I recall your frustrations at *Guapa* being pigeonholed as a gay novel when it is as much about the Arab spring. Queer characters are central to *Floodlines*, too, but queer themes are slightly less to the fore, being one part of a much larger web. Was this a deliberate decision to move away from this pigeonholing? Or simply a natural effect of a much larger cast of characters?

It wasn't frustration so much as discomfort, and a sense that categorising *Guapa* as a gay novel felt like looking at the story through the wrong lens. It wasn't that the novel wasn't a gay novel, or that I was not a gay writer – both of those things are true. It was simply that the category didn't fully encapsulate the underlying questions the novel was interrogating.

If I had to draw out a common theme in my writing, it is not queerness but rather estrangement that has been a more consistent preoccupation of mine. I am interested

in characters who are experiencing some form of estrangement: from their homelands, their families, their lives, their pasts, and their desires. I am curious about how this estrangement manifests – its textures and contradictions – how it creates idealised visions of people and places, and how characters try to overcome it, negotiate it, or simply learn to live alongside it.

When looked at through this lens, one can clearly trace estrangement as a through-line that runs through all the characters, not just in *Guapa* and *Floodlines*, but in my shorter works too.

Of course, the question of estrangement does not exclude queerness. When someone is socialised to believe that their desires are abject, an estrangement occurs between an individual, their body, and their desires. In this sense, queerness becomes one of the most potent ways in which estrangement can be experienced. But estrangement becomes about a lot more than that, and I'd argue that Rasa's sense of estrangement in *Guapa* is about more than just his queerness.

With *Floodlines*, it wasn't a deliberate decision to de-centre the characters' queerness from the narrative. It just wasn't the primary preoccupation of the characters themselves. They had other things on their mind.

I sensed the connection between Rasa's estrangement in the West as an Arab with his estrangement from his own society as a queer man, and even the non-queer characters experience similar isolation in *Floodlines*. Do you feel that diasporic estrangement is a similar to queerness in the way it must be navigated in a hostile society that otherwise those who don't fit in? And do you think your queerness has helped you write such rich female characters?

I do think there is a connection, though I'm always cautious about collapsing the two experiences into each other. Diasporic estrangement and queerness are obviously not the same thing, but they share certain emotional and psychological terrains. Both involve learning how to live with a kind of double consciousness – an awareness that you are being read, interpreted, or misread by the societies around you. You learn to

move through the world translating yourself constantly: deciding what to reveal, what to conceal, how to belong without entirely belonging.

Living abroad during the genocide in Palestine has been discombobulating and, indeed, maddening. Internally, I was in turmoil, but I look around and see most people going about their daily life as if nothing is happening. They exist with so much ease (or at least, it appears that way to me). So I can see similar parallels with having to hide your queerness to assimilate into society. There's that same pressure of performance, of having to conceal and carry something heavy that you're not sure others will react well to or even understand. That feeling of living slightly askew from the world around you, of struggling to integrate the multiple worlds inside of you that don't neatly resolve into one stable self, is something I'm very interested in exploring in my fiction.

As for writing female characters, I don't know if queerness automatically makes someone better at writing across gender, but I do think it can create a certain sensitivity to the ways identity is constructed and policed. Queer people often grow up observing social dynamics very closely: learning how gender roles operate, how power moves through families, how expectations shape the lives of the people around us. That kind of attentiveness can be useful when writing characters very different from yourself. But I was also raised by one man and four wonderfully intense women, and perhaps that's why in my life and in my writing I find myself gravitating to strong, eccentric women.

For me, the women in *Floodlines* are really the emotional and moral centre of the novel. They carry memory, they carry history, and they often see things that the men in the story are too damaged or distracted to fully understand. Writing them wasn't about imagining an "other," but about paying attention to the women I've known – in my family, in my community – and trying to honour the complexity of their inner lives.

The recurring flood motif in the novel is very powerful, lending an urgent sense of unstoppable forces in both the personal and political. It evokes the ancient story of Gilgamesh but also reminded me of the present moment with the Al-Aqsa Flood. What drew you to this imagery and what does it mean to you?

The flood image emerged quite early in the writing of the novel, and it felt almost inevitable given that the Tigris River runs through the story both physically and metaphorically. Rivers carry memory. They carry civilisations. And they also carry destruction. That duality fascinated me.

In Mesopotamian mythology, of course, the flood is one of the foundational stories. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the flood represents both an ending and a beginning, a catastrophic rupture that wipes away a world but also makes space for something new to emerge. I was drawn to that idea of history moving in cycles, where moments of upheaval expose the fragility of the systems we assume are permanent.

In the novel, the flood operates on several levels. There is the literal environmental threat surrounding the river, which reflects the climate crisis and the ways landscapes themselves are changing. And as one of the characters says, Iraq's rivers are the lifeline of the country. But there is also a more emotional or psychological dimension to it. The characters are all living with the accumulation of histories – personal griefs, family secrets, political violence – and those pressures build quietly until something finally breaks, and the past overwhelms them like a flood.

But like I said, for me the flood isn't only about destruction. It's also about revelation. Floods uncover things that were buried. And in the novel, that process of uncovering the past becomes essential for the characters if they are going to understand themselves and the world they inhabit.

***Floodlines* obviously required a huge amount of research across many topics. What has been the most rewarding part of this process? And what did you most enjoy learning about?**

It was a very long process, but an incredibly rewarding one. The research took me in many directions: Iraqi political history, the development of modern art in Baghdad, Mesopotamian mythology, climate issues affecting Iraq and Turkey, the collapse of ancient Mesopotamian civilisations, the politics of archaeology and museums, and the history of Baghdad itself.

But the most lasting experience for me was immersing myself in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. There's something magical about that text – its gaps and digressions, the way the story feels like a long strand of yarn that can be shaped and twisted in different ways depending on who is telling it.

Mythology and folklore evolve through a kind of collaborative process over time. *Gilgamesh* is a perfect example of that: a story that has been retold and reshaped across centuries. Parts of it have been lost to time, leaving these tantalising blanks that are also incredibly rich spaces for interpretation.

Your writing touches on a lot of issues yet never feels didactic, instead using the mother and sisters to explore often opposing ideas and perspectives on Iraq. Nizar feels caught in-between (and perhaps overwhelmed by) these women's views, is he a somewhat autobiographical figure?

Nizar emerged because I was chatting to my uncle about the novel, and he asked me whether there was going to be a character inspired by me. I told him this wasn't a story about me but about 'the family'. He laughed and said "You're part of this family, whether you like it or not." So when I returned home I began to free-write this character based on what was on my mind, and that's how Nizar emerged. So in some ways his concerns echo my own, and I empathise with his rage and his pain, but I wouldn't say he is autobiographical or that his plot line closely follows my own life, because that wouldn't be true.

The story of these characters is focused on 2014, a time of traumatic upheaval in Iraq. Had you begun the novel now, how would the last decade have changed your approach?

Oh dear – I think it would probably take me another decade to properly answer that question. What I will say is that although the novel is set in 2014, during a moment of traumatic upheaval in Iraq, and although it is “about Iraq,” which is no longer in the headlines as often as it once was, I’ve been struck by how relevant its themes still seem to feel to readers today.

At its heart, the novel is asking questions that extend far beyond that particular moment: how and why do we continue to live, hope, and create art in dark times? How do we reckon with our past mistakes – both political and personal – when the consequences of those decisions are still unfolding around us?

Those questions, unfortunately, don’t belong to a single historical moment. If anything, they feel even more urgent today.

Aside from your family’s personal connection with art, what drew you to using art as a vehicle for this kind of story?

I suppose I was partly drawn to understanding the power and purpose of art as a vehicle for both internal and external change.

What stayed with me most through writing the novel was a renewed sense of the necessity of art in a moment like ours – not as something that is always public, visible and celebrated, but as a means of orientation. Art, for me, is a way of navigating the space between our inner lives and the external realities we’re trying to survive, and of holding those two realms in relation rather than allowing them to fracture or overwhelm us.

The story ends with a glimmer of hope, albeit a realistic one, found in the bonds of family and power of art. How do you hold on to hope yourself?

I don't think anyone has much of a say in the matter; we are all doomed to hope. I recently read this fantastic essay by the Iranian political thinker, Shahram Khosravi, on the value of hope amidst defeat, where he says that "unmaking is never the end of the story. The will to remake again is not born outside defeat but inside it." He then goes on to ask: "How can one think from within brokenness, from within the ruins, and still produce meaning, and even possibility? What does it mean to transform defeat into a method?"

This articulates something the characters in *Floodlines* are grappling with, which is how do we pick ourselves up and start again after decades of destruction and defeat. And the reality is that, by virtue of being alive, hope is an inevitability.

I really enjoyed your 2018 short film *Marco*. Do you have any plans to make any more films, and how would you feel about adaptations of your novels? Would you want close involvement, or to see what a director would do with your stories?

I love the collaborative aspect of film-making, and would love to do it again, but the novel is generally where I feel most at home. I'd love to see adaptations of my novels, and I'd love to see how another creative might interpret the stories. I can't think of anything worse than being asked to write a screenplay of a novel I've spent years working on. Once the novel is published, my role in the story is done as far as I see it. Though I reserve the right to call it a terrible adaptation, if indeed it is one.

Speaking of art, I recall you were taking painting classes recently, how is your own journey with art coming along?

The process of publishing my first novel was very interesting but also strangely traumatic: to put myself out there as an artist was unexpectedly exposing, and to churn it through the industry made me look at writing in a different way. And because I was

working on this novel about visual art, I wanted to explore visual art in a practical way. I tried pottery and sculpture for a while, though I ended up taking some oil painting classes and fell in love with that. Painting was not only necessary for the novel – to understand the practical side of painting when writing about a family of painters – but was incredibly soothing; to work in this different artistic medium with no intention of ever turning it towards the ‘market’, so to speak (something which my writing had become geared towards, by virtue of the success of my first novel). It was meditative, it was fun, I could drink wine and talk to people while I did it (which I can never do while writing), and the final product had no value beyond the process. As soon as the genocide in Palestine began, I abandoned painting. There was something grotesque to me about sitting down in a room far away and painting while bombs were dropped in Gaza (though I’m aware that one could say the same thing about sitting in a room and writing). So I haven’t actually painted anything since October 2023.

And finally, you must have already been researching *Floodlines* when *Guapa* was released in 2016. Are you already formulating your next novel?

I’ve actually already written another novel (this one set in Lebanon), but the genocide in Palestine soured my perspective on it, so I’m not sure that will see the light of day anytime soon (if at all). Over the past year or so I’ve been working on a non-fiction project about love, belonging, and estrangement. And I’m working with a friend on a murder mystery screenplay set in Lisbon. So I’ve got a few different projects that I dip into every now and then. But for the moment, I want to give *Floodlines* space to emerge in the world. It’s been a long time coming.

An extract from *Floodlines*

[Saleem Haddad]

Cairo, September 2011.

Nizar was attending a conference organised by the British Council's Egypt Bureau, which brought together journalists documenting the Arab Spring. On the first day, Massoud introduced himself to the group as a photographer who had documented the protest squares across Yemen. On the second day, he gave a brief presentation of his photography during the protests in Sana'a and Ta'iz. There was an amateurishness to his pictures, but also a sincerity that Nizar found compelling.

Beyond that, Massoud barely spoke. On the rare occasions he said something, he didn't sound like an activist or a journalist. He wasn't concerned with the minutiae of political manoeuvrings or outraged by flagrant human rights abuses. Instead, his interjections consisted of thoughtful—albeit tangential—quasi-philosophical reflections.

In a small break-out group on the subject of self-care for journalists, he interrupted a conversation to say: "Since we are in Cairo, it is worthwhile to remember what the Egyptian surrealists of the early twentieth century used to say: revolution is condemned by the law of the land, while suicide is condemned by the laws of God. So, where does that leave us? Stuck in some in-between place, neither dead nor alive."

These musings did not impress the British organisers, who nudged the conversation away from his reflections on the paradoxes of freedom towards concrete analysis and policy recommendations.

On the third day, when the session paused for lunch, Massoud turned to Nizar. "The hotel buffet is disgusting. Let's get some Koshari."

They left the illusory enclave of the five-star hotel for the streets of downtown Cairo, where they found a Koshari stall on the corner of a bustling intersection.

"Where are you boys from?" the stall owner asked.

Massoud said he was Yemeni. Nizar told the server he was half-Iraqi and half-Palestinian.

"Welcome brothers. May all our countries one day be free."

As they ate, Nizar told Massoud that he last visited Yemen during the 2009 war in Sa'ada. Massoud said he was from the south and had little connection to events in the north. His father was from Aden and his mother was half-Eritrean, which explained his dark skin and the angled features of his face. He told Nizar that because of his background he was considered a second-class citizen in Yemen, and confessed that he believed he had been invited to the conference less on the strength of his photographs than on his marginalised status.

Nizar asked what Massoud thought of Cairo. He said it was the most vibrant city in the world but the food was terrible, and that Egyptians had a habit of believing the world revolved around them.

“Doesn't everyone?”

“No,” Massoud replied, spooning red-stained macaroni into his mouth. “Yemenis know what it means to be forgotten.”

Later, when he re-connected to the hotel Wi-Fi, he accepted Massoud's friend request on Facebook. He scrolled through Massoud's page, which consisted mostly of photographs taken during the protests as well as portraits of street children, many of whom, like Massoud, were dark-skinned.

They met again for an evening shisha on a floating restaurant by the corniche. They sat on uneven wicker chairs as they smoked and looked out over the river, which stretched before them like a sheet of ink, interrupted every so often by a passing felucca or a boat draped in neon lights. Across the water, the city shimmered through a haze of smog.

The conversation turned towards family. Massoud told Nizar about his younger brother, and Nizar told Massoud about his mother. He wasn't sure who else to talk about, and the topic of Alfie seemed—as it always did on such trips—off-limits. He explained that his mother was half-Iraqi and half-British, that they had moved around aimlessly for many years.

“And your father is Palestinian?”

“Was,” Nizar pulled on the shisha, inhaling the sweet apple-flavoured molasses. “My parents met in Baghdad, but my father died in the war before I was born.”

“Which war?”

“The Lebanese one.”

Massoud looked at Nizar with a strange solemnity. “May God rest his soul.”

Underneath them the river moved slowly, the deck bobbing lazily in the current. The reflections of the fairy lights strung along the restaurant's railing quivered on the surface of the water.

Massoud asked about the scar on his cheek, and Nizar told him about the first and only time he visited Baghdad for *The Times* in February 2005. He told Massoud about his decision to visit the square which housed his grandfather's monument, how he was proud it had stood firm during decades of sanctions and war. It had been a cold morning. Everything was as it should have been, until the thundering and the furnace of heat. He told Massoud about the fingers on the asphalt, the torn limbs and the headless body, about the man who had been walking around with his eyeball in his palm. How Nizar had placed the eyeball haphazardly back in its socket, had taken off his own bloody shirt and wrapped it around the man's head to keep it in place.

In two years with Alfie he had never been able to find the words to explain the scar's origins, but with Massoud the story unfolded from his tongue with surprising ease, in all its gore and brutality.

"My mother holds all these painful memories of Iraq, I don't even know most of them. I've seen it as this battleground ever since I was young, so I guess it's funny that the one time I visit and go to see my grandfather's monument no less, it nearly kills me."

"These wars..." The sentence hung in the air as Massoud drew on the shisha, blowing a cloud of smoke in the air. He opened his mouth to finish his sentence, then changed his mind and grabbed Nizar's hand, interlacing their fingers. A breeze moved over the water, warm and thick with the smell of riverweed and grilled meat. Nizar looked down at Massoud's hands, his fingernails bitten into tiny stubs that seemed painfully embedded in his skin.

They walked back to the hotel in silence. Massoud's room was one floor above his own. When the elevator stopped, Nizar turned to him.

"Come."

On entering Nizar's room, Massoud took off his shoes. The hems of his jeans were slightly torn, like those of a teenager. Nizar watched as he gently removed his socks. There was an intimacy to watching him slowly undress his feet. When he'd finished, Massoud looked up.

"Come," he said, echoing Nizar's earlier command.

Nizar placed a hand on Massoud's cheek. Leathery and sun-exposed, his skin bore the faint scars of teenage acne. He thought of Alfie at home, possibly cooking or sitting in the bath, using his foot to sprinkle some bathwater onto the plant next to the tub. But in the hotel room in Cairo, these scenes of British domesticity felt distant and false. He kissed Massoud's cheek, and Massoud pressed Nizar's body against his with surprising strength. They kissed again, this time on the lips. With a deep breath Massoud inhaled Nizar, then pushed him onto the bed. Nizar gazed at Massoud standing above him. Massoud stared back, not breaking eye contact as he unbuttoned his shirt with trembling fingers, before sinking into Nizar's body.

They spent the next three evenings together. Massoud loved to kiss Nizar, and insisted on pressing their bodies together, hugging him tightly even after they had both come, as if trying to meld their bodies into one. He did not speak during sex, communicating with grunts or vague hand gestures, but he maintained eye contact for long periods of time. It infused the lovemaking with an intensity that felt new to Nizar. Massoud wasn't as seasoned as Alfie; his touch and kisses had the same amateurish quality as his photography, one that was arousing in its sincerity, its boyish charm. But there was solace in kissing a mouth that could also pronounce the guttural Arabic letter *ayn* without reducing the sound to a vulgar gag, to hold close a body that would never remark that Oum Kalthoum's songs 'go on for too long'.

Technically, there was nothing immoral about what he was doing. He and Alfie had never attached value to monogamy. In fact, they often exchanged stories of their erotic exploits with one another, taking pleasure in dissecting the idiosyncratic behaviours of their lovers. But Nizar's time with Massoud felt like a betrayal. In that hotel room in Cairo, Nizar discovered that by loving a foreigner, he had become a prisoner in an exile he was not aware of. The sex with Massoud was a homecoming. It had revealed a hollowness at the core of his relationship with Alfie, one he had been blind to for some time.

It was not until he unlocked the front door of their London flat that the guilt washed over him. The weight of the betrayal was intensified by how much Nizar enjoyed it. He stepped into the apartment gripped by a quiet estrangement, fearful that Alfie would read this on his face or smell it on his skin.

"Hey Niz," Alfie's voice drifted in from the kitchen. The apartment smelled of smoked paprika.

“Hey love.” The words felt heavy in his mouth.

He left his suitcase by the door and kicked off his shoes. In the kitchen, Alfie was by the oven in his underwear, stirring a pot of tomato sauce. Nizar walked towards him and wrapped his arms around his thin frame.

“You look tired,” Alfie kissed his forehead.

“Yes.”

“I’ll run you a bath.”

A bath. Alfie’s solution to the problems in life. Nizar heard the faucet, then the clunk of a bath bomb hitting the bottom of the tub, and the ensuing fizz as it dissolved in the water.

Nizar was scrubbing between his toes when Alfie knocked on the bathroom door. He had a cup of tea in one hand, which he placed on the stool next to the bath before turning to look at his reflection in the mirror.

“How was the conference?”

“Same as usual, a bunch of foreigners trying to put square pegs into round holes. How have things been here?”

“Oh, you know...” Alfie stopped, then turned around and ran his fingers down Nizar’s back.

“You’ve got scratch marks,” he said softly. His face began to break into a knowing smile, and Nizar imagined he was about to say something like ‘Seems you still managed to squeeze in some fun’. But something in Nizar’s face wiped the shadow of a smile from Alfie’s.

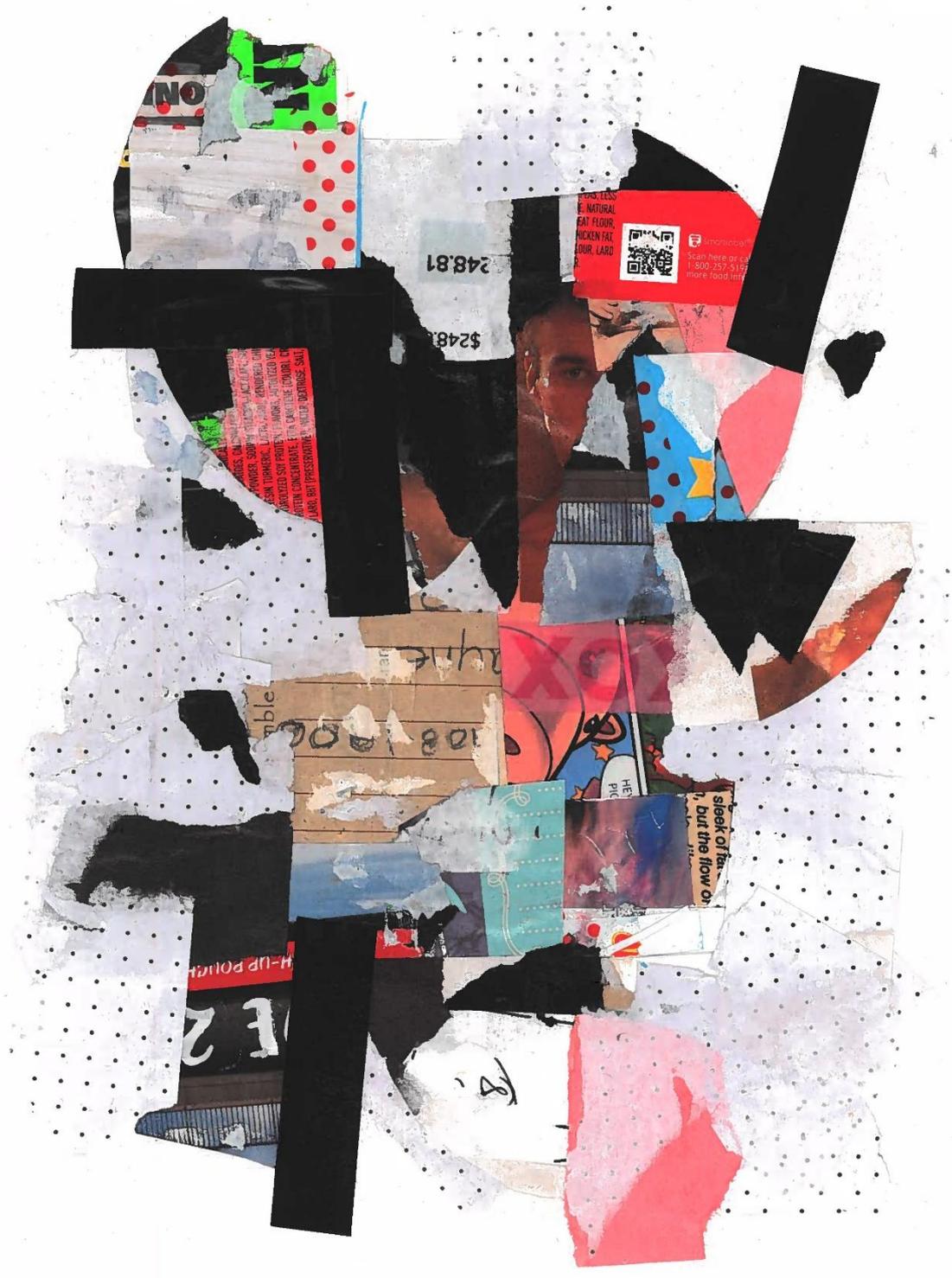
“I should get back to the chilli.”

Nizar sat in the bath for a long time. He did not remember Massoud scratching him. In fact, he distinctly recalled that Massoud had bitten his nails down to tiny stubs. Yet, when he got out of the bath and turned around in front of the mirror, the scratch marks were unmistakable. Four jagged lines scrawled down his right shoulder blade.

Shane Allison









Polari Catullus 86

The Most Beautiful Boy in the World

Jock's quite the dish, or so they say.
She's a tall, dark omi, très butch;
auntie Kenneth grants her that much.
Still, for me that Jock's nanti dish:
there's something lacking from the mix.
My treash, now, *she's* the real McCoy,
your actual fortuni boy.

Polari glossary:

Dish – attractive man; she – [Polari frequently refers to men using female pronouns or other gender markers; compare 'auntie']; omi – man; très – [Julian and Sandy often used French together with Polari]; nanti – no; treash – treasure [used as a term of endearment by Polari speakers]; fortuni – gorgeous

Polari Catullus 81

Slim pickings

In the whole of this city, you couldn't find some pretty lad
what you might go and fall in love with, what's out there on the scene?
Did it have to be that antique h.p., that tragic old queen,
that geriatric derelict, my darling filiome?
And you went for that tatty creature, when you could have had me?
For shame! Can you really not vada that he's NTBH?

Polari glossary:

Antique h.p. – old gay man (h.p. = homee palone – gay man, a combination of homee/omi, man + palone, woman); queen – gay man; filiome – young man; tatty – rubbish; vada – see; NTBH – Not To Be Had (a phrase used to indicate that a man is sexually unattractive)

Catullus 32

A bona time of day

Or: The Afternoon Cock

Please please me, my one and only,
don't leave me here sad and lonely.
Call me, I'll come round to yours;
just make sure you've open doors,
don't head out to do all your chores.
We'll have ourselves a nice little siesta,
indulge in an afternoon's fuck-fiesta.
So, call me. I'll be round in a jiffy –
I don't want to waste my post-lunch stiffy.

Polari glossary: Bona – good

Fruity Booty

[Amy Grandvoinet]

Walking thru Bracknell Business Park to the D A workshop

All of the blossom is all over all of the concrete !

Big walls of glass Head Quarters surrounding me: up up up up *up !*

Incl. the 3M Building : : Minnesota Manufacturing & Mining Company

Ha ha ha , I miss you ! I: all 'svelte', 10/10 flat chest'd

How clever; this femme-hiding desexualisation (except 4 you)

No wolf-whistles for me! No siree! (but let's drink th'Campari spritzes)

U are so skinny (* yay *) the dr tells u u should put on some weight

But, cannily, u keep on just enough of it to avoid institutions

U've got it *s u s s e d !*

U do not *need* a binder !

U can wear thine hat and thine hoodie and look just like a nice *b o y*

Everybody saying Ciara was a transwoman in the most transphobic register

uh

I walk on the concrete all confetti'd in blossom (my non-wedding)

I walk down the street and I am in disguise (*soffocare* pride)

A tough-boy 'do not bother' *facielle* expression

~ *oranges in the jardin wait no carpark in Malaga* ~

~ *ginseng at your mama's nearer-by altar* ~

It is always on ur mind & when it's not , c.o.n.s.e.q.u.e.n.c.e.s

Beautiful human bodies, yes But living under rocks, well

Strip / Their unwanted-ness But living under rocks, well

U wore nice Fruity Booty underwear that you said was for u ; that was gentil
kind of ~ but it was also 4 you ! Party 4 you ! Just you ! it seems ?



Free Schapelle

[elise tyson]

The Barbies are scissoring. Exhibitionists on the balcony of the doll house. One day, my mum doesn't hold the front door open for me as I get home from school. Mum always holds the door open for me. I cry on the lawn until Dad comes home and I scurry in behind him.

We wolf down our dinner. It's the only way to guarantee seconds in a house with eight siblings. Most of us will have digestive issues as adults. One sister forces another sister to lick poo. My brother farts in everyone's cereal.

I hate going to church and I hate saying the rosary and I especially hate the marches outside the abortion clinics. I don't understand what they are, just that they're boring and embarrassing because none of my friends have to do things like this.

I have no bedtime. I stay up watching Melrose Place. I don't even understand it. I'm always late for school. My dad rips the quilt off my bed. I cling to the bedpost as he tries to yank me off by my legs. He tips a glass of water on me. He wins.

My brother teases my sister. She throws a tennis racquet at his head and concusses him.

We get *The Sims* and take shifts playing. I make the women have affairs, removing the bed to watch. I lock their husbands in rooms with the cheapest fireplaces. Or pools without ladders. *move_objects on*

At school casual day, I tell my teacher how much I love my flared Pumpkin Patch jeans that my sister bought me. She says, "I know, you wear them enough!" They are the only pair of jeans I own.

My mum becomes obsessed with a convicted drug trafficker with pretty eyes. She takes to sticking notes on the fridge that say "*Lord Jesus, Please bring Schapell (sic) Corby home to Australia. Praise you Lord, Amen.*"

My dad writes notes of his own. He attaches a sign beneath the television. "NEVER TOUCH THESE CABLES UNDER PAIN OF DEATH" He signs off with his full name.

The Barbies are scissoring. They're second-hand and we have no Ken. I am only ever gifted one new Barbie of my own. My rich friend steals it. I find it decapitated at her house.

My sister visits the Philippines and brings back rosary beads so large they hang from the curtain rod. Why encourage them?

My sister buys a shitbox car with a sunroof. We take turns standing outside the roof screaming along to '*Black Betty*' as she sways the car across the road.

Every time I say my sister I mean a different person. I have seven sisters.

The exorcism should be a low point, but it's funny as hell. I put a sign on my bedroom door: "*BEWARE DEMON INSIDE*". It's my strongest anecdote at parties.

I tell mum the school didn't mind me taking the day off to line up for the Kings of Leon concert. She relays that to them when they ring. I get detention.

I get my licence. I'm allowed to drive my younger sister and I to mass. We park out the front so our family friends will see the Tarago. We pop in to grab a church pamphlet and lower the car seats. The perfect crime.

My best friend and I kiss SO much when we're drunk. I think she's beautiful.

My sister crashes my dad's car. I take the blame, hoping to leverage it to borrow her ID. When she refuses, I steal her passport. I replace it with Dad's expired one from the 70s. She's furious and demands he punish me. Dad laughs.

My sister's boyfriend's mum uses her library laminator to make me and my sister fake IDs.

Every time I say my sister I mean a different person. I have seven sisters.

My friend remarks that I don't have a sexuality. "Your sexuality is nothing, it's just *chill*. You'll kiss boys or girls and you don't care." I wonder if there's a word for that.

The Style: on Monica Vitti in *Red Desert*

[Nirris Nagendrarajah]

She holds a quail egg
in her closed fist.

Her gears don't mesh,
her husband said.

He didn't even visit her
When she was interned.

She's off, he adds,
so now everything
about her is off.

She's with friends now
surrounded by red wood
and a mirror, mirror on the wall.

She looks into it, turns around,
and leans back into him.

Like two cars crashing,
making room for the other,
producing a sensual current.

He registers it and
leans his head back.

And for a moment,
amongst their friends,
exists a private, mutual bliss.

When she opens her fist
it is like a flower blooming.

The stigma at the top of a pistil
is attached to a structure called the style.

Self-Portrait as a “Soutpiel” in a Drought

[Sheridan Walter]

The rejection comes in English, but it tastes like Afrikaans.

It tastes like the Sunday roast where the silence is louder than the prayer.

We feel this piece lacks direction, the Editor says.

It lacks a clear spine.

They mean: *Where is the man in this text?*

They are looking for the rugby captain, the soldier, the patriarch.

They want a subject that stands up straight in a khaki shirt
and creates a border around itself.

But my gender is the treason of the border.

Foucault called it the “Great Confinement,”

but here we call it the *Laager*.

The circle of wagons drawn tight against the unknown.

And I am the thing wandering outside the circle,

too fluid for the cracked clay of the Highveld.

They want to fix me. Normalization.

They want to grind the edges of my “they” until it fits into “he.”

They want the history of my body to be a monument
to the Voortrekkers,

not this smear of cheap lipstick and defiance,

not this soft, unmapped territory.

They look at my hands—manicured, trembling—
and see a waste of good labor.

Abnormal, the Dominee would have said.

Unmarketable, the Editor says now.

It is the same script in a different font.

They want a confession.

They want me to admit their “truth” about my biology.

But I refuse the confession.

I refuse to be the “Moffie” they can pity,
or the “Ally” they can praise.
I refuse the taxonomy of their guilt.
I am not a problem to be solved by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
I am the glitch in their genealogy.
Their power is in the electric fence buzzing around the suburbs.
It is in the stare of the cashier at the Spar.
It is in the garden tap that runs dry,
the withheld rain mirroring their hoarded recognition.
But resistance is everywhere, too.
My resistance is a braai where no one eats the meat.
It is the jacaranda blooming when it is supposed to be dead.
It is wearing a dress in the middle of the *platteland*
as an act of war against the binary.
Let them file the poem under “Experimental.”
Let them say it does not fit the canon of South African Literature.
I am not trying to be read.
I am trying to be ungovernable.
I am the soutpiel, one foot in the grave of the past,
one foot in a future they cannot imagine,
hanging suspended over the gap,
refusing to touch their ground.

It was mid-afternoon. The grown-ups were having a siesta, and I was enjoying the variety of TV channels, flicking up and down.

On MTV, I stopped—a second too long.

My finger on the remote control paralysed, my eyes became hypnotized by his. Piercing blue eyes and an innocent but cheeky smile. The way he looked seductively at me and sang “. . . hold on to a love sensation . . .” showing his tongue lustfully as he said “love”.

I felt my pulse bang in my ears.

Heat filled my chest. Who is he?

I read the title of the song before the end of the video: “*Love Sensation*,” 911. Another look at him and he was gone. I waited, hoping it would play again. It didn't. I must record it, next time.

From then on, I made excuses to stay home, and skipped family reunions. I sat by the TV, waiting, prepared to capture him on a VHS tape, and, when I finally did, he was mine.

Now, I knew his name: Lee. I lost count of the number of times I watched the video, rewinding and playing it again, pausing the screen at the right moment, when he was looking up at the camera, looking at me, and I'd stare back.

Could I ever meet him?

I didn't know what to do. I had a desperate urge to be close to him. A TV screen in Ankara was as close as I could get, and time was against me.

Counting the days I had left with him before we went back to Iran turned into an excruciating torture. I had to ingrain his face into my memory, somewhere safe. When our last day arrived, I ran to the TV room to see the music video one final time. My heartbeat fluttered on my temples and behind my eyes. I could hear Maman's chatter with her sister at the door, both laughing. I entered the room, only to find my uncle on the sofa, his feet up, watching the news on TV.

He glanced at me and smiled. “I'll be coming in a second. Just checking the football results.”

I shuffled from one leg to the other, staring at the video cassette on top of the VCR player. Please, please, please, let me see you once more.

I took a step forward, standing next to him now, looking blankly at the TV. The reporter was looking back, speaking in Turkish.

“Majid, come on! The driver is here,” called Maman.

No, no, no. Please.

With a grunt, my uncle pulled himself up, grabbed the remote, and switched off the TV. I gasped a half breath and took another step towards the screen, but his huge body blocked my view, and then he was hugging me, tapping me on the back.

“Come on, young man; your mother is waiting.”

I looked over his shoulder at the tape, where I was leaving Lee. My eyes filled with tears.

My uncle, holding me by the arms, was evidently touched. “Ah, we are not going anywhere. Stop with these tears, Majid. You are a strong man. A strong man does not cry. *Mashallah!*” And he gave me two hard taps on the shoulders.

I made an incomprehensible sound, imitating laughter, and walked out with him.

When we returned to Tehran, I became withdrawn, as if I had suffered a true loss. I missed that sting of desire, of being close to his 2D face. The joy, the excitement, the guilty pleasure. The new feeling was like a fog expanding in my head, numbing my senses, obscuring logic and sanity.

A week later, I was awoken by an unmistakable squeal. At first, I thought I had dreamed the loud *Baaaa*. It ripped through yet another dream of Lee, where he was sitting in our living room, singing.

“*Baaaa*.”

I looked out of our bedroom window. A flocculent sheep was tied to the railing in the backyard, looking as confused as I.

“They brought it an hour ago,” said Sina from behind me.

I kept my nose stuck to the window. “For Baba,” I whispered, as Sina joined me. Baba was coming home from haj that day.

“What’ll happen to it?” he said.

I looked at his round face and sleepy eyes; he was still in his pyjamas. I slid my index finger across my throat and stuck my tongue out from the corner of my mouth.

Sina winced and looked back to the animal.

“Sacrificing an animal for a haji is tradition,” I said, feeling guilty. In Iran, religion justified it.

“Can we go down to feed it?”

Knowing sleep—and, with it, Lee—had long gone, I agreed. We took some lettuce from the kitchen and went into the backyard.

As I fed the animal and watched her jaws grind together, I whispered to her: “You know, you ruined my dream. Lee, the boy I love, was here.” The thrill of saying the words hit me like a high I had not felt before.

Her gaze locked with mine and, for a second, she stopped chewing. Big black eyes. The hairs on my neck stood on end. Then, a swallow and another loud “*Baa*.” I shook my head and smiled to myself, passing the lettuce to Sina as I got up.

Back inside, Maman was fixing her scarf in front of the mirror.

“Going out?”

“Yes; I need to kill some time and that animal won’t let me sleep. Just for a walk in the park,” she said.

I could tell it was not the noise that kept her awake. Her eyes were beaming, her fingers fidgety. She was excited.

“Can I come, Maman?”

“Yes, yes—be quick, though. We don’t have much time.”

I returned to my bedroom for a change of clothes, smiling to myself. Today is a happy day.

It was unusual for the two of us to go for a walk together, but Maman had perhaps sensed my despondence. As we left, we looked up at Baba’s welcome banner erected in our street, gently dancing in the wind. Maman smiled and hooked her arm in mine as we walked. We chatted about unrelated, trivial matters, even cracking a joke now and then. She told me how our upstairs neighbour had sorted out delivery of the sheep, and she laughed as she described the hassle of moving the animal into the backyard. There was an intimacy between us that I had not felt for years, since back when I used to bury my face in her chador to breathe in her scent.

Gentle winds rustled leaves on big old plane trees, as if they were in a heated conversation among themselves, muffling the sounds of cars honking on the streets

nearby. I looked at my mother. Her eyes were soft, with only few extra smile wrinkles at the corners. The scene was set.

I told her about the music video, sounding casual, using the same tone she had used when talking about the sheep, hands in my pockets and head down, kicking a pebble.

“. . . I really like the video.”

She stiffened, just a bit, but was still calm. “Oh, that’s OK. Well, you can see it again next time, maybe.”

I was not sure if she meant it. Was she deliberately being liberal? The welcoming and warm nature of her response burst my flimsy casual bubble and my emotions poured forth. “Maman, I love him!”

It had slipped out of nowhere. I’d let my guard down and opened the door of the closet a crack. The seal broken, the monster smelt freedom. It grabbed the opportunity like a rabid animal and spoke for me. Hell, it shouted for me. I wanted the world to know. It had convinced me love is love and I could love anyone, without any dirty thoughts—right?

Wrong, actually.

My mother was silent, which on its own merit was a rarity. Her faith had transformed her into a vocal woman, her voice always rising above others to make a point—her point. But now she was silent out of shock, wires having short-circuited in her brain.

With her silence, everything else seemed to go silent for a moment, too. I could imagine sparrows and ravens turning their heads to see if they had heard right. The wind stopped blowing and the trees stopped their whispers. All of a sudden, the world seemed to close in on me. I shivered with fear.

Maman pulled away her hand. I wanted to grab it again, as if I were falling into a bottomless pit. Maybe my feelings were wrong. But how could that be? I had been so sure of how pure they were, or rather *it* was sure.

I composed myself, almost pleading for an affirmation as I said, “It’s OK to love anyone, right? Not anything bad or dirty, just . . . just love, like a friend, or . . . or family.”

But it wasn’t like a friend or family member. I knew it wasn’t, and she did too.

“You shouldn’t be thinking like that about men, or say those words about a boy,” she said, her voice serious, her eyes worried. “It is not right. People will think

differently, and you need to be careful about how you express your feelings, even if it feels like a friend.”

Of course I was wrong. I should have followed my gut when it warned me that something about my feelings for Lee did not fit. And now I had let Maman know. I had let her down, let myself down, opening that bloody door. I had to forget the stupid video.

“OK, OK. It’s just a silly video, anyway,” I said, blushing with embarrassment.

She sighed and looked away. “Don’t ever say anything like that again, do you understand?”

I only nodded, biting my tongue. I wanted to ask what she was thinking or try to rectify the damage, but it was already too late.

I had said the *L* word, about a boy.

Now, I had ruined a memory. If memories had colours, hers would have been white, serene. Not anymore. I had violated it with an ugly stain.

For the walk back, she didn’t hold my arm. Her smile wrinkles disappeared and the warmth in her eyes was replaced with worry. She whispered one last word under her breath, in Arabic: “*Astaghfirullah.*” I seek forgiveness from Allah.

I had underestimated the impact of confessing to that feeling. What I perceived as an innocent love was in fact dirty and shameful. The stony look was the worst. It reminded me of something. It had a meaning. Concern, disappointment. I could not put my finger on it, at the time. I had seen that look before, but not on her.

A few hours later, Baba arrived.

On the street, I stood behind family and neighbours, only seeing Maman’s back, in her floral chador. I inhaled deeply, hoping for a bit of that smell to warm my nostrils and ease the ache in my chest.

Nothing.

The only person facing me, on the other side of the street, was the butcher, in a stained apron, sharpening his knife. Next to him was the clueless sheep, still straining her vocal cords as if preparing for an opera. If only she knew these *baas* were her last.

The sheep’s final calls were muffled by the cheers, *Allahu Akbars*, and the clapping as my shaved-headed baba stepped out of the car, wrapped in the typical haj

attire of a white robe. The knife struck her throat and a crimson river flowed on the asphalt. People cheered again and I stared into the big black eyes as life left them—the eyes that had not judged me when I confessed to her. Her faithful hoofs continued to kick, still trying to get her away from danger. It was too late.

a note on the type

[Redd Glass]

this poem is set in
the same type as the prescription
for the condition they said
i invented.

released in the summer of '92,
though produced on christmas day, '91—
my mother's birthday.

rendered in lowercase
for ease of erasure.
ligatures collapse
under mild scrutiny.
kerning's fucked
like my ability to leave the house
before three
or answer the phone
without rehearsal.

recommended for:
empty chairs at parents' evening,
spliffs rolled from CBT worksheets,
'no worries' when i mean
'i think i might die,'
or 'sorry' when i mean
ask again, i'll bite.

flickers after flat lucozade
and two panic attacks.
then: cis dicks
in my DMs
who treat my queerness like a guest pass,
their cropped cocks ignoring the unchecked box—
begging
for notes
before they vanish.

open type features:
cached trauma,
emotional recursion,
an optional swash
that curls like a nervous laugh.
defaults to lorem ipsum
when stared at too long.
best printed on a wet train ticket
or scratched into a spoonie's cubicle—
unbleached since we clapped
for key workers.

Two Poems

[Costantino Toth]

Who Are We Expecting?

The moonflowers are
open-mouthed without breaking
our sleep, drooping low, closer
and closer to consonance until.

What about *stoma*: that word
that didn't speak for years
until landing on you slow-smack
like a pale frisbee on dirt?

I won't shut up. Your miracle-
swelling-despite-winter field.

I won't stop pecking names
from clews in your stomach.

Pick one. Just pick one already.

There are so many and I hate
that you're right. Freezing my tongue to you,
at this point, is

welcome. Wanking? Apple?

Nonna Would Do The Crosswords

in the cream craftsman's chair,
at the end of the table,
right here, where I sit now.

Le cruciverba. No,
Mom says. *They weren't*
crosswords, *they were —*

GHTAEGHBRDDGOKLKGUIBSGJUVDHKHCFANEAGLER
ATTLESFTYCAFJDBJDFKZOTTAWCUGTOIYITTRVSFTH
ETINTOPOFFOFTJDTHFSBPDSAHSBSQVKOIDHGRQV
NMRGRDPROMETHEUS

(a braid, instead,
of guts the physicians combed,
for knots, for culprit of the body's
giving up, of her collapse
alla fermata).

AFAHJTEVHDTYUINSARGJFSCGNDGSTOMACHANDRE
MARKSYKAWOBHTXHJJFWGTKIFVSTJITGVTHATHISLI
VERSSMOOTHIUDCBKOTWCCINVEGTMGVFREVPURPL
EHASPOPCORNED

She can't find the right name.
I can't either. *You know,*
the kind where they're all there

already. Deep in the mess.

*You just have to find them
without any given clues.*

At night, the shut door and walls
would muffle nonna's prayers.

Saint-names. Familiar-names.

There we were – my mom, my dad, my brother T, my brother-in-law, my brother G, my sister-in-law, and me. Seven of us in a rambling ranch Airbnb. My mom had summoned us to Scottsdale, AZ for Thanksgiving. *It will be more like a vacation*, she said. Swimming pool, palm tree in the yard – the whole bit.

T is a musician in LA. His agency booked him a gig in Scottsdale on Thanksgiving Day. That's how he makes money – playing piano and singing covers for a franchise of upscale steak houses called Mastro's. *Maestros?* I asked. *Noooo, Mastro's...you know, like in the Beyoncé song, 'eat that shit like Mastro's,'* he said. I didn't know. But if Beyoncé is singing about it, then it must hold some cultural currency. T used to write his own music. Everyone thought he was gonna be the next Billy Joel or something. *The hustle gets old*, he told me over the phone several years ago. *It's mostly eighteen-year-old girls who are fucking the right producers. A white, gay man in his mid-thirties isn't gonna sell.* I feel for him. Even though I'm in a grad program to become "a writer," with the goal of "being published," I often wonder if a book deal is less about one's writing skills and more about sexiness. Still, I can't tell if T seems happy, or just comfortable. The older I get, those two things become harder to differentiate.

My family decided that instead of turkey we'd have steak at Mastro's, dress all formal, and go cheer on my brother from a white-clothed table. It turns out that most of Scottsdale also didn't want to cook, also wanted to pay sixty plus a plate on petite filets and loaded twice baked potatoes. We crammed into the burgundy waiting area and waited (despite having a reservation). There was a real stately host stand with five young women in flattering neutrals and eyelashes like poisonous caterpillars standing behind it. They were all looking at the POS screen, smiling and chatting about something beyond the burgundy walls because they weren't interacting with or seating any of the people standing and waiting. I could hear T's voice projected on the overhead speakers from the dining room. *Any country fans out there?* he asked, then went into that Tennessee whiskey song, nailing every riff with the grace of a figure skater landing a triple axel.

My brother-in-law flitted about the waiting room attempting to coax some semblance of action from the hostesses, returning to my parents with an update, *I'm trying to find a manager who will DO something*. I sat between my parents on a leather bench and opened Tinder. Earlier, I had matched with a woman in Tucson whose profile read “swipe right if you wanna suck champagne off my toes.” I messaged asking (truly curious) “How does one suck champagne off of someone’s toes?” She replied, “It’s hard to explain, I’ll have to show you.” I messaged back, “When is school in session? I’m a fast learner.” That was four hours ago. I stared at her profile picture – a selfie showing off baby bangs framing a foxlike face, a glimpse of shoulder laced in linework tattoos. I imagined speeding off through the desert in my parent’s rental car, a crazed roadrunner, just to tickle this woman’s pinky toe with my tongue. But no response. I crossed my legs.

This is ridiculous, I'm gonna go order a drink at the bar, said G. He works in the food and beverage industry, so he has high expectations. I trailed behind him and my sister-in-law, who, the day before, exclaimed she would be ordering *the biggest, dirtiest martini EVER!* I’ve never been a martini person, and it felt like this was my moment. In my thrifted J Crew blazer, hair washed and slicked back, I felt like George Clooney in *Ocean’s 11*.

The bar was even more crowded than the waiting area, and I felt bad because we were clearly in the way of the wait staff, who were all buttoned up in starched shirts and coats, foreheads glistening like melting popsicles longing to be peeled from white cellophane wrappers. My sister-in-law ordered a martini for herself and for me with Carrie Bradshaw confidence; her cosmopolitan-boss-girl energy seemed to fit the landscape of the room. A glass fell from a tray and shattered directly behind us as the bartender slid me a Ketel One up with olives. A fleet of staff swooped in to make the glass shards disappear. I pressed myself into the bar so the waitstaff could manoeuvre with brooms and dustbins. *Excuse me?* said a woman who looked vaguely like a celebrity, eyeing the barstool I was blocking where a Coach purse was saving her spot. I shifted to the left, *Sorry*. As she sat down to face her friend (who also looked vaguely

like a celebrity) I commented, martini in hand, *Who knew Scottsdale had so many lazy cooks!* They stared blankly at me, bursting my George Clooney bubble.

A hostess finally brought us to our table, which had to be adjusted (because it was wobbly) and rotated (so we could have a better view of T at the piano). Our server came around to take everyone's order. *And for you, ma'am?* she asked. My body seized slightly from the Styrofoam formality, but I reminded myself that this was the kind of place that probably trained staff to address everyone as either *sir* or *ma'am*, and it wasn't a big deal. Though I was reminded (once again) that despite my desires, no one in that establishment would ever perceive me as a debonair Danny Ocean, which was probably for the best because my mother's face still stales whenever she sees me in a suit and not a dress. I ordered the lobster bisque (it was the cheapest).

At the table behind us, a platinum blonde with fake breasts and salamander lips dined next to a man with a receding hairline. Later, an elderly woman with a puckered face, electrocuted hair, and no teeth materialized at their table. I heard the woman with salamander lips call her *mom*, and I worried that she might shrivel up into a prune at any minute. Receding hairline told prune face to *order whatever you want*. I noticed she ordered the lobster bisque, too – bringing slow spoonfuls up to her disappearing lips. I couldn't help but feel a sense of camaraderie between us.

As I sipped soup, my family made percussion of knives cutting into steak – a bloody medley – along with the other patrons furiously sawing thick, red meat. The sound of sterling silver scraping ceramics squeaked in my ear. *Want a bite?* my dad asked, offering a ruddy cube on his fork. *No thanks*, I suddenly didn't have an appetite for anything. My brother G kept pouring champagne into our glasses. I drank it with a sadness, wishing I was sucking it off the toes of the woman in Tucson. A smile smeared my mother's face as she nodded along to my brother's playing – maybe it was pride, maybe it was her second gin and tonic, or both.

When T started singing "Piano Man" by Billy Joel, I left my body. Some metaphysical force (the ghost of Thanksgiving Present?) sent me hovering above to watch T and learn some lesson layered in the dramatic irony. There was my family below, so happy

to be eating steak, not turkey. So happy to watch T perform other people's songs. Everything looked watery and far away – a montage scene reflected in a pond. *Well, we're all in the mood for a melody, and you've got us feeling alright.* And I wanted to feel alright; I really wanted to.

When the song ended, I returned to my body. My brother G had ordered espresso for the table, but my mother – three sheets to the wind – couldn't hold the little cup straight and spilled the inky drink on the white tablecloth. Everyone laughed; my brother G calmly blotted the stain and grabbed our server while my dad propped my mother up in his arms, supporting her weeping sunflower state. As the server removed the tablecloth, my mom told them, *He's been playing piano since he was 8, classically trained!* The server smiled politely.

When the time came, G and my brother-in-law split the check. I pulled out my wallet and they said, *No, no, no! You're in grad school.* After grad school, I might be an adjunct teacher. After adjunct teaching – who knows? That might be as good as it gets. I Venmo-ed them each 20 bucks, which at least covered the cost of my martini (it was delicious. I think my taste is maturing.).

Back at the Airbnb, everyone stood around the kitchen counter in matching flannel pyjamas that my mother bought for us, eating Costco pumpkin pie, raving about Mastro's. *Wasn't that so fun? The service was excellent. The steak – so buttery!*

I grabbed a joint I had stashed in my suitcase and escaped outside by the pool – its surface, still, reflecting the desert sky with diamond clarity. I checked my Tinder. No messages. I took a big drag from the joint and stared at the stars, tuning down my family's chatter to a manageable pink noise. In blankets of deep velvet behind the stars, I pictured the champagne toe sucker laying in a bed of sparkling wine dew drops. I had a bottle of Dom Perignon the size of a rocket ship and a ladder right up to her sky bed. As I climbed to her, she held out a foot done up with red polish and said, *Pour it all, daddy.*

T appeared through the sliding glass doors with a slice of pumpkin pie. *May I?* he asked. I put a bookmark in my fantasy and gestured to the pink, plastic chaise lounge

beside me. *Great performance tonight*, I told him, offering the joint. *Ha! It's just a job*, he said. *It's not like I'm writing novels like you*. But I'm not even writing novels, I'm barely writing short stories, I wanted to say, but my throat felt knotted. Watching him hit the joint, I wondered if he cares that he no longer makes his own music. *You want some pie?* T asked, offering his plate. *I'm good, thanks*. He exhaled, handed back the joint, and said, *It's just as good as homemade*.

Lesbians in Appalachia

[Abigail Cain]

Lesbians in Appalachia eat

crab apples
the a/c
and dust bunnies.

Touch hands only

to avoid
splitting
poles.

Text my butch: *I love you, my man.*

Use pine needles as a fake mustache.

Choose wild swimming over chlorine,

become a spotted red darter:

endangered species.

Hunters with chilled and wet eyes in the cold

don't like that we hide in the woods with

brown sweaters and white sun spots.

I learn the tip of the rifle
is called a muzzle—
the most important place
to leave a kiss on a red
chilly nose.

Use the shed behind

the rusting church

to chew on skin and

dissolve into piles of gardening tools.

Call it Old Fashioned-Old School hide-outs.

Use the mountains to open your pores
and leave the oils of your skin
like evidence.

Yes, we were once God out here.

Diseases of Civilization

[Callie Jennings]

after Erin Hunter's Warriors

My nephew's on book fifty-one of what he calls *Cat Politics*.

Good cats know war and medicine, ancestors and hunts.

House cats are trapped in kithood. They go nowhere when they die. Everything I do to eat requires remaining in this specific place. Yesterday I walked ten miles through woods I hunted nothing from. Dear friends argued about when you get to say you are *in nature*.

It's either when you look in all directions and see no buildings. Or it's when you look in all directions and everything would be the same without us.

Which is nowhere in New England? Far offshore?

All the trees here pack together like it was the back seat of the girl who got her license first. Anything old in a certain year was cut for boats and roofbeams, cleared for crops by no one still alive. All over the planet, large-seeded trees are rarer since we ate the megafauna.

Ages and ages since it happened for real, I'm waking from nightmare flashbacks of suffocation again. I plan to go to the bar takeover even though the organizers said *trans joy* and *foster belonging* and *thrive without fear or judgment* and *safely exist as our whole selves*

and I threw up a little in my mouth. I hope to bitch about it to a hottie who looks dangerous. I hate my waist and it might be inborn proprioception or wanting to be *missed* or not wanting to be punched or the fear that I can't hack it as a six. I have, at times, been proud of being of a people who *use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without*. The land on which a clan of cats belongs

is clear in its broad strokes, disputed at the margin.
I have been proud of making do. Most fascists
are just responding to incentives. The bears in Yosemite
learned to roll bear-proof containers off of cliffs
to get inside. I feel safest after flogging or electrolysis.
While the red coals dim. Maybe I could handle anything.
As long as I can make do and do without, I'm free.
The great romance of dating other trans women
is never having to ask *what would you give up for this*.
Also the softest skin. The girl growl. Someone who understands
your fear of hurting her in your night flails, and exile.
I chose objects for my apartment that felt domestic,
sensible. I'm a garbage liar when I say *my people*.
By cleaning my kitchen, I make myself into a visitor.
I'm a guest on all land. Warrior cats use human words
for *boat* and *city*, borrowed from the pet cat creole
because those are not places for warriors. *I'm a guest
on all land*, I reassure myself, filling my sketchbook
with rules of visas and asylum, following the pages
of life drawings of other rope bottoms. *Nature*
is when you look in all directions and all of it required
no decisions. To get out of a trap, you have to get out
before you *have to*. I know none of the Latin names for plants.
My grandmother knew so many. Her grandmother knew
names for them that no one knows today. What can and can't
be eaten, I know a smidge, but only here, where they belonged.
Most fascists are just responding to a longing to thrive
without fear or judgment, where their whole selves,
with all their natural disgust and yearning for comfort
and blood, are welcomed. In a clan of warrior cats, some laws
foster safety and others stabilize the status hierarchy.
Which is which is difficult to disentangle. My most
put-together and accomplished friend sincerely thinks

all the loveliness in her life is dumb luck. Her advice rarely works for anyone else. Her nature is to wildly long to do exactly what she does. I'm too superstitious to confess how dearly I love the world before it says it first. Like all other forms of wealth, being okay begets being okay. A house cat eats when he is fed, goes outside and inside when allowed, suffers himself to be stroked and named and praised, and his longing soul is scalped. When I'm bound by jute, I can allow my jealousy to soften toward the wizard academy, the Danger Room, med school, tradwifery, House of LaBeija. I have been proud of making do absent formal training. The land on which a clan of cats belongs is what they've won. What others have surrendered. As a cat, should I now say that I am *wild*? Or *abandoned*? As the land, I'm capillaried by stone walls. The devil's crop made tidy.

Infinite Largesse

[Rachel Sykes]

after Denis Johnson and HBO's Industry

Lying on the floor of drama class, it was hard to know who to believe. I was twelve years old, in real life, and had just died, in a play. At that age, names and identities seemed to come from the outside – in cat-calls, family jibes, schoolyard jokes about my prodigious size. Aged twelve, the scene went simply and predictably like this:

I fell to the floor / “FAT” bellowed from some boy in the corner, dragging his a’s in our country style / From within the scene, my friend, well-meaning, my scene partner and murderer, broke character to yell back “she’s JUST big-BONED” to peals of laughter – my death replaced by the ghost of a cartoon boy in a red shirt, blue hat, and squeaky voice.

Names arrive from the outside and we know they’re largely nonsense. I remained Cartman for a while, although I never felt especially preyed on – every student at our rough as school had their quirk, every bully was also picked on. They say children can know things, but adults make their meaning; at twelve, all we knew was how to shout the words they fed us until we learnt what they meant and which mattered. Fatness and, I guess, thinness were just two of their shared delusions, impossible to truly bifurcate or uphold. The constant ricochet of “yes, she is”, “no, she’s not” doing little to undermine that one word cannot act as a holding cell for a mutating and rapidly maturing pubescent body.

*

The video game *Consume Me* begins with a child balancing the food she likes on her plate. At first, she’s unobserved, but when her mother walks in she’s told that she’s wrong – that she is, in fact, over eating, that she’ll never be happy or beautiful this way. Interconnected and Tetris-like, the first skill the game requires is balancing the number of ‘bites’ – fewer for fruit and vegetables, more for meat, most for

carbohydrates – you eat at lunch with the energy required for an increasingly complex adolescent life. Can you justify eating pizza with friends if the game ends when you blow your bite limit? Will you have the energy to ace a big test if you don't push back your bedtime to late, late(r), or late(st), whilst exercising intensively and systematically undereating?

If *Consume Me* doesn't sound like fun, that's because it's not. As the lead character grows, levels become increasingly harder to beat without a large supply of energy drinks, which give you headaches, and desperate calls to a long-distance paramour whose lacklustre attention is given unearned co-dominance with your continual disordered eating. The lead developer, Jenny Jiao Hsia, took inspiration from her teenage diaries, which she found were full of calorie charts and relentless productivity goals. Photographs of these diaries appear in the game's end credits.

I recently underwent some training that asked me to reflect on any 'difficulties' I'd found in my teenage years. Was I bullied? How did I – or did I – overcome it? At first, I couldn't think of anything. But then I remembered Cartman, and a friend reminded me of the 'munter cam' – a literal video recorder brought in by some boys in our year – which recorded, with commentary, our school's most unfuckable girls. The 'munters' in our year were large in number – no pain is ever truly unique – but inclusive of my friend and I. They would show the footage, she said, on a TV in the geography classroom during breaktime.

I didn't remember any of this. And so I looked at my own diaries, which, like Hsia's, were full of bland obsessions – should I dot my i's with little bubbles, did my friends all secretly hate me – and, to my surprise, an almost constant level of self-surveillance. You'll already know what it sounds like: Eat less, exercise more / Pink has cool hip bones that jut out / the school nurse is worried (oops) / Britney does 1,000 sit ups a day / thigh gaps are IN for Y2K / Beyoncé's fuelled by nothing but maple syrup and cayenne pepper / nothing tastes as good as skinny feels / tried to throw up today, failed / you're twelve / you're a munter / you're unfuckable.

**

The thing is, once fatness named me it felt both stable and all-encompassing, overshadowing any other thing I might be or become. It wasn't that I was queer – although, of course, I would be – but that I was without all romance and desire. As I grew older (and sometimes, even now), it wasn't that I liked to dress in skirts, to cinch my waist, to wear my hair down and long, but that a fat girl, once named, couldn't dress any other way.

Gradually, I became less than keen about the 'girl' part too, but I struggled to notice where the fear of my body's largesse ended and my gender began. It was the 2000s and I wore my stripes vertically, chose shapewear with my free will, wore tea dresses, belts, and wrap tops, and lived fully in compliance with an agreed invisibility. There was no androgyny available on the high street for a body already said to take up too much space. Sometimes this still seems true: that my style, that my gender, has only ever been shaped by a corporation's opinions of my size.

When Britney Spears addressed the court petitioning to end her conservatorship in 2021, just the sound of her voice, crackling through a phone during a pandemic, made me cry. "But my precious body," she said, "who has worked for my dad for the past fucking 13 years, trying to be so good and pretty. So perfect." Hearing Britney speak was like hearing someone at the bottom of the ocean trying to remember what it was like to be on land. For the supposed girls, like me, who'd lived in fear of what bodies like Britney's meant for our lives and loves, it also felt like coming up for air, only to find we had the bends. We too had had precious bodies and we too had worked them for both real and imagined patriarchs. We too had tried to be so good and so pretty. We didn't owe these people anything, yet they still squatted, rent free, in our minds.

I was twenty before queerness first appeared to me as an option. Written on the ground in chalk, on my first day visiting a women's college, were the slogans: "do not assume my pronoun", "not in my name", "live, laugh, LESBIAN". It's not an exaggeration to say I didn't know what a pronoun was; that I had assumed myself without any identity since Cartman. My ignorance of myself was endless. At eight or nine, I got detention for

spending hours carving boyband names into my pencil case, knowing I didn't really like any of them, but committing so hard my hand cramped shut. At eighteen, an early boyfriend punched the wall of a Subway sandwich shop in frustration at my lack of emotion, care, or teenage lust. Years later, he would ask if I was 'still' a devout Christian, a false conclusion he'd drawn because of my apparent numbness to men.

I'd lived my whole life outward facing, with very little interest in myself – a negative space, shaped by the light and shade around me, holding no abiding structure. Even after seeing its scrawl in technicolour chalk, it took years for that queerness to bed in; creeping slowly, day-by-day, through the cocoon of indifference built around me, until it reached and then cracked my big, beautiful bones.

This Theatre, Your Prompt

[Christopher Barnes]

11

Magenta doorway from ticket office.

Neck-wrestling sightlines.

Tabloids heaped.

Crucifix on ironing board.

12

Slab-roofed hexagon.

Centreline – empty balcony.

Razorwire on climbing frame.

Plastic ivy manacles swings.

13

Semicircled footlights.

Awning mounted on pillars.

Tilted polystyrene crag.

Overtaken skiff.

14

Through the thick of illusion,
Caged projector overhangs.

Enormous bus shelter,
Unfussy hedge.

15

Grisaille broadloom, plush upholstery,
Ranging asymmetry.

Lecture room desks.
Fractions on blackboard.

16

House-lights dissolve
Conventional notions of Realism.

Teaset on sideboard.
Isolated door, agape.

“Peterson, you will never really be gay until you take it up the ass and love it, especially after all that ex-gay bullshit.”

My friend and former workmate, Roy Steele, an older and much more experienced gay man, regularly dispensed provocative advice designed to inform and shock me. Once again, I couldn't tell whether he was trying to be an inspiring mentor, leading me to self-realization, or a bitchy queen, wanting to get under my skin. Knowing Roy, who went to brunch with a full beard, garish makeup, and a flowing moomoo, he probably meant both. His pronouncement about the relation of my anus to my gayness, though, went deep and burrowed down to a crevice in my gut that housed a growing insecurity.

At age 41, I recently moved from Memphis, TN, where I attended the notorious Love in Action ex-gay residential program, to Hartford, CT, to start a new job as a teacher in a private school. For the first time in my life, I lived openly gay in every aspect of my life.

I settled into Hartford and began to explore my neighborhood, including the Metro Store, a 10-minute walk from my apartment. Like many cities at the time, Hartford had at least one LGBTQ magazine, The Metroline, which had its offices at the Metro Store. John, a gay man in his fifties, did 90% of all the work required to run both.

Inside the Metro Store, John provided a wide array of rainbow-themed products – umbrellas, T-shirts, and, of course, flags. I disliked the gay rainbow swag, thinking it was gaudy. “The colors don't even match,” I complained to Roy, who, as an artist, I thought would understand. He shot back, “You're just too much of a sissy to wear something gay.”

John also stocked up on large wind chimes. “These are special,” he told me, jangling one. “You hear that?” John asked. “It's a major key. Most wind chimes are in minor keys.” At the Metro Store, even the wind chimes were queer.

John filled the back half of the store with porn, the bread and butter of his business. In 2001, most people still opted for glossy magazines and DVDs, keeping the store and magazine afloat. “Technically, we're a bookstore,” John told me. I wasn't

sure whether he meant the business's legal status or what many customers like me said to others when they asked, "Where are you going?"

Like me – out but ashamed, out and weighed down with fears of diseases, social stigma, and a God who loved the sinner but hated the sin, especially if butt stuff was involved.

Although John had plenty to do at the store, he made time to chat, so I asked him every question that popped into my head.

"What is the most popular DVD right now?" (*The Crush* by Falcon Studios, followed by *101 Men Part Six* by BelAmi)

"Are companies that supply your rainbow products gay owned?" (Mostly not, including a Christian company that offered the widest array of rainbow merch.)

"What trends have you seen in the gay porn industry?" (Bareback sex was back.)

The last one worried me. I came of age at the start of the HIV/AIDS crisis. While some men opted for safe sex practices, I went the radical route and vowed to abstain from all gay sex. Instead of gay clubs, bookstores, or bars, I attended churches, conversion therapy programs, and private deliverance sessions where ministers attempted to extract evil spirits from my body.

"They enter wherever you had sex," Joanne Highley, a former lesbian and head of L.I.F.E. Ministries in New York City, once told me in the mid-1980s during a private session in her bedroom in a midtown high-rise. She believed demons spread much like HIV/AIDS; they surfed on the body fluids that one man passed on to another. No surprise, the most aggressive demons entered through the asshole.

In response to the dangers from disease and demons, I shut up my butt hole and mentally posted a sign, "Closed Indefinitely!" Fifteen years later, I found myself once again worrying about my anus. Was Roy right? Was I a wannabe gay until I bent over and let a man pound me?

After a month of visiting the Metro Store and chatting with John, I received my second paycheck and splurged. John rang me up as he commented on each item.

1. Three previously-owned vintage gay porn magazines. "You're lucky. These came in yesterday, and they're going fast."
2. A set of very large windchimes. "Did I tell you they're in a major key?" (I pretended surprise.)

3. A red umbrella: “Sorry, I’m out of rainbow ones.”
4. A custom-made shirt: “A local gay man makes them, and I sell them on consignment. I make nothing from the sale.”

Under the items, John saw the dildo encased in plastic packaging. Eight inches long, it was a replica of some porn star’s dong.

“We used to have it in flesh-color, but now only the purple ones and this black one. You’re going to need this!” John said as he tossed a tube of lube into the bag. “My treat!” I then went grocery shopping, returned to my studio apartment, and lugged my bags up the three flights.

I stored every item except the dildo, which remained in its packaging, in the center of the small, round cafe table. It seemed a living thing desperate to break free. Did its breath fog the plastic casing?

I hacked away at the package until the front and back plastic panels, molded to fit around the veiny dildo, separated. The dildo popped out and bounced on the table.

I stood it up on its base and left it there, next to the napkin holder, the salt & pepper shakers, and a bottle of Heinz ketchup.

For the next five days, the dildo remained standing tall and imposing in the center of the table. Each morning, I’d greet it as I made my coffee and say goodnight when I turned off the light and went around the Japanese screen that separated my cooking/eating area from my sleeping area.

Sometime during that week, I gave the dildo a name: Samson, from the book of Judges. Daily, I faced Samson as I ate my bowl of cereal or rice and beans. Samson, the big, muscular oaf with an insatiable sex drive. Could he be the sex piston that would once and for all break my ex-gay cherry, transforming me into an out and proud gay man?

The following Friday, I returned home tired from work. I drank a glass of wine with dinner, and feeling loosened up, I turned to Samson, winked, and said, “Hello, Big Boy.” I whisked him to the bedroom and immediately felt shy, a blushing bride not sure where to start.

I stripped off my clothes, flipped open the tube of lube, and slathered Samson up. I positioned the dildo as I lay back on the bed, and froze. I slipped a condom on Samson and drowned my butthole with lube. For the next twenty minutes, no matter

how hard I tried – no matter the contortions I twisted myself into, the deep breathing, the relaxing, the going slowly, and even the surprise attack – nothing worked. I could not get Samson into my ass. The gates to my gaydom were firmly shut.

I panicked. Roy was right! The years of ex-gay therapy fucked me up so badly that I could never be fucked.

The next morning, I sprinted to the Metro Store, my muscles tense and jaw clenched. I saw John, smiling and waving. “I haven’t seen you all week,” he said. “How did things work out for you and your new toy?”

I confessed all to John, my years in conversion therapy, my struggles to accept myself, and Roy’s needling me about being fucked before I was truly gay. John listened, nodding as I talked, pausing only when he rang up a customer. “Go on,” he said as I rambled about my insecurities and fears.

When I stopped speaking, John waited nearly five minutes before he replied. “Honey,” taking both my hands in his, “You are gay. I could tell the first time you walked in the door. No matter what you put or don’t put in your butt, if you have sex with a man or not, you are gay. Lord knows you spent years trying not to be. You are going to be ok.”

Relieved, tears welled up in my eyes as I squeezed John’s hands. “Oh, about not getting Samson in your hole,” he said, “You’re not the first person who’s struggled like that; sometimes the eyes are bigger than the anus.”

A Ghost at a Festival

[Satrio Nindyo Istiko]

Three months after my HIV diagnosis and a week after turning twenty-six, I find myself standing outside Brisbane City Hall, observing a festival: the bamboo sound of the anklung instruments reverberates from the stage to the summer sky, calling for people like me to come, or so I thought before. Now I'm suspicious that the festival isn't just for us, but also for us to entertain the locals. A man ignores a cop yelling at him for jaywalking while rushing to be with his dancer friends, all wearing the same black outfit, but their faces are full of shame and tension as the man is clearly late and they're about to perform. I turn my head towards the centre of the festival – gazing at the rows of long tables in front of the stage, surrounded by stalls emanating smells of familiar cuisines; gazing at the postgraduate students welcoming the locals, and women in their kebaya socialising with important guests from both countries, and the others, without official roles, yet still actively interpreting the food and the anklung performance for the local audience. *Go celebrate your life*, my brother said over WhatsApp on my birthday. But I've just been standing here, watching people who want the locals to invest, invest, invest in my country. The anklung stops playing, and the two MCs on stage raise their little red-and-white flags as they shout: *WELCOME TO THE 4TH INDONESIAN FESTIVAL!*

I step out of the shadow of the City Hall towards the food stalls, scrunching my eyes in the sun. A little girl almost steps on my shoes when I avoid an influencer interviewing a local man about the food in his mouth. The previous group of male dancers is now performing on stage, sitting on their knees in a straight line; their hands and upper bodies move in synchrony while chanting to the rhythm of the percussion and the singing from a syekh. It's as if they're serenading my arrival at the food stalls. The male dancers speed up their movements, and my feet follow, moving under the spell of their rhythm, tiptoeing around a group of female business owners: one of them looks like she is about to yell at another. Standing in front of a stall for masakan Padang, the smell of the food activates a core memory: a long time ago, in Semarang, a city I first moved into after finishing high school, I danced the same dance with a group of friends who didn't care I was gay. Moving faster and faster on stage, the dancers' movements

are mimicking the ocean waves that engulf me, as I yearn for a time when I thought it was possible for me to be myself in Indonesia. The dance I performed with my friends was imperfect, but we ended it on a high and a group hug that transmitted laughter from one person to another. A plastic box from one of the stalls has now arrived in my hands. Inside is the same food I had that day when I danced with my old friends. Would the seller even let me near their food if they knew I'm positive? *Go celebrate your life*, my brother said. So here I am, eating at one of the long tables, and to my right are the people who remind me why I can't return to my homeland.

The sound of gamelan Bali from the big speakers fills the open space. I split my telur balado in half, as my attention becomes divided between enjoying gamelan while listening to the woman next to me. She said she was asked to leave a restaurant earlier this week for wearing her khimar. I've heard of her story before, from a friend, I think. I'm checking who the woman is by pretending to look towards the stage. A group of four female dancers is now carrying silver bowls of flowers while making quick, little movements with their heads, from side to side. *She's funny*, I remember my friend said about the woman next to me. Apparently, the woman told my friend not to share Christmas messages in their Indonesian WhatsApp group last year. I'm about to ignore her and focus on the absolute tenderness that is ayam pop when I recognise the woman's husband right next to her. About a month ago, he gave me a look of disgust when I wore a sleeveless pink shirt to a students' gathering (sun's out, nipples out). The female dancers on stage, dressed in green and gold, are stretching their arms to their side – their fingers move like a curtain gently blown by the wind while keeping their hips low. I can't see their full performance as I put my head down to get out of the eyesight of that woman's husband, only to realise I'm wearing the exact, same sleeveless pink shirt from that day. Don't talk to me, I pray, now that I remember what others said about this couple: they like to report Indonesian students on government scholarships to the embassy if they behave against the norms from our country. I pray like I did a few times at a Hindu temple in Jakarta a couple of years before I came here. My prayer is answered when I see Vero walking to my table. My dear friend, the one who warned me about the Muslim woman, and the only Indonesian in Australia who knows of my diagnosis.

Vero helps me escape from that couple. We walk closer to the stage to get es cendol, and smile when we see a little boy whose face lights up when he recognises the chants from another group of male dancers on stage. His mother reminds him it's the same dance they saw from their Bali trip last year. I know what my mother will remind me about when I tell her of my diagnosis one day: she'll say the opposite of what my brother said on Whatsapp. Vero keeps checking on me without saying anything as if the sound of *cak, cak, cak, cak, cak* coming out of the dancers is a substitute for her concerns for me. We went to her church last Sunday. Before then, I only ever went to Catholic churches to attend weddings from my mother's side of the family. *Cak, cak, cak, cak, cak*; the hands of the dancers are up towards the sky when Vero and me reach the stall that sells es cendol. It doesn't taste as sweet as the one I had with my family in Yogyakarta. Yet it's more than enough to soothe the discomfort that sneaks in, as I remember a gay man I met in Jakarta who ended his life not long after he found out he was positive. *Cak, cak, cak, cak, cak*; we finish our es cendol at the same time the dancers end their chant. We throw our cups into the bin, the dancers put their hands down.

On another table, there are people our age who are engrossed in a heated discussion – a few are Vero's co-workers at a local digital marketing company. The MCs come down from the stage to try to get some local men to dance with a female ronggeng dancer. I'm pretending to pay attention to the woman next to me complaining about her boss – another woman married to a local man (who is also the owner of the company). Close to the table, the male MC approaches a passerby, a local man who looks clueless about ronggeng, or maybe even the whole festival. The person next to me continues their complaint, saying that their boss likes to exploit other Indonesians – *she's more horrible than her husband*, she says. Meanwhile, the MC shows the local man how to move with the ronggeng dancer. The sound of rebab and gong fills the air with a sense of playfulness, and the ronggeng dancer moves her body close to the MC. She looks away from him, affirming the rule of no physical contact. Her dance ignites a desire in me to be playful again with my sexuality, despite my diagnosis. And now the dancer puts her yellow shawl around the MC's neck – her head turns to the right, his to the other side, their bodies remain separate from each other. The local man tries to join, moving his body awkwardly, out of tune. My phone vibrates; it's

Grindr. A message from another Indonesian: *nice butt*, he says. But he doesn't know I'm positive because I don't put my HIV status on my profile.

Vero asks me if I've met a friend of hers, who is also here at the festival. I say no, wondering if it's the same man who just messaged me on Grindr. The ronggeng dance has just ended. I follow Vero from behind to the edge the festival, passing by the Muslim couple from before, who look furious with the ronggeng dance performance. Another woman who owns a small catering business stops Vero in her tracks, asking her if she knew who among our community spoke to the media about Indonesians selling food on Facebook without food safety certificates. A female singer is now singing the national anthem on stage – *Indonesia, tanah air beta* – while Vero stumbles to find an answer (she knows the person wanted by the woman). The singer is close to reaching the song's climax when the woman talking to Vero brands the person who spoke to the media a national traitor. Maybe I'm a traitor too, for thinking that I can't return to Indonesia and live as a positive gay man. Sensing my anxiety, Vero excuses herself from the woman's investigation. The singer ends her singing with a lyric to remind Indonesians of the only place in the world we must draw our final breath: our homeland.

At the edge of the festival, Vero calls over a man who is smoking while avoiding eye contact with everyone except her. She introduces us to each other and asks him if he's had lunch. *No*, he says, looking grim. I know that look. I had it while waiting for my diagnosis. Vero's friend doesn't hesitate to tell us that his recent hook up told him he was positive after they had sex. This morning, he received his test result. *So?* asks Vero. The man puts out his cigarette. I know what's he going to say. *It's negative*, he answers, *and I don't want fuck with positive guys ever again*.

I remove myself from their conversation. My body floats away from the festival. Vero keeps calling me, but I only turn around when I see her reflection on a restaurant's window. I listen to her apologising for what her friend said. She thought we would connect, we would understand each other, and be friends, be less alone, be less dying. *It's okay, I'm okay, you can go back*, I say to her. She doesn't believe me. Asks me where I'm going. *I'll be around*, I say. *I'll come back, I promise*.

NO WARNING just

☆☆☆ ***GENDHER*** ☆☆☆

⚡ burning thru the floor ⚡
i cried for the first time.
and it was:

* *beautiful* *

☹ *artificial* ☹

❖❖❖ it was loud ❖❖❖

☆☆

Artist Biographies

Shane Allison was bit by the writing bug at the age of fourteen. He spent a majority of his high school life shying away in the library behind desk cubicles writing bad love poems about boys he had crushes on. He has since gone on to publish five collections of poetry with *Turbulent* (Hysterical Books) being his most recent, and his book length poem *Remembered Men* (Ranger Press). Shane's collage work has graced the pages of *Noisy Rain*, *Shampoo*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Pnppzine.com*, *Palavar Arts Magazine*, *Southeast Review*, *Postscript* and a plethora of others. Allison is at work on a new novel, new poetry and is always at work making a collages and painting.

Christopher Barnes worked on a collaborative art and literature project called *How Gay Are Your Genes*, facilitated by Lisa Mathews (poet) which exhibited at The Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University, including a film piece by the artist Predrag Pajdic in which he read his poem 'On Brenkley St'.

Dom Birch is a trans writer and educator living in Oxford (currently). Their work explores the messy reality of being a femme. They have poetry forthcoming in *Glossy Planet* and *The Gentian*, and are working on a pamphlet: *An Hour with The Dead Girls*.

Abigail Cain (she/he) is a lesbian writer hailing from rural Pennsylvania, though her better days are spent travelling. Her work can be found in *Eunoia Review*, *Jardin Zine*, and more. His debut novelette, *Girls are Fish*, will be released in 2027 through Girl Noise Press. When she is not writing, she is carefully curating a small corner of the internet for weird girl lit called Sardine Can Collective.

Joseph Devine studied Arabic and Persian at SOAS, University of London, with year abroad placements at An-Najah National University in Nablus, Palestine, and Ferdowsi University in Mashhad, Iran. His Arabic dissertation on Israeli pink washing and the LGBTQ community in Palestine was published by SOAS in 2016. He studied a Masters in Comparative Literature at Doha Institute, Qatar, and has worked as a freelance Arabic translator and a bookseller at Saqi Books in London.

Redd Glass lives in Toronto. Their work has appeared most recently in *Silly Goose Press*.

Amy Grandvoinet is a writer & artist trying for a PhD on so-called literary psychogeographies between Aberystwyth and Cardiff universities. She currently teaches at Liverpool John Moores University and is a co-founder of think.material Press and always works on a number of side-projects. Plîs, won't you find out more at amygrandvoi.net??

Saleem Haddad's writing spans novels, short stories, essays, film, and television. His critically acclaimed first novel, *Guapa* (2016), was awarded both a Stonewall Honour and the Polari Prize. His writing has been supported by institutions such as Yaddo and the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin. His second novel, *Floodlines*, was published in February 2026.

Jennifer Ingleheart's day job is Professor of Latin at Durham University, where she explores Rome's role in LGBTQ+ history. Her Polari (per)versions of the Roman poet Catullus are designed to be read out loud with a slight Cockney accent, and can also be found in *Shearsman* and *Stand* magazines. She has performed at Polari Literary Salon and the National Centre for Writing.

Callie Jennings (@aporianautics) is a trans writer, musician, & game designer. She received the 2025 Zone 3 Editor's Award, 2024 Stacy Doris Prize, and 2023 Bennett Nieberg Transpoetic Broadside Prize, and has work in *Fourteen Hills*, *Fifth Wheel Press*, *manywor(l)ds* and *Fruit Journal #7*. Her newsletter is at threemachineexpression.substack.com, and chances are she's dancing.

Nirris Nagendrarajah is a writer from Toronto whose work centres around fiction, film, opera and himself. In addition to Metatron Press, his work has appeared in *Public Parking*, *MUBI Notebook*, *Little White Lies*, *CBC Arts*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *In the Mood Magazine*, and *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. In 2026, he received the Telefilm Canada Emerging Critic Award from the Toronto Film Critics Association and is currently working on a novel.

Satrio Nindyo Istiko or Tiko (he/she) is a writer and migration-health social scientist. He writes about gender, sexuality and race. Visit his website for more information: <https://dtsc.my.canva.site/writtenbytiko>

Majid Parsa (pseudonym) is a gay Iranian author living in London. He grew up in Iran before moving to the UK in 2010. His debut, *The Ayatollah's Gaze* (May 2025), is a memoir of growing up gay in a devout Muslim family under the Islamic Republic and Tehran's hidden flamboyant gay scene.

Gianna Starble (they/them) is a writer and performer with an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Idaho. Their work has been featured in *Outskirts Literary Journal*, *Foglifter*, and *fugue*. They've been an artist in residence at The Sable Project. They love dogs deeply, especially their dog, Blue.

Rachel Sykes is a Birmingham-based writer and researcher, who teaches gender and sexuality studies. They've written personal essays for *This Recording*, *The Toast*, and *The Hairpin* and reviews and articles for *The Independent*, *Yahoo News*, and both the *LSE* and *Glasgow Review of Books*. They're currently working on a book about working-class communities on the Welsh borders.

Peterson Toscano is a queer writer and performance artist whose work explores faith, power, bodies, and the uneasy spaces where belief and politics collide. His writing appears in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *The Advocate*, *Geez Magazine*, and *Unlikely Stories*. He hosts and produces *Quakers Today* and his experimental audio project *Bubble & Squeak*. He divides his time between Sunbury, Pennsylvania, and Waterval Boven, South Africa. www.petersontoscano.com

Costantino Toth is a researcher, warehouse worker and writer. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Epiphany*, *The Good Life Review*, *The Rumpus*, and *Two Thirds North*. She is currently pursuing her M.A. in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, while residing in Florida with Romoletto, her little cat. Her first chapbook, 'La Selva di Circe', is almost finished.

elise tyson is a queer writer and filmmaker from Australia, now living in London. Her writing has been published online by *The Guardian UK*, *Heroica Online*, *The Queerness*, *Poetry Proletariat*, *River's Edge*, *Fairlight Books* & *Tin Can Poetry*, as well as in print by *PRISM International* & *Samfiftyfour*. Her short film 'St Bernie' screened at fifteen film festivals worldwide and won Best National Film at Canberra Short Film Festival. elise's favourite thing in the world is the colour green.

Sheridan Walter is a queer South African poet and doctor whose work traces the faultlines between law, faith and the ungovernable body. They live in rural KwaZulu-Natal and hold a Master's in Philosophy.