

**not  
quite  
right**

literary magazine

*(unlabeled)*

01

June 2026

“Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition. The place in which we find ourselves is not the place we belong, but the place from which we must begin.”

- James Baldwin

*(unlabeled)*

Not Quite Right Literary Magazine

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## **Before Diving In**

### *A Letter from the Desk of Nicky Bennett*

I learned early that there were rules, even if no one ever wrote them down. Not the obvious ones, the ones about being kind, or doing well in school, or saying please and thank you. I mean the quieter rules, the ones that seemed to live in tone, in posture, in the way other boys carried themselves without thinking about it. There was a right way to be a boy. A normal way. And somehow, without fully understanding how or why, I could tell I wasn't doing it correctly.

I was a gymnast. A dancer. A cheerleader. I wrote constantly. Poems, fragments, things I didn't always have the language to explain. None of those things felt strange to me at the time. They were just the things I loved, the ways I moved through the world, the ways I made sense of it. But I didn't have to look very far to realize that those weren't the boxes most people expected a "normal boy" to check. And kids, especially, are very good at spotting anything that sits even slightly outside the lines.

It wasn't one big moment of realization. It was smaller than that. Accumulative. A feeling that showed up in passing comments, in the way certain jokes landed, in the subtle distance between myself and the people I was supposed to resemble. I remember noticing how easily other boys seemed to understand things that felt foreign to me. The way they talked about attraction. The way they reacted to vulnerability. The unspoken agreement about what was acceptable and what wasn't. I didn't feel like I was rebelling against those expectations. I just couldn't seem to find myself inside them.

For a long time, I assumed that meant I needed to try harder. That if I paid close enough attention, if I adjusted the way I spoke or reacted or presented myself, I might eventually land in the right place. I thought

maybe everyone else had figured something out that I had simply missed. So I watched. I mirrored. I edited. And still, there was always this quiet sense that I was performing something rather than living it.

The metaphor that makes the most sense to me now is something simple. Coloring. There were lines already drawn, and everyone else seemed to know exactly how to stay inside them. Not perfectly, not rigidly, but comfortably. Naturally. I, on the other hand, kept drifting past the edges without meaning to. Not in a dramatic, defiant way. Just... slightly off. Slightly outside. Enough to notice. Enough to feel.

What I didn't have, at the time, was language. I didn't have a word like pansexual. I didn't have frameworks that allowed for fluidity, or nuance, or the possibility that attraction didn't have to follow a single, predictable path. It took me a lot longer than I'd care to admit to feel comfortable with that part of myself, and to even understand it clearly enough to name it. And even now, if I'm being honest, I sometimes say "bisexual" because it's easier. Easier to explain. Easier for people to understand quickly without needing a longer conversation.

And for a while, that kind of translation works. You find ways to exist that are close enough to the truth to feel tolerable, even if they're not quite right. You accept a certain amount of misalignment as the cost of being understood, or at least not questioned too closely. But there's always a quiet awareness underneath it. A recognition that you are still, in some essential way, just outside the lines.

This issue exists because of that space.

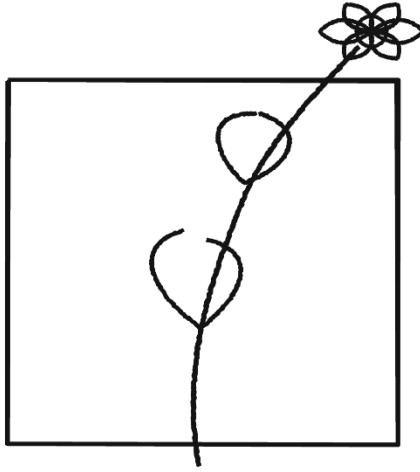
(unlabeled) is, in many ways, a response to the idea that everything needs to be clearly defined, easily categorized, neatly contained. Pride Month, for a lot of people, is about visibility and celebration, and it absolutely should be. But it is also, for many of us, about complexity. About the parts of ourselves that don't fit cleanly into a single word, or that shift over time, or that we're still in the process of understanding.

Being part of the LGBTQ+ community doesn't always mean having a perfectly articulated identity. Sometimes it means sitting with uncertainty. Sometimes it means knowing exactly who you are, but choosing which version of that truth is safest or simplest to share in a given moment. Sometimes it means recognizing yourself in more than one place at once, or in none of the available boxes at all.

What you'll find in this issue reflects that. These pieces are not trying to arrive at a single answer. They're not interested in defining identity in a way that closes anything off. Instead, they sit in the in-between. They explore contradiction, fluidity, tension, and self-recognition in all its imperfect forms. They move through experience rather than around it. They resist the urge to simplify.

If you've ever felt like you were almost, but not quite, what you were supposed to be, I hope something here feels familiar. If you've ever adjusted your truth to make it easier to explain, I hope something here gives you permission to stop doing that, even if only for a moment. And if you've ever found yourself somewhere just outside the lines, unsure of what to call that space but certain that it mattered, then this issue is for you.

There is nothing wrong with not fitting perfectly. There never was.



*i*

*just outside the lines*

## **Whole**

*Nicky Bennett*

I used to think of myself in sections.  
In hallways.  
In doors that stayed closed unless absolutely necessary.

But lately  
I've started to imagine myself as a house.

Not a grand one.  
Not a haunted one either.  
Just a lived-in place  
with more rooms than I once allowed myself to enter.

Tonight I walk through it slowly.

The front door opens without resistance.  
No one checks my ID.  
No one asks what I'm doing here.

I flip the first light switch.

There's a room that likes girls.

It's warm in there.  
Soft lamplight.  
A bed with notebooks tucked underneath it.  
Names written once and then crossed out  
just to see how they looked next to mine.

The air smells like early hope.  
Like hallway glances that didn't require explanation.  
Like the uncomplicated thrill  
of being allowed to want something  
and have the wanting make sense to everyone else.

There are folded notes on the desk.  
Inside jokes.  
Imagined futures sketched in the margins of homework.  
A version of love that felt ordinary  
and therefore safe.

I stand there a moment longer than I used to.  
I don't rush past it anymore.  
I don't minimize it to prove anything.

The light settles easily.

Down the hall, another door.

This one used to stick.  
I used to pretend it was locked.  
I told myself it led nowhere important.

I push it open anyway.

There's a room that likes boys.

It isn't dark like I imagined.  
It isn't shame-soaked or dangerous.  
It isn't loud.

It's quiet. Thoughtful.  
Sunlight slipping through blinds in narrow lines.  
Dust floating lazily in the air like it's been waiting.

There's a desk in the corner.  
A chair turned slightly toward the window.  
And a memory —  
a boy whispering to himself while he reads,  
lips moving just enough to let the words exist twice.

There are moments stacked here I once misfiled.  
Admiration I called envy.  
Attention I renamed curiosity.  
A quickened pulse I blamed on nerves.

The room is not scandalous.  
It is tender.

It holds the first time I let the sentence sit without correcting it.  
The first time I didn't immediately calculate the cost.

I turn on the light.

Nothing shatters.  
Nothing burns down.  
The walls do not close in.

The house simply grows larger  
by one honest admission.

Across from it is a room lined with mirrors and trophies.  
Pom-poms in a heap on the floor.  
A megaphone resting on a chair.

This room cheerleads.

It knows how to smile wide under scrutiny.  
It knows how to stand tall on shaking legs.  
It has carried applause and insult  
with the same steady posture.

The light here is bright.  
It has always known how to be seen.

Further back, there's a smaller room with scuffed cleats by the door.  
Grass stains that never quite came out of the carpet.

This one plays soccer.

It runs hard.  
It slides without hesitation.  
It isn't worried about grace.

I switch that light on too.

There's a room with stacks of books reaching toward the ceiling.  
Margins scribbled in.  
Spines cracked open at favorite pages.

Stories that felt like oxygen  
when the rest of the house felt tight.

This room reads.

It has always been looking  
for language big enough  
to explain what the other rooms were feeling  
before they had the courage to say it out loud.

The light here glows steady and patient.

Next to it, a desk by a window.

This one writes.

Drafts scattered across the floor.  
Sentences started at midnight  
and abandoned at two in the morning  
when honesty felt too close to the bone.

This room rewinds conversations  
long after they're over.  
It rearranges them.  
Gives them better endings.  
Tries to find the exact word  
for something that once only existed as pressure in the chest.

There are pages here  
that no one has seen.  
Pages that say the thing plainly.  
Pages that circle it three times before daring to name it.

This room is where I stopped pretending  
I didn't know.

It is where confusion turns into shape.  
Where ache becomes architecture.  
Where the unsaid  
finally takes up space.

I let the light stay on.

There's a room with music seeping under the door.  
The floor worn smooth in certain places.

This one dances.

It doesn't apologize for softness.  
It doesn't explain why it moves the way it does.  
It just moves.

I don't dim it anymore.

There's a room that works.  
Neat. Efficient.  
Emails answered.  
Bills paid.  
Deadlines met.

It once believed it had to compensate  
for the other rooms.

I flip that switch too.

There are smaller rooms.  
Rooms I used to pretend weren't connected to the main house.

A room that feels too much.  
A room that shuts down.  
A room that forgives too easily.  
A room that holds anger longer than it should.

I open each door.

I turn on every light.

At first it feels exposed —  
like the whole neighborhood might see inside.  
Like someone might walk past and point.

But the longer I stand there,  
the less it feels like exposure  
and the more it feels like air.

Nothing has to be filed separately.  
Nothing has to be stored off-site.  
Nothing requires a false wall.

The house does not collapse  
because it contains multitudes.

It stands.

Solid.  
Wired for all of it.

The room that likes boys  
does not cancel the room that likes girls.

They share a hallway.

They share a heartbeat.

The room that cheerleads  
does not invalidate the room that dances.

The reader does not shame the athlete.  
The writer does not silence the performer.

They are not contradictions.

They are rooms.

And tonight  
every single light is on.

Not for display.  
Not for proof.

Just because I live here.

Just because it is mine.

I am not a hallway  
between acceptable versions of myself.

I am the house.

And I am done  
walking past doors  
that belong to me.

## **Their Hands**

*Oliver Rose*

I am not self-made  
My own hands  
Could never have sculpted  
A vessel that would've  
Held me gentle  
Enough to grow  
No  
Their hands  
Met my soft with a cradle  
That would've made  
God rest  
Her head  
On my chest

Their hands shape me

## **Identity Isn't a Fortress**

*@QuarterPastThree*

I spent a lifetime building a house out of "I'm fine."

I was the architect of my own isolation, laying bricks of self-reliance until the walls were so high I couldn't see the horizon. I thought that being strong meant being untouchable. I thought that "becoming" was something you did behind a locked door, alone, where no one could see the struggle of the transformation.

But identity isn't a fortress; it's a surrender.

I had to unlearn the habit of being my own only sanctuary. I had to learn that my identity wasn't found in how much I could endure, but in how much I could allow myself to be seen. It was in the moments when I stopped trying to be the "strong one" and started being the "real one" that the light finally got in.

Becoming isn't a sudden arrival. It's the slow, midnight realization—at a quarter past three—that the person I was socialized to be is a stranger, and the person I am is someone who is finally allowed to breathe. I am no longer an island. I am the bridge. I am the open door. I am finally, hauntingly, myself.

## **How to Be a Good Queer**

*in the eyes of a heteronormative society*

*Prudence Brooks*

Braid your teeth into thick zippers;  
reinforce your cheeks with steel beams.  
Place them horizontally  
so it always looks like you're smiling.

Shrink down to a single raindrop.  
Brace for a wicked storm  
and always know you are outnumbered.  
Remember that you will be less than nothing  
as soon as you hit the black pavement.

Wash the glitter out of your bleached eyebrows.  
Dip yourself in business casual khakis  
and paint on a subtle face you don't recognize.  
Clip your patterned wings. Declaw your toes.

Narrow yourself.

## Metamorphic

### *Autumn Ray*

What if nobody ever sees  
Beyond this shell to the soft center?  
Scaling these walls is one mean feat  
Draped in thorns and prickly patches  
I try not to hide behind but get caught  
Between wanting to reveal and reviling  
Letting another one in to end up leaving me  
Undone; I am done handing my heart  
Out to the wrong ones who don't know  
What even to do with such a breakable thing

Now you know what, I am more  
Than just another florid metaphor  
Much within me aches to be free  
I am grander than a poem  
Deeper than any one thought

An amalgam of  
Every word I've ever written  
Every dream I've dared to claim  
There is a beauty in my soul  
Love courses through my veins

I do have heaps to give those who care  
To get near enough for uncovering  
What exists behind the scenes.

In the wings there's another act  
A lyrical uplifting  
Must see

**Eureka!**

*Autumn Ray*

Missing persons report  
Scrawled on paper napkins  
Throwaway findings...no more  
Where did I go when the going  
Got tough and I felt not enough  
Diluting, diffusing, bottling up

Looking for glimpses of me  
In others who had no clue  
Should've spoke above  
A whisper, but listening and  
Encouraging took priority  
Worried over making it about me  
Even when necessary

Told myself it was love  
Loved being useful, needed  
All-consuming and consumed by  
The good girl role  
Trying to ace every test  
With hands behind my back  
Gold stars and praise  
Raised my spirits until  
I got too high and crashed  
Lower than before, underground  
Burrowing into despair

Feeling chased, chosen  
Was everything then nothing  
Learned the hard way that worth  
Isn't measured by accolades  
Nor determined by who stays  
Or goes...no it's closer than that  
All inside so I'm turning every stone  
Piecing together a lifelong puzzle  
Self-portrait case study  
Stroke by stroke—eureka!  
Here I am

## **Monsters Old and New**

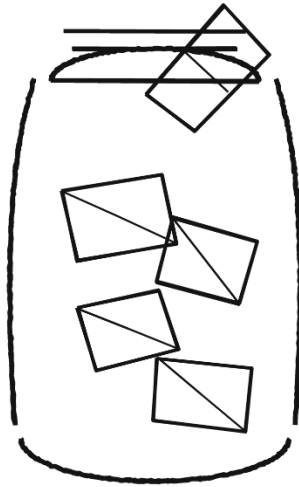
### *Leaves Left*

you'll never get to see me as i become.  
and that, my love, is your loss.

the journey i am on started in your bed.  
started in a bubble of safety we built together.  
lust and love, darkness and light-  
dust motes flung up from the pillow  
I pressed your face into.  
pressed palm to cheek, your half-grimace, half-smile  
daring me to let go-be all monster for you.

I was your monster; you were my bunny,  
trembling with fear and anticipation.  
afterwards, sweat and tears spiraled down the drain-  
shower boys, we lead each other  
back to whole personhood.  
you told me i never needed permission  
to claim titles I now wear easily,  
bandana tucked in pocket,  
pride pronoun pins on a well-worn jean jacket.  
you'll never meet the me you helped unlock,  
and for that, and that alone, I feel sorry for you.

because this bitch makes the monster we made  
together quake in his doc martens.  
this bitch knows better.  
and this monster, beyond man or woman  
much softer and truer  
than the last dregs of man you helped me peel-  
long, satisfying strips of sunburn skin  
drying on the floor  
of a cottage you don't live in anymore.



*ii*

*what we don't say out loud*

# Unbreaking

*Oliver Rose*

I've been spending a lot of my time  
Unbreaking  
Recently

I'm calling it unbreaking  
Because  
Healing doesn't sound like it hurts enough

Unbreaking  
Sounds like the putting of bones  
Back together

Healing  
Sounds like the names  
Signed on the cast

Unbreaking  
Is counting the names  
That never got there

Healing  
Has been too gentle with me

I  
Didn't realize it hurt so much  
To unbreak the way  
That you need to  
  
When you actually  
Want to  
Heal

## **The Trigeminal Nerve**

*Sarah Elizabeth Schantz*

At five I christened myself Snow White from the casket of a cold frame for starts, waiting for a prince's lips—  
I've been evicted from every home I tried to call my own, wind chapping raw any prayer passed through my lips.

We planted seeds in a plot & you buried a yellowed tooth twisted from my husband's mouth,  
imagined it a pearl to oyster the guts of an onion-to-be, layers of skin to unwrap, a series of lips.

Tall weeds with mouthfuls of seeds tower scratchy stalks to stand sentinel in my yard:  
A sunflower dentata to chew you up, hunger camouflaged by gilded frame of petal lips—

Starved, some conversations can only be transmitted through touch, flesh to ash:  
Our exchange began & closed with tender buttons, the trigeminal nerve, oh sweet erogenous lips!

A distance of wind & asphalt & fracking sites divide us now & I am dumb when I try to text the echo chamber  
of addiction: alcohol plus dopamine devices, coltan extracted from the Congo where women's lips

are sliced from their faces, rape: a weapon of war, facts we feel more than know, I grow numb, you go mute,  
but through a super moon in Gemini, via Lady Luna's face haloed by lux, I blow you a kiss from her milkiest of lips.

## But Daddy, I Love Her

*Prudence Brooks*

At seventeen, I abandoned a kind boyfriend  
to chase a red-headed torpedo  
who annihilated my ego with effortless grace.  
She wore thick, winged eyeliner, even early in the morning,  
her eyes taking flight before the birds roused their voices  
from their groggy throats. My father told me  
I was making a mistake in building her a nest.

*No one besides him will ever love you.*

His declaration resounded in my cavernous ears,  
implying a serrated truth – a keen stalactite falling  
from the ceiling and piercing me straight through the head,  
slicing me in half. My father never loved me.  
He was simply waiting to marry me off to the first Catholic man  
who asked. He had been estimating how much cash he could get  
for my mattress since the second he signed the adoption papers.

Still, I wrote soft poems about feminine lips  
and pomegranates; my father kept finding them.  
He could hardly hear me  
through the twisted washrag in my teeth as I screamed,  
*Daddy, don't separate us. She's the only real thing to me right now.*  
He was already rotating the silver key in the gun safe lock,  
humming an Appalachian murder ballad under his breath.  
When he said no one else would ever love me,  
he meant he would ensure it. He meant he was in control  
and always would be.

# The Secret

*Pete Strong*

clear as running water my hand reaching out fingers twitching  
to yours crossing the bridge your smell in my nostrils  
you shake it away *people will see* uniforms mark us out  
*pair of wee queers* whispers follow us feel of your flesh  
taste of your tongue your voice in my ear saying my name

later a bright, overhead light the house empty we've the run of it.  
stretched out your cock in my mouth like a lollipop  
*no one will see it no one will see it no one can see*

we drink coffee in secret talk about where we'd go  
talk about what we'd share haunting the town  
until we came to life break through the surface of the river  
climb through cumulus glide through cerulean to unknown lives  
we know we will not share I'm older now and still

my hand reaching out to yours the low sound of traffic  
crossing the bridge your smell in my nostrils you saying my name  
*no one will see it no one will see it no one can see*

*no one will know*

## **Burt Corbin**

### *Keizer Rae*

#### **“I just Latin’ed you.” - Burtie-Bee**

I slip into smaller versions of myself when my heart starts to ache. And there, I find you, tucked away as the amygdala processes pain. Crisp fall air drifts past my nostrils as I close my eyes and hear the morning bell ring. You were standing there at the end of the hall, waiting for me.

Two anxious souls met in an echoey choir room, eyes latched onto each other, as voices intertwined— and I called it a safe haven. It makes me think of your old button-up tees and I sigh as I try to remember the scent you left on my hoodie. I hold the old sleeves close, but they don’t smell like you anymore.

I never liked my birthday, having always shared it with my sister. It was never mine, but you— the Latino insect, defying all science, found a way to make it ours. Seasons of Love danced in the air as the harmony buzzed the choir room to life. A birthday card, signed by all the people I loved. *People I still love.*

Except, now— I love you, just from a different place.

“I don’t like girls.”

“Oh, Burt, I knew before you told me.”

“You did? You never said anything.”

“Because it doesn’t change anything. I love you just as you are.”

Now, a memory that haunts me— your mother’s screams when she found you in the upstairs bathroom.

And the truth is:

Modo volui tibi dicere ‘amo te.’

# The Dance

*Pete Strong*

Your shoes are purple, glitter wrapped.  
Inside my belt there is a bottle, still full.  
My bent back leans into the reflective floor.  
Step. Step. Shrug off the sheepskin coat,  
Instead, be wrapped in sweat and smell.  
The hand beckoning me across the space  
Looms large and twists into a single finger.

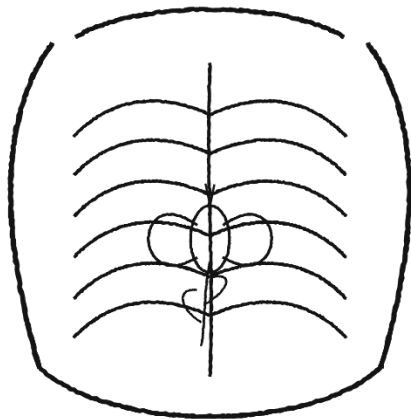
It's you. It's you.

It's seven pm and it's you

As the sweat creeps slowly down my face  
And nostrils. Salt taste as I leap and spin  
and all the ache of past just goes.

All my stories di  
s  
si  
p at  
e

into a flurry of action, a flurry of you.



*iii*

*when the body remembers*

## **The Gift**

*John Grey*

Imagination was brief.

As a child, she let it go,  
and the wind blew it elsewhere.

Parents filled the vacuum  
with family lore  
and Sunday morning faith,  
teachers with facts,  
other kids with peer pressure.

This was the same  
young girl  
whose wallpaper told stories,  
whose teddy bear came alive,  
whose ceiling stars  
were an entire universe.

But the first gift given  
was the first to be given away.

## **Menstruation Hell at Dannemora – Circa 1968**

*Sandra Beth Levy*

I was thirteen when I last visited Dannemora. The civil rights act was law, but you wouldn't know it at Ting's Grocery Store; at least that's how it was designated by folks in the small village of Dannemora, upstate New York, a location in decline salvaged from decrepitude by an economic boost from the expansion of Clinton Correctional Facility. In its past iteration the prison was Dannemora State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Then it was repurposed into a Federal Maximum-Security lock-up for an ever-growing pipeline of mostly Black men, and my white father, taken from New York City; warehoused near the Canadian border. Loved ones leaped like greyhounds onto Greyhound buses out of Port Authority Bus Terminal to travel north for nine hours to stay at Ting's Motel. My white-Jewish-immigrant-Grandma found boarding in a prison guard's home more appealing, where the guard's wife went through our bathroom garbage pail to place my toilet paper wrapped soaked sanitary napkins in paper bags on our dresser! A wordless reproach to the girl with her period.

No Black visitors stayed with us or shopped at Ting's. That little grocery store was for the guards' families and my shrunken-Yiddish-speaking-Grandma. Inmates were allowed limited care packages – but few visitors could afford them except for Grandma. She dragged me along like a broken doll while Ting loaded cardboard crates with tomato sauce, cigarette cartons, tins of ground coffee, sardines in olive oil, and more cigarette cartons. Grandma had them delivered for guards to inspect once we were escorted by holstered uniformed men through medieval cast iron gates and a set of intimidating concrete walls. Guards stood high up in turrets with pointed rifles appearing like plastic action figures. You'd never know Grandma had a weak heart

and would die later that year, because she made herself at home in Clinton Prison where she fashioned her tall white son “King of the Inmates,” an interlocutor with the Warden, which in her mind bestowed privilege upon her.

I wished to be invisible in the wake of her embarrassing pride – my father was a jail-bird with clipped wings; set apart from other visitors I was isolated from those who suffered the same plight as me of stigma, degradation, broken-hearted separation from a loved one, and rage at a mechanistic-dehumanized system outside the reach of our control. Grandma had joined the Ting family institution of patriotic prison guards, leaving me cast into a riptide to swim alone.

By the time I entered the visitation room menstrual blood had silently seeped around the sides of my sanitary napkin. I feared attracting sharks by my scent. That is, the prison guard sharks who Grandma mingled with like friends from the old country. When I spotted my father, who shone like a lightbulb in a room gone dark beyond his halo, I struggled to hold down the vomit in my gullet. My only option was to hide in plain sight; tuck my red stained dress beneath my clenched thighs and hope not to be discovered. This is how I learned to camouflage my crimson soul.

# Love for Me

*Oliver Rose*

How much love do I have?  
Does it end?

Why does this  
Bottomless pit  
Black hole  
Of heart  
Touch everything

But me

How much love I can have  
For everyone else  
They deserve  
It all

But me

My own love  
Doesn't thrum for me  
Doesn't hum for me  
Doesn't feel for me  
Isn't real for me

How much love I have  
Never ending

Where does it go  
When it goes through me

## **Moth Daughter**

*Chloe La Vada*

The sun-bleached house rises through the overgrown yard like a sepulchre as Julia walks up the drive toward the sagging porch. The third step still groans when she puts her weight in its center, and the tarnished brass lock of the front door still resists the way it did when she was a teen. She stands at the threshold, not yet ready to take the final step that will bring her under her parents' roof for the first time in twenty years.

When she does, the familiar smell of dry rot and potpourri rushes at her. The same ruin that has reclaimed the yard with weeds has taken root inside: a thick blanket of dust covers everything, and spiderwebs cling like spectral tapestries in doorways and windows. The entire property looks as though it has been abandoned for years instead of the few short days since her mother's death. A pang of guilt shudders through her.

She sees little else has changed as she makes her way through the sprawling house. Faded photographs remain where she remembers, and furniture has maintained its place. She enters the room her parents shared until her father's death a decade ago. Julia had skipped the funeral, the wounds still too raw.

She opens her mother's closet and is hit by the cloying scent of pomander. She sifts through the hanging garments absent-mindedly. The metallic rasp of hangers along the rod sends a chill through her: how often did she hear it as a child while she played dress-up with her mother's clothes whenever she had the house to herself? Her fingers brush a gown of viridian silk and she sees herself swimming in its folds. She leaves the dresses and cardigans swinging and makes her way down the hall.

Her childhood bedroom has been turned into a sewing room. A massive old Singer squats on a scarred wooden workbench beside half-finished projects. It is the only room in the house that has been significantly altered: her band posters have been taken down, the walls repapered. A faceless, naked, sexless mannequin stands in one corner.

Turning toward the doorway, she sees a figure in the full-length mirror hanging from the closet door. Hollow eyes like bruises stare out from an etiolated face, framed by a dark shock of hair. Julia turns on the light and sighs: her own tired reflection stares back at her.

The shrill, jangling ring of the telephone breaks through the silence from the downstairs living room. Julia rushes down and answers the old enamel rotary phone, expecting to have to wade her way through some estranged relative's condolences.

The voice on the other line is distant and garbled, fading in and out from a wave of static. Julia shouts into the receiver, unable to make out words.

"Johnny...?" the voice asks. Julia's stomach sours and the recesses of her mouth go dry.

"There's no one here by that name," she says, slamming the phone into its cradle.

"Johnny...?" The same voice echoes from the upper floors of the house, faint and wavering as a memory. Julia stands and finds her heart racing, pulse roaring in her temples. Something in the cadence of the voice sounds familiar. She strains, trying to remember. Overhead, a creaking floorboard startles her. Only this old house settling, she reminds herself. An old house and travel fatigue.

Julia starts for the stairway. Looking up, she sees a child-sized shadow dart down the second-floor hallway. "Hello?" Julia calls. "Is anybody there?" Only her voice echoes back.

Fear knocks the breath from her like a cold pocket in a warm lake. She imagines an intruder prowling the upper halls, a phrogger slinking through crawlspaces. Another moaning floorboard snaps her back. She grabs a poker from the fireplace and makes her way up the stairs, avoiding the steps that creak with muscle-memory instinct; Father hated to be woken up — she had learned to move in silence early.

Upstairs, she watches the shadow fall across the threshold of the sewing room at the end of the hallway. Though she finds the room empty, the closet door, closed minutes before, now stands open. She slowly walks to its threshold and stares down at the floor. One of the boards trembles, groans, and falls silent. A memory muscles through her, a secret kept in shadows through the years.

Kneeling in the closet, Julia pries up a floorboard with the end of the poker. The stench of bombyx and saw dust wafts up from the dark hole, yawning like an open grave. Reaching in, she rummages blindly until her fingertips find what she seeks.

She pulls out a dress of antique lace, yellowed over the years. When she shakes it out, the dried carapaces of insects rain back down into the hole and skitter on the floorboards.

As she examines the moldering garment, memories come surging back: the mildewy scent of the thrift store where she bought it after school one day, the first time she pulled up the boards to hide her secrets like some magpie girl, the way slipping the dress on had felt like stepping into her own skin for the first time. Now, it smells like wet earth, and spiders mend the fraying hem.

A sudden impulse seizes Julia. She pulls off her clothes and stands naked before the same mirror she grew up in front of, the mirror that watched her body change into a shape she could not abide. She has not seen her face in its glass since that night she fled from her father's rage and out into the dark with only the baggy boy clothes on her back — and what a different face it was then.

Julia steps into the dress and pulls it up; although she has not worn it since she was a shapeless teen, it seems to fit as though being sewn around her. She feels things wriggling in the knitting, moving against her skin, burrowing into her.

She watches in the mirror as massive white moths emerge from the lace, beating their dusty wings. A shimmering cloud coalesces into the vague shape of a child and hovers beside her before following the moths out the open window and onto the breeze.

She takes a deep breath, as if for the first time.

“Goodbye, Johnny,” Julia softly says to herself.

## **Thank You For Coming**

*Sarah Elizabeth Schantz*

A slant of light glares through the small oval window in the upstairs bedroom. Above the window, the roof peaks, and outside, especially when viewed from the street, the A-framed gable is reminiscent of a steeple. In high school, your third girlfriend, the daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, played bass for a heavy metal band called Prayer Hands.

The ray of sunshine is bright, an illusion of warmth striping your bare feet as you stand there—heels kicked off, cashmere tights slouched on the floor. While the twin bed remains, everything else has changed. Even your dresser is gone. The smell of fresh paint, taupe walls, a glossy white trim to match the new wainscoting.

A recumbent exercise bike occupies the area where your drafting table once imposed the cramped space, a yoga mat beneath the window where your fainting sofa used to be a sprawl of crushed red velvet.

This sofa where you'd curl up with a book at night or nurse hangovers come Sunday morning. Where you'd reclined the first time you received cunnilingus: Amantha Evans, strawberry-blond curls, coke bottle lenses that steamed up, enthusiastic but probably still closeted at age thirty.

The yoga mat has a lotus stenciled on one end, the Om symbol on the other. A cairn of weights teeters beside a boom box from the eighties you remember being in the kitchen when you were a kid, perched atop the Frigidaire, NPR talking to your mother as she poached salmon. When you first arrived six days ago, you noticed the stereo while putting your stuff away. Your mother was defrosting a casserole downstairs where the kitchen table was set for dinner, and stalling your return to her, or maybe looking for answers, you'd checked both sides

of the dual cassette player. On the right, you found Leonard Cohen's *Songs of Love and Hate*; the store-bought tape paused three-quarters of the way through "Joan of Arc," and on the left, a compilation tape had Otis ready to sit on the dock of the bay.

Thalassophobia, you'd thought then as you do now: The persistent and intense fear of deep water such as an ocean or a lake.

To get to the airport you took a taxi across the Golden Gate Bridge, the orange steel winking through the fog, the sea below a churning cauldron.

The black dress you borrowed from your mother is too tight, the wool fibers itchy, further evidence of her full-fledged descent into anorexia athletica. You came to put on jeans, but now you can't move—downstairs a murmur of friends and family, the nosiest of neighbors—downstairs, where your mother sips coffee while everyone else drinks wine from round glasses with dangerously thin stems. Downstairs, where your mother nods and greets each guest, "Thank you for coming."

Last Sunday when she picked you up from the terminal this is also what she said. "Thank you for coming." As if you weren't her daughter, hadn't swam the waters of her womb.

The oval window frames the canopy of the cottonwood in the yard, an image you've studied every time you got stuck like this getting dressed for school or work or a date, back when you still lived here, back when you still tried to call this house a home.

Your mother hates this tree, and while your parents discussed having it removed, it's only gotten larger. The electric company routinely clips the rogue branches to protect the powerlines. The other houses on the block boast proper New England hardwoods—maples, black birch, hemlock—trees whose leaves catch fire every autumn, a spectacular display of scarlets and golds picture-perfect for the postcards the tourists to send home. Meanwhile, the swamp cottonwood drapes your

parent's house with white dander every spring, each garland a reminder of middle school when Caitlyn, Brianna, and Cora snuck into your yard to toss roll after roll of TP into the night, Ultra Soft Charmin, one form of vandalism to punctuate another. In red spray-paint, scrawled across the side of the shed, they'd saved you the trouble of coming out.

Today, almost twenty years after they branded you *Pussy Eater Dyke!*, a gust of wind sends the few remaining heart-shaped leaves spinning from the cottonwood into a cold blue October sky, and you spin too, six years back to the last time you were here; the last time you saw your dad alive.

~

There you are, packing to go back to finals, back to finish a clichéd paper on Kiki Smith's feminist reaction to Duchamp's urinal. You're folding long johns, the red kind with the butt flap, and even though you're cross-legged on the floor, not standing in the spot that catches you now, you'd been distracted by the view the oval window had to offer. It telescoped you out of your body: That afternoon the crows on the bare branches caught your attention, the gray-yellow smear of a winter sky beyond them.

When your father knocked on the already open door, he'd asked, "Permission to enter?"

He knocked with the side of his fist, a small courtesy in a pushy world. He always did hate loud noises. Startled when the wind slammed the metal door on the shed, jumped if a passing car backfired. You knew why he was there and you couldn't look at him.

You let your eyes wander from the window to the walls plastered with a palimpsest of your adolescence—fliers, ticket stubs, sketches, Polaroids, and Absolut Vodka advertisements. Even though you'd been away at college for two years, this ephemera remained, and you figured they'd keep your room like this forever.

Your eyes landed on a poster of The Cure you bought with babysitting money when you were fourteen. A Technicolor close-up of the band member's faces, each mouth a red blur, you were studying Robert Smith's lips when you replied, "Sure Dad, permission to enter."

But he didn't.

He stood inside the doorway, didn't even lean against the frame as he had in years past, back when he'd check on you, ask to see your latest drawing or listen to whatever song you had playing on the scratchy turntable you kept atop the dresser once pressed against the wall beside the closet.

That morning you'd gone searching for your great-grandmother's mink muff in the attic to use as a statement piece for a found art assemblage class at Pratt. Animals slaughtered in the name of capitalism and misogyny. Women wrapped in pelts of fox, turned trophy. But folded into the ratty fur you'd found a gun. Like opening another Christmas present you didn't want.

The fur was disintegrating, coming out in clumps, moth-eaten, and when you slid your hands into it this time you thought of Salone, her impossible sleek long black hair, the mole on both her chin and her right shoulder, how she handcuffed you on Easter morning your freshman year, and made you cum just by staring at you naked, splayed open on her dormitory bed. You wore the mink to breakfast, made sure your parents saw the way it swallowed your hands as you rested your elbows on the table, chin propped atop the carcass, the cracked leather from within emitting the ghost scent of Chanel No. 5. When your mother set a plate before you, scrambled eggs, a sprig of parsley on top for both the aesthetic and for digestion, a persimmon to the side, sliced in half, the woman either didn't yet notice or was choosing to ignore you once more.

Your dad choked on his coffee, made a fist to cover his mouth as he tried to clear his windpipe, and your mother hit him on the back with

a fist of her own, the thud audible before she turned to look at you then and said, “Honestly Meredith.”

You didn’t put the gun back where the fur had always been stored. Where you’d been able to find the muff as a child when you’d play Jo from *Little Women* until you started experimenting with being Beth instead, exploring what the attention that comes from dying might be like.

You’d never touched a real gun before. It was both heavier and lighter than it looked and the compulsion to lick the trigger passed quickly because the curved metal also made you want to puke.

You left it on top of the trunk, another message. But in case it was loaded, in case it could fire itself, you pointed it away from the trapdoor.

“It’s not what you think,” your dad had said.

“Okay,” you replied, and he flinched at this abbreviation as if the sharpness of a “k” could hurt a person.

Then you kneeled on your too-full suitcase trying to get it to latch. All those turtle-necks from the Gap your mother had meticulously gift wrapped, another trap, the different sheets of green and gold, the velveteen bows she tied by hand, the tissue paper guts inside, all of which you had to rip apart as she watched, and now the luggage wouldn’t shut.

You bore down with all one-hundred and thirteen pounds of what you weighed back then until finally you heard the metallic click, but when you looked up again, your father was gone.

~

When the sparrow flies into the windowpane, you jump back into the present moment. The bird slides down the glass, drops from view, a streak of black in its wake.

*In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Audubon Society.*

At the service an hour and half earlier, you'd overheard an aunt telling Mrs. Howard, the widow from across the street, that he'd done it in the attic.

*Nathaniel (Nate) Lawrence is survived by his wife Sophia and daughter Meredith.*

The attic is above this room. Its roof another steeple.

*Nate was born in Mystic, Connecticut on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1944.*

You run down the stairs, past the whisper of aunts by the sideboard, through the vestibule where damp coats crowd the hooks, out the door into the yard to find only leaves decomposing beneath the monolithic tree. No dead or wounded sparrow, not even a feather. A rake leans against the trunk, the bark the same gray as your one bad tooth.

You turn in circles searching the frostbitten grass. You check the skeletal tangle of lilac along the house where a Walgreens bag is caught, trembling in the breeze. A hose runs green from a spigot someone needs to detach before winter burrows in. The cold burns your feet, and you remember the need for shoes. You run back inside where the aunts all reach for you, so you say, "My feet," and you jog back to the bedroom where the windowpane is so clean it might have just been washed.

But inside the stencil of the lotus on the yoga mat, the sparrow's head bends backward, its eyes two black pearls, blood glistens from the yellow of the slightly parted, broken beak.

You know sparrows can swim fast to escape predators even though they aren't technically water birds, yet you don't know how you know this. You win at Trivial Pursuit and should be a contestant on Jeopardy. At age two you beat most adults at Go Fish.

One wing is splayed open while the other attempts to blanket its own body. The feathers are mouse brown, the down a grayish-cream, the belly so round there must be eggs within.

You also know the event horizon is the spherical outer boundary of a black hole, a boundary beyond which the events cannot affect an observer, but you don't actually know what this means. You need anecdotes to understand.

You crouch down to look at the sparrow.

"Thank you for coming," you whisper, and an hour later, having changed into jeans, you'll stand beside your mother in the vestibule wearing the 49ers sweatshirt you appropriated from your wife's drawer before you snuck out at 4:30 a.m., a note on the stove to explain how you'd be home in two weeks, tops.

As you bid farewell to the guests, you will slip your left hand into the pouch-like front pocket of the pullover sweatshirt where you tucked the sparrow's corpse.

When your mother visibly stiffens reciting this script, you will secretly stroke the dead bird, the coolness of its body contrary to the softness of its feathers.

As the coats vanish from the hooks, the vestibule windows misted, you will also repeat these four words. To each and every guest, you will say, "Thank you for coming," even to the aunts, "Thank you for coming," and to Mrs. Howard whose nostrils flare, whose lips are thin and chapped, her cheeks spackled with liver spots, you will say, "Thank you for coming."

## Living Autopsy

*Ella B. Winters*

To prepare a rack of ribs, lamb  
or pork, first you need to strip off  
the outer membrane, the coarse web  
binding matter together. Gently glide  
the butter knife under silverskin,  
then tear it sharply off the flesh.  
Next, use a boning knife to trim  
off the excesses, the fat, the loose  
hanging meat, and toss it all  
to one side. Now you are ready  
to carve, scoring either side  
of the solid centre, deep  
and meticulous as a mortician,  
close to the backbone, thinking  
of all the other spines you have  
cracked along the way, the blameless  
library books, the people. Cleave  
off each spread of bone, like a  
cupped hand begging for absolution,  
like fractured time, ravenous  
for revenge. Scrub at the naked  
bones until they surrender their  
pearlescent sheen, stark under  
the artificial kitchen lighting, which  
buzzes like a fly around decay.  
Survey each hollow for uniformity  
with surgical precision. Pare  
as required to make it fit  
the baking tin, the ever-present  
narrative that maybe, just maybe,  
if you try hard enough, you will  
end up with something worthwhile.

**In which the forest and a bird conspire to ruin me  
gently**

*Samantha Lucia*

heard a bird while  
walking through the forest.  
together, they gathered the sky, and  
dropped it in my shirt pocket.  
the beauty of joy  
bundled into love  
mingled inside the fleece envelope,  
releasing its perfume under my nose.  
but  
perfume has an expiration date.  
and the cost of love is pain —  
a pain that sat upon my breast  
so heavily that grief became life.  
fragrance turned acidic,  
harboring a burn intimately clothed,  
tattooed.

# ZARAH

*Samantha Lucia*

The pen resisted the word salt.

I inhaled and choked. The Hebrew letters reached toward me. Blinded by sunlight. Fire? No. Smoke. Heat. Voices. My voice, or Zarah's? HIS voice echoed through my mouth, "Don't look back!"

The countertop gave way to shifting sand. Or was it salt? The word split open, pulling me in.

Salt in my lungs. Crystallizing. Everything solid, gone. Sand where the kitchen — the kitchen where the — no. Breathe. Can't.

"Just panicking," I thought. Zarah thought. Who is thinking?

The sand. Open-toe leather sandals. My feet burning. Salt in wounds, wounds from sand? Fire? The coolness of the tile floor soothes the... burning. Falling ash.

My mouth opens. A thousand voices spill out, choking my own.

Modern. Ancient.

My body shaking. Her — my — seizing. Pulled under, through the space between each letter and moment.

Drowning.

Expanding.

Disappearing.

But SHE turned.

Not because she forgot. Because what burned behind her was hers. Her table. Her bread rising. Her daughters' voices still warm in the

walls. Her name in her own mouth before they replaced it with his.  
Every daughter taught to swallow before she was taught to speak.  
She wouldn't leave it unwitnessed. She wouldn't let him unmake her  
life and ask her not to look.

I — we. Darkness above and below.

We. I. Grains of salt. Sand, sand. Salt.

He meant it as punishment.

But salt preserves. Salt is what the body can't live without.

She didn't die on that road. She became the landscape itself,  
outlasting every man who told her story as a warning.

We, they. Zarah, voices. Burning, screams.

Oceans, tears. Countless faces. Where? When?

Kitchen cupboards? Caves? Mines?

Blood. Bodies. Bones. My body? All bodies?

Sliding over the bumps and stutters of the ink. The landscape shifts.

Inside the word itself. Reaching for the kitchen counter, or was it  
Lot's hand?

Losing grip. Sodom. The Blue Ridge Mountains outside the window.

Stained by darkness. Gasping as it fills my, her, our. A world full of  
lungs, hearts, blood, water, bodies. So many bodies.

Forward: the 'a' towering.

The void. Can't escape.

She, they. Why is this...

Behind: the 's' rising.

Turning. The ‘s’ crashes over me, her, us. The salt, sand, fire, sunlight, cold, heat, blood, oceans, eternity, the void, the known, and the unspeakable. Claims us.

זָרָה

Saturday morning. Cursive on a notepad at the kitchen table. Coffee, butter, milk, cream cheese, bagels, chocolates, s

The pen resisted at the ‘s’. Shook it, licked the ballpoint tip, tried again. The ‘a’ dragged. Nothing blocking it underneath. The ‘l’ stuttered. The ‘t’ barely formed. ‘Salt.’ The word stared back at me, bumpy and uneven, as if written over gravel. Pen down, arms stretched forward, palms face down to check for tremors. Perfectly still.

Tried to continue. Coffee, butter, milk, cream cheese, bagels, chocolates, ~~salt~~ salt, sugar. “It’s so bumpy,” I whispered. Couldn’t bring myself to add another item until I understood this. Blinking several times, I thought the word was changing into something else. Not exactly morphing. Revealing.

Tore the page from the notepad. Held it with both hands, brought it to the kitchen window, and angled it so the sun could shine through. No luck. Set the paper on the counter and ran my fingers over the bumps. A shockwave through my arm. When I looked down again, shapes within them.

At first, it was chaos. But with each second, it started to come together into what resembled an ancient text, each shape revealing itself until it became an unrecognizable word — זָרָה

Hebrew. The shapes were Hebrew. I didn’t know Hebrew. But my mouth did. “Zarah.” The word flowed as naturally as an exhale.

Not a translation. A name. The woman in the story never had one. Just *Lot’s wife*. As if she’d been a room in his house. But this was hers.

The one thing the fire couldn't take, and the scripture refused to carry.

That voice. I knew it. Not Lot's. Older. The voice that burned a city and called it love. The voice behind every pulpit, every closed door, every correction dressed as mercy. *Don't question. Don't grieve. Walk forward. Don't turn around.*

## זרה

The refrigerator hummed. Or was it the voices still fading?

Tile. Cold tile under my knees. I fell?

Hands shaking. The pen on the floor. The notepad had slid halfway off the table. The torn-off list under one of my knees. I sat against the cabinet and picked up the sweat-stained paper. Coffee, butter, milk. Words I recognized. Words that didn't open.

No way to know how long I'd been gone. The sunlight had shifted, and the spilled coffee dripping from the table's edge ran cold. I looked down at the word. Not through it, but at it. The way you look at something you've been told not to.

And inside the word, Zarah looked back too. Not at the burning city, but at me. Steady. Unafraid. A woman no holy book saw fit to name, finally seen by someone willing to turn around.

## Contributor Spotlight: Samantha Lucia

### *An Interview with Nicky Bennett*

In ZARAH, Samantha Lucia reimagines a familiar story through language that fractures, expands, and resists containment. We asked her a few questions about naming, voice, and what it means to witness what others would rather leave behind.

**Nicky Bennett:** This piece feels almost like being pulled into a trance with this blurring of “I,” “we,” and Zarah. What was your way into writing it. Did it start with an image, a word, or something else entirely?

**Samantha Lucia:** It started with two things arriving at the same time. The image of a pen refusing to write a word, and a woman from Genesis 19, whose story I’d heard my whole life but never from her perspective. It struck me one evening. She’s taught as a cautionary tale, a warning about disobedience. But what it actually describes is a woman whose home is burning, whose life is being erased, who is commanded not to look. I wanted to give her back the moment they took from her. The pen was the way in. A mundane object doing something impossible. Once “salt” became the word it refused to write, everything else followed.

The trance effect wasn’t planned. The first draft was third person, controlled, linear. But it kept breaking. The pronouns bled into each other. Zarah started pushing through. Every time I corrected the text, it resisted. Eventually I realized the piece was doing something truer than what I’d intended. The disorientation on the page is what happened when I stopped controlling the piece and let the possession become the form.

**NB:** The word “salt” becomes this kind of portal in the piece: physical, linguistic, even spiritual. At what point did you realize the word itself was going to carry that much weight?

**SL:** I started researching the aftermath. What happens to a pillar of salt? Obviously, she scattered. Whether it was immediately or over centuries, the text doesn’t say. That led me to the Hebrew verb *zarah* — to scatter, to winnow, to disperse. The feminine form also signifies something strange or foreign. A related root points to arise. So I had a word that held everything done to her and everything she became afterward. Scattered across the landscape, strange to every tradition that told her story, and still rising. That became her name. The word “salt” on the grocery list is the surface. *Zarah* is what’s underneath. The whole piece is organized around that tension.

**NB:** You give a name, *Zarah*, to a figure who’s usually just known as Lot’s wife. What did it mean to you to name her, and to let her story shift in that way?

**SL:** It meant everything. She’s been defined by her husband for thousands of years. Three Abrahamic traditions tell her story, and not one of them gives her a name. The midrash eventually did, but those were men filling a silence they couldn’t leave alone. Not reclamation. Cataloguing. I wanted to give her something that came from what happened to her, not from what men decided to call her afterward. *Zarah*. The scattered one. The name isn’t a gift. It’s a recognition. She already was that. I just said it out loud. And once she had a name, the whole story shifted because she wasn’t an object lesson anymore. She was a person. A person who made a choice and paid for it with her body. That’s not a cautionary tale. That’s an injustice.

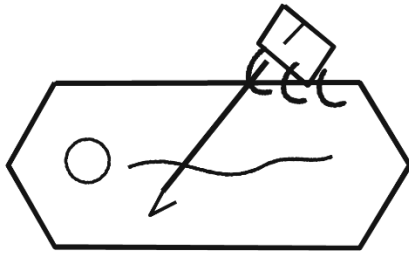
**NB:** There's a line that really stuck with me: the ideas of refusing to "leave it unwitnessed." Do you see this piece as an act of witnessing, reclaiming, or something else?

**SL:** It's all three. Witnessing, reclaiming, and something more personal than either of those words. I spent most of my life inside a religious system that taught me to keep my eyes forward, to trust the structure, to accept what was handed to me and call it grace. The denomination I came from allowed women to take on leadership roles in ministry, which made it harder to see the walls. I was the music director and worship leader. There was nowhere higher to go. But the power was always conditional. Always under a man's authority. You could lead, but only so far. You could speak, but only what was sanctioned.

When I finally left, the guilt followed me for years. Not guilt for leaving. Guilt for how long I'd participated without recognizing what it was doing to us. I didn't even know I was queer until after I left. The system was so thorough it kept me from my own identity. That's what I mean by unwitnessed. Not just what it does to other women. What it did to me.

Zarah turned to face what was being destroyed around her. I had to turn to face what was being destroyed within me. Same defiance. Same cost.

The refusal to leave something unwitnessed is the first act of resistance. Before reclaiming, before naming. You have to be willing to look. Even though these are ancient mythologies, they're not *just* mythologies. They've shaped real doctrine, real policy, real lives. There are women still inside those systems right now. This was my small way of taking back power for all of them. The defiance was never the sin. The demand for silence was.



*iv*

*naming ourselves anyway*

## **This Is Not My First Apocalypse**

*Sarah Elizabeth Schantz*

Through the tombstone in the plot, water drips.  
In the garden, the incisor planted.  
And this is not my first apocalypse.

From my husband's mouth, a yellow tooth, he rips—  
*What a vulture!* No consent got granted.  
Through the tombstone in the plot, water drips.

Between her thighs, he parted jilted lips,  
behind those curtains, the story slanted:  
And this is not my first apocalypse.

There gnashed a dentata guarding crypts,  
gruesome deity, sexiest mantid.  
Through the tombstone in the plot, water drips.

In the grave the widow sucks rock, then sips  
cold marrow from ghost bone, she's enchanted,  
and this is not her first apocalypse.

From the caverns of her hag, he runs and trips,  
in the echo chambers, she has ranted:  
*Through the tombstone in the plot, water drips!*  
*And this is not my first apocalypse!*

## **Fiction Novel**

*Magdolna Koren*

I am passed around, like a book.  
But not to read; only to look.  
They say that the cover is fine,  
But I should be edited down.

I am not a fiction novel,  
Not up for interpretation,  
Not meant to be palatable,  
Sold to a wide range of buyers.

I am not here to entertain,  
Or to comfort your store-bought pain.  
I'm an *autobiography*  
You cannot take the pen from me.

You do not get to hold me down,  
Claim I need your help to get up.  
You do not get an opinion  
On what I've doubtlessly proven.

No amount of college degrees  
Gives you the right to correct me  
On the story of my own life.  
I bled out the ink for these lines.

## Brief Summary of a Bisexual Love Story

*Prudence Brooks*

I introduced myself by telling you about the eyelash stuck to your cheek. You told me to take your wish for myself. You always believed generosity would bring all the luck you need. I never told you what I wished for but from then on, every flutter of your lashes felt like a gift granted. You smelled faintly of incense or what I used to call your "hippie sticks." I'm sorry I gave you so much shit, but you were a fun person to fuck with. You were also the kindest girl I'd ever met. I bought you latte coffees, and white magnolias, and antique rings, and I wish it could have accurately expressed how much I treasured you. Your every zit was another star to me — cystic constellations I had the privilege of seeing up close, my telescope fingers charting the terrain of your tan cheeks. I wasn't naive enough to think young love would last and I've always hated that. I want to believe in what I cannot know. There was a night we both took two tabs and laid on the roof linking fingers. You said you saw an angel. I said I couldn't see anything. You said Look closer, darling, and I realized you were watching me.

## **What the Good Girl Leaves Behind**

*Toni Young*

I grew up with an altar of saints  
at the foot of our stairs, a daily wake-up call  
to do good for my soul that day.

I would hang flowers around their necks,  
bow my head and promise I would be  
a very good girl.

The nuns taught me never to be angry  
if I wanted to hurl forks at the boys  
who teased my sister.

Social graces taught me never to turn red  
unless blushing at compliments  
about how I was good.

To be called “good girl”  
was a prize I wanted to win.  
Again and again, I knelt in prayer.  
Again and again, I kept the forks at bay.

But a good girl tires of  
keeping her knees together.  
Under my bed were knives  
I had sharpened in my sleep.

So I began to kneel only when I wanted to,  
threw knives and forks without abandon,  
blushed crimson at my first orgasm  
which was, very, very good.

This does not make me a bad girl.

## Contributor Spotlight: Toni Young

### *An Interview with Nicky Bennett*

In *What the Good Girl Leaves Behind*, Toni Young traces the quiet architecture of obedience and the moment it begins to fracture. Moving between reverence, restraint, and release, the poem reclaims the language of “goodness” and reshapes it into something self-defined, embodied, and unapologetically alive. We asked her a few questions about conditioning, desire, and what it means to outgrow the roles we were taught to inhabit.

**Nicky Bennett:** This poem moves from being a "good girl" to something much more self-defined. Did that shift happen all at once for you, or was it something that unfolded slowly over time?

**Toni Young:** The shift happened over decades of unlearning. It was slow but gradual, and I wish it had happened much sooner in my life. I sometimes think of how having that clearer sense of identity earlier could've made me braver. I definitely would've made different choices. But I'm grateful I know all this now! It's liberating.

**NB:** I love the contrast between "keeping the forks at bay" and then throwing them without abandon. Was that tension something you were aware of while writing, or did it come together more instinctively?

**TY:** As soon as I wrote "keeping the forks at bay," I knew I would write about throwing them later. There was an itch to wrap my fists around the forks early in the poem and start throwing them; that release had to come for sure.

**NB:** There's a strong thread of religion running through the beginning of the poem. How does that early influence still show up in how you think about yourself now, if at all?

**TY:** I think of myself as quite disciplined, and growing up with strict religious practices definitely contributed to that. There was a lot of rigor with the lessons, the readings, the teachings. Over time I learned to reframe the rigor as rituals— so yes, there's discipline behind my own spirituality now and my writing too, but it's more meaningful.

**NB:** The last line—"This does not make me a bad girl."—feels really direct and a little defiant. Who were you talking to when you wrote that?

**TY:** I was talking to whoever believes a good girl should only be the girl described in the earlier verses. The submissive. The obedient. The one who doesn't question. I was raised to believe you're either a good girl or a bad girl. It took me a long time to see how it's hardly black or white, how there's a whole "good girl spectrum" and it's also your choice whether you want to be on it at all.

## Critical Commentary – *We Wear the Mask* by Paul Laurence Dunbar

*Nicky Bennett*

Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote his famous poem “We Wear the Mask” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was the son of formerly enslaved parents, and would become one of the first nationally-recognized Black poets in the United States. Dunbar was writing poetry at a time when Black expression was very visible and very constrained. *We Wear the Mask* was first published in 1896, during the post-Reconstruction era, which meant increasing racial violence, segregation, and divisive Jim Crow laws.

I chose this poem for critical commentary here because although the issues that Dunbar was facing were different than what LGBTQ+ individuals face, there are some similarities. Dunbar, using a metaphor predating the language we use now, speaks of the “mask,” a way of surviving in a world that demands performance and compliance. I’ve put the full text of the public-domain poem below:

**We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.**

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
    We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
    We wear the mask!

I in no way wish to collapse or minimize the oppression that Dunbar and other Black Americans were facing during this time (and still continue to face in different ways). They were experiencing racism, surveillance, and social danger simply from having a different skin tone than the majority. The mask in his poem is an enforced performance, emotional concealment, and a strategy that protected him during a dangerous time.

The mask is described as the mask that “grins and lies,” representing a sharp contrast between the inward pain, struggle, and conflict, and the outward ease and docility he was required to project and present. Make no mistake, though. The mask is not weakness. It is survival. It is adaptation.

Technically, the poem is beautiful. Some things that immediately stand out to me when I read this poem are that Dunbar elects to use a collective voice, using “we” as opposed to “I.” Surely he was experiencing this, and wearing this mask, but so were countless other Black Americans left in the aftermath of slavery in the American South. This was a communal experience.

The repetition of “mask” and “we wear the mask,” adds a sort of rhythm and musicality to the poem that reminds me of the Jazz poetry of Langston Hughes. It feels like a poem that was meant to be read out loud. At the same time, though, in my personal opinion, it doesn’t feel like a poem that would be screamed at the top of one’s lungs. Its tone is restrained, controlled. It’s almost formal, mirroring the very act of masking that Dunbar is writing about.

In a smart decision, Dunbar withholds many specifics about the situation at hand, rendering the metaphor universal. Historically, it makes sense that he was writing about his own personal experiences, however after many years, the metaphor is still widely applicable and relatable. While Dunbar writes from a specific racial reality, the metaphor of “the mask” extends and resonates far beyond that specific racial reality. This reading of the poem doesn’t replace the original meaning, but extends it.

I chose this specific poem, because the mask can be reinterpreted for LGBTQ+ individuals. The mask can be about performing straightness, about quieting oneself to “fly under the radar.” About editing one’s own language, managing visibility, and choosing how and when and where to be seen.

This remains a very real experience for many LGBTQ+ people. There’s a difference sometimes between the external self that we present for examination, and the internal truth that we know of ourselves. I speak often about my sexual orientation as a *pansexual*, whereas sometimes when I’m talking with others, especially those outside of the LGBTQ+ community, I identify myself as *bisexual*, because it tends to evoke less confusion, judgment, and conversations that I don’t always have the energy to have.

When we wear the mask, it protects us. That’s true. But it also distances us, in a way, from our true selves. It’s not my goal to shame the mask, but to examine it. To imagine life beyond it. A life where various parts

of you don't need to be hidden or compartmentalized, but can be integrated and allowed to coexist.

Now, not everyone can safely remove the mask – even now. This depends largely on the environment you find yourself in. Geographical, political, and familial considerations all need to be taken into account when you're deciding just how much of yourself to put out there. This is why ideas like “just be yourself” are nice in theory, and have a positive intention, but are often a bit of an oversimplification that would put a large amount of people at risk if followed indiscriminately.

We chose “(unlabeled)” as the title of this issue, because identity and humanity are fluid, incomplete, and evolving. The issue isn't about having the “right” label, if there even is a right label for you. It's about what we show, what we hide, and what we're still learning to hold.

If Paul Laurence Dunbar gives us the mask, this issue asks us what waits behind it, and what becomes possible when we begin, even briefly, to set it down.

## *What Comes Next*

If something in these pages felt familiar, we're glad you stayed.

First of all, allow us to take a moment to say thank you. Whether you were here reading with us or writing with us, or you found us by mistake, we genuinely appreciate you. Without you, this entire endeavor is impossible.

That being said, we're always looking for contributors in poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and visual art. If you have work that feels at home here, take a look at our upcoming issues, submission guidelines, and open calls for submission by visiting our website at [www.notquiterightmag.com](http://www.notquiterightmag.com).

## *Contributors and Biographies*

### **Pete Strong (@petestrongpoet)**

*Pete Strong is an Irish writer based in England. His work has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize and published in Flights, Epoque and Potluck. His pamphlet Greenfinch is available from Flight of the Dragonfly Press.*

### **Samantha Lucia (@iamsamanthalulu)**

*Samantha Lucia (she/her) is a queer writer and photographer living in the American South. She bears witness to the body, to power, to what we inherit, and what we refuse. Her work appears in Witches Magazine, Corporeal, MENACE, Twisted Tongue, Spellbinder, and Poetries in English, among others, and will be featured in the 1455 Books: Women Writers Anthology (2026). Connect with her on social media @iamsamanthalulu.*

## John Grey

*John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Midnight Mind, Novus and Abbey. Latest books, "Bittersweet", "Subject Matters" and "Between Two Fires" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the MacGuffin, Touchstone and Willow Review.*

## Toni Young (@toniyoungpoems)

*Toni Young (she/her) is a Filipina poet whose work explores the intersection of softness and self-possession, and the sacred within everyday moments. She is the author of the zine Talons & Grace and the poetry collection All the Broken Bloom (published under the name September Stardust). Her work has appeared in River's Edge, Phylum Press, The Cove, Three Panels Press, and Opol, and can also be found on Instagram at @toniyoungpoems.*

## Magdolna Koren (@magdolnakoren)

*Magdolna Koren is a sapphic and neurodivergent writer and veterinary medicine student. She has published four collections of poetry so far, and she aims to create art celebrating the strangeness of nature and biology.*

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*Leaves Left is a poet and story teller from Nashville, Tennessee. They can be found haunting various poetry and queer art events when not tending to their cats, children, and messy relationships.*

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## Sarah Elizabeth Schantz (@anangka)

*Sarah Elizabeth Schantz is a writer, witch, and widow living in a Victorian bungalow on the east side of Old Town Longmont close to the tracks and the nostalgic rumble of the freight trains passing through. Her first novel Fig debuted from Simon & Schuster in 2015 and was selected by NPR as A Best Read of the Year before winning a 2016 Colorado Book Award. Her short fiction, essays, and poems have been published in journals such as Third Coast, Hunger Mountain, Los Angeles Review, Midwestern Gothic, and many others. She adjuncts for the MFA program at Naropa University; serves as faculty at Lighthouse Writers Workshop; and owns and operates (W)rites of Passage where she offers workshops and manuscript midwifery with an emphasis on divinatory poetics. She lives with three cats—Tilly, the matriarch calico from Taos, New Mexico; Cinder, a gray rescue from Lubbock, Texas with a Tom Waits' rasp of a meow and an Eeyore disposition; and Ponyboy, a once-feral Siamese kitten from Casper, Wyoming turned sweetheart who now loves to cuddle and to play.*

## Ella B. Winters (@ella.b.winters)

*Ella B. Winters (she/they) is a social worker, researcher, and writer, living on the South-East coast of England with her partner and their sausage dog. Her poetry often explores themes of identity, memory and belonging. It has been published in The Aftershock Review, Frozen Sea, Full House Literary, Black Iris, Wildscape Literary, and elsewhere, and was nominated for the Forward and Pushcart prizes.*

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*Keizer Rae is an American poet based in Arkansas. Her work typically explores healing and life after grief. Some of her work can be found in the anthology “Love in d minor,” published by Cozy Ink Press.*

## Prudence Brooks (@prudence.writes)

*Prudence Brooks (she/her) is a tender and strange poet born in rural Indiana, now happily nestled among the pines of Portland, Oregon. A queer, disabled woman living with AuDHD, Prudence considers her poetic voice more than a passion — it is a form of unmasking in a world that commands her to assimilate. She is the author of two poetry collections, TRUCE and SAVED, and serves as the grubby-toed host of the Roach Reading Club on Patreon. Her work has appeared in Pile Press, Feral Journal of Poetry and Art, Eunioia Review, Querencia Press, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Grey Coven Publishing, and others.*

## Sandra Beth Levy (@slevy43)

*Sandra Beth Levy has published with Anomaly Poetry, Local Gems Press, Arcana Poetry Press, A Curious Moon, The Vagabond's Verse, SHINE, Viridine Literary, The Orange Rose, Red Rose Thornes, Azarao Literary, The Poetry Lighthouse, Quillkeepers Press, Cosmic Daffodil, and Three Panels Press, amongst others. She has two poems shortlisted for the 2026 Rough Diamond Poetry Prize. Her social and personal histories weave their way through her writing as she explores intricacies of love, loss, aging, and awe of nature. Her debut poetry chapbook will be available for pre-sales with Finishing Line Press in October 2026. Sandra is a retired psychologist who practiced the healing art of psychotherapy for over forty years and is now pursuing her dream of immersion in creative writing.*

## Chloe La Vada (@chloetrycorner)

*Chloe Crawford La Vada is a Brooklyn-based writer, artist, and educator whose work primarily focuses on the dark side of the human psyche and experience. Her writing has appeared in a variety of publications, most recently Bloodlust Magazine, Persephone Literary, and Uncharted Magazine. She is currently finishing work on her debut poetry chapbook, a rural Gothic exploration of trans womanhood in America.*

**Nicky Bennett** (Editor-in-Chief, @nicky.bennett.writes)

*Nicky Bennett is an American poet and essayist. He has written several collections of poems and essays, including “Strong Enough to Be Soft” and “every feeling i could name.” He is the Editor-in-Chief of Not Quite Right Literary Magazine.*

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