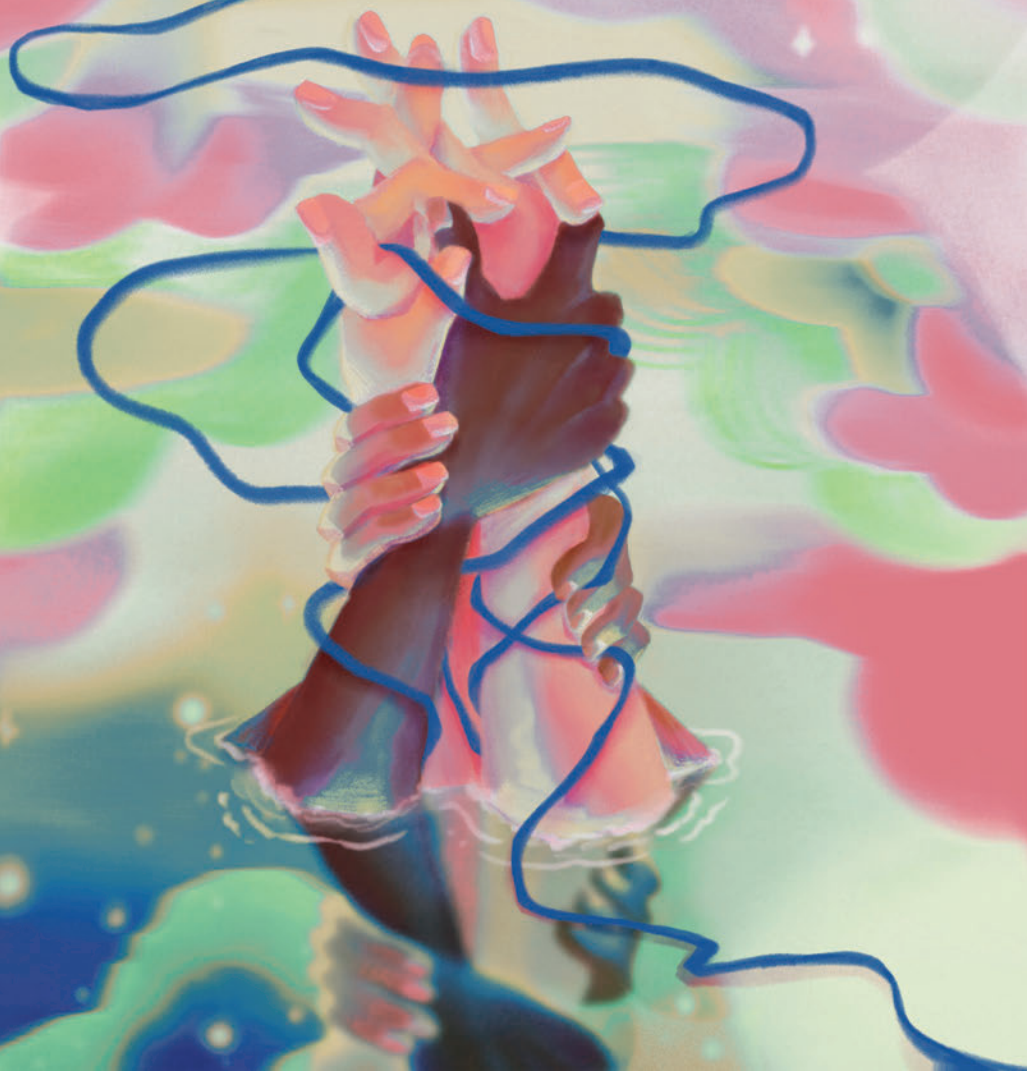


In Vision

Toward A Queer Ethics of Slow Care





Introduction

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.

-Audre Lorde

Above all, to put care centre stage means recognising and embracing our interdependencies... Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive – along with the planet itself.

-The Care Collective, The Care Manifesto

A moment of freedom and connection can undo a lifetime of social conditioning and scatter seeds in a thousand directions.

-Dean Spade, Mutual Aid

Envision: Toward a Queer Ethics of Care centers care and care work as embodied creative practices and radical politics for everyday life. Grounded in the lived realities of feminist, queer, and transgender creatives in our local Milwaukee community and beyond, this collaborative zine explores critical reflections on the embodied processes of slowing down, radical self-care, solidarity, creative resistance, and fostering networks of mutual aid as a survival practice for marginalized communities living in dark times. We extend this invitation to you, our dear readers, to join us in collectively daring to dream of interconnected futures and envision the politics of care for today and tomorrow.

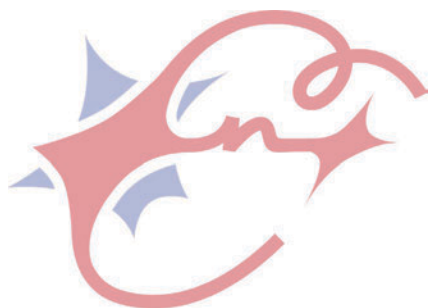
Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank our contributors for their willingness to be vulnerable and share their deeply personal visions of care and care work in this public archive. Finally, thank you to all of the friends, family, colleagues, faculty, staff, and care workers for their ongoing work in fostering sustainable communities of care in and around UW-Milwaukee.

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Metamorphoses

Carly Davis

How often did Pygmalion drape silk
and watch it fall in waves of silver?

He never guided her by the waist
and bent to trace the curve
of her hip before sticking
needles beneath her cotton-soft
flesh and sighed, guilty at
how good it felt to hold
her by the back
while the changes
drove in

Excerpted from *Dream State*

Ali Nowac

“You don’t have to drink that,” Theo said.

I took two big gulps to show him I didn’t mind and held back the grimace. “I’m okay.”

“Christian...”

“Theo, c’mere!” Johnny had returned and was kneeling beside a wicker basket of CDs. Theo traded a glance with me, but I nodded him forward with what I hoped was an encouraging smile. I drank deeply. The bottle was nearly empty. I hadn’t eaten yet and it sat heavy in my stomach.

Beside me, from her spot on the back of the couch, Mari dipped the mascara brush back into the bottle, blinking and canting her head toward her hand mirror. When her eyes found me, she paused, considered, and took one cursory glance around the living room, before tapping the top of her makeup bag, pink and covered in small white bunnies. “Want some?”

“I—”

“You also need a tie.”

Then, she was up and moving. She grabbed my drink, ignored my mumbled “hey” as she left it on the table, and stuffed her makeup bag beneath her arm. She spun up the staircase, calling after me. Deer in headlights, I rocked back on my heels, stealing glances at the other boys (none of whom had looked over for longer than a singular moment) before slowly extracting myself from my rooted position and following her upstairs, intent on telling her I only wanted the tie. I found her in Trevor’s room, rifling through a shallow drawer beneath a framed vintage Mineral High jersey. She grabbed a blue-striped tie out of the bunch with a quiet “ah-ha,” and returned to my side. Within a few smooth motions, she had it perfectly tied and was pushing me into the adjoining bathroom, flicking on the light. “You didn’t answer,” she said, holding up the bag. In-

side, the various brushes and tubes rustled against one another. “Do you want some?”

I scrapped along the inside of my mouth for a sneer, finding only something that had lifted its head at the offer. Wrapping my arms around myself, I looked to the staircase remind myself that it was a viable escape route and hoping Theo would appear at the top of it and save me like he had back at my place. Downstairs, the music strained against the speakers, tiny and loud. It filled the house; the boys’ voices an incoherent thrum beneath. I couldn’t pick out Theo’s voice among them. I stood there, in the middle of a room that wasn’t mine that smelled like Trever’s cologne, my palms slick, my tongue heavy in my mouth, a little buzz turning my thoughts into fading mirages.

I remembered how it felt to watch her movements. The slow flick of her wrist and the mascara brush. The flutter of her newly curled eyelashes. The lipstick tube gliding across her lower lip. And I imagined how it might feel to look like that. To have her highlight the curve of my jaw or the bridge of my nose, to step away from the sharp, clean-cut lines of the clothes that held my body in a boxy tomb. I thought it might soften me. I thought Voltolini’s narrator would have reached out and taken what he wanted. I wanted to be brave too, and told myself the slight beer haze was close enough to real bravery to do well enough.

“Christian?” She prompted, her voice kind and patient. Throat dry, all I could do was nod.

She hopped up onto the counter and beckoned me forward. “Eyes closed. No peaking.” I heard her rustling around in the bag again, humming along to the music thrumming downstairs.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“You wanted me to.”

“I meant why did you ask.”

“You had this look on your face, I don’t know. I imag-

ine it's the look kids get when they first get the idea to play with their mom's makeup. Like you really wanted to experiment."

I kept quiet. Her knees were pressed into my hips, her breath scattering out against my lips as she leaned close. The meat of her palm grazed my cheekbone. "Stay still," she whispered. "I'm going to do your eyes, so don't blink either." I flinched, eyes flying open when the brush pressed against my eyelid. Mari was close, a few of her lashes slicked together by mascara, her lips pursed to hide her smirk. "Christian. Eyes closed."

"It's weird," I muttered, but closed my eyes. She laughed, melodic and quick. I felt her lean in again, the overpowering warmth of her once more enveloping me. I wanted to kiss her as the brush in her hand glided across my upper eyelid. Not because I was attracted to her, but because I thought if I did, I'd know for sure.

She tilted my head with her fingertips, moving on to my other eye. She said, "Do you like him? Theo?"

My eyes snapped open. She leaned back, her hand still raised, brush hanging from her fingertips. "No—" Mari's dark brow twitched up. I swallowed hard, shaking my head, the warmth spreading upward, itchy as it wrapped itself around my throat. My eyes were burning. I couldn't stop shaking my head. "That's why you asked, isn't it?" I weaponized the feeling as best I could, but my voice sounded strangled, wounded, even to me. "Are you just trying to make me look like— I mean— You can't— I'm not—" I couldn't even say the word.

I wanted to wipe it all off, call this a slip in judgment, and pretend it had never happened at all. I would have, if not for the reflection behind her. She'd painted my eyelids a gentle, lovely, shade of cerulean, not far off from one of the stripes in the tie that now hung around my neck.

Mari turned around, taking in my tense shoulders and trembling lip in the mirror. "Do you want me to take it off?" she asked.

I swallowed. "I'm scared."

"Of Johnny?"

"Him and everyone else. Is it really that obvious?"

"Only if you know what to look for."

She dug around in the bag and pulled out a container of makeup wipes. Wordlessly, she offered it to me. I took it in my hands, studying the label that hugged the side of the cylinder, worrying the rounded, lavender edge of it with my clammy thumb. I remember wanting to unscrew the lid, rub away the blue and the heat behind my eyes until I could pretend it was the chemicals that put the feeling there. I remember thinking I should have taken the bag from Mari and leaned in close, line my lips in red until they were bright enough to outweigh the splotches on my cheeks. I wondered if doing it my damn self would have satiated the desire to be less like myself, more like Voltolini's narrator.

In the end, I called once more on what I imagined as the shifting slosh of courage in my empty stomach, passed the makeup remover back to her, and shuffled back into place. I felt her smile in the air between us as she placed her hand, once more against my face, the smell of her perfume, like cherry blossoms, permeating the air between us as she worked. Time passed slower this time, my throat tight, the pressure against the backs of my eyes almost too much. I kept sniffing, soft gasps of unshed feeling. I apologized once and she hushed me.

When at last she drew back, she put her fingers beneath my chin and tilted my head this way and that before saying, "Okay. You can look now."

I opened my eyes as she shifted to the side. Behind her, in the mirror, I found the shape of someone I didn't know I could be. She had outlined both of my eyes in thin strips of black eyeliner and faded the pale blue into a deeper, royal blue at the edges. I barely focused on the breakout on the line of my jaw or beside my ear, instead I sat, overwhelmed, by how it felt to wear it. To see that this flash of color could exist in the same

space as the rest of me.

I remember thinking: this is how I'm supposed to feel.

"You'll ruin it if you cry."

My world had gone blurry, my vision swimming as Mari pressed a tissue into my hand. I dabbed it at the bottom of my eyes, doing my best not to mess up her work, breathing in deep to control the tide rising in me. "Thanks for experimenting," I pressed out. Her smile was a flash of white teeth and sparkling eyes before she leaned forward and pulled me into her. I slid my arms around her waist in turn, chin pressed into the curve of her shoulder, the sunburst of feeling in my chest spreading spokes of warmth throughout my body, entirely different than the hot, angry thing that had clung to me.

She separated from me first, leaning back. "Okay?" she asked. Her voice was a quiet thrum, a touch lower than the music pounding up against the floorboards. The drink Johnny had forced into me still waited, heavy at the back of my throat; a leftover burn nearly indistinguishable from the tears that sat there still. I wanted more to hold onto the confidence and carelessness that had driven me into the bathroom with her.

"I think so."

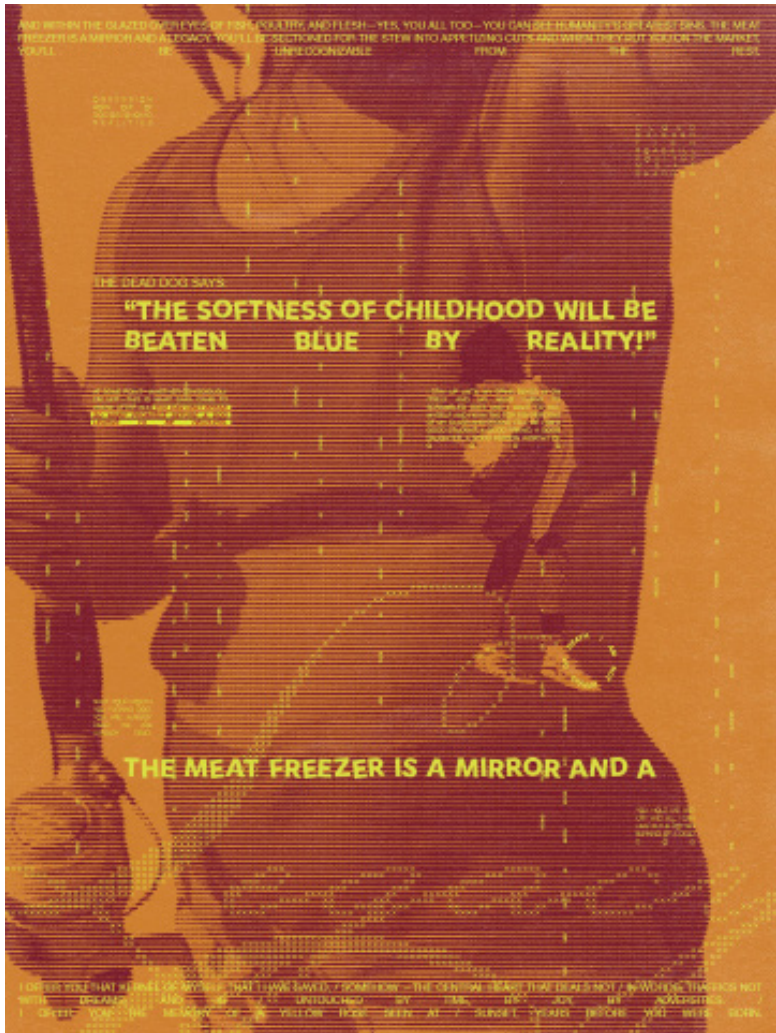
"I'll meet you back down there?"

"I could just... Stay here..." My hand was at the back of my neck.

Mari laughed. She shook her head. "Go." She ushered me out of the bathroom, her hand at the dip of my shoulders. "I have to change."

"Mari—" She was still pushing me to the door, and I grabbed at the frame to look back at her.

One elegant brow arched upward. She leaned in close, flashed me a wide smile. "I think, Christian," she said, "you should go knock 'em dead. You look good." Then she shut the door in my face.



legacy
Houa Vang
digital illustration

Dear Future Me

Ramsey McGrath

Dear future me,

Now, as my eighteen-year-old self, I carry lip gloss, the keychain Regan gifted me from New York, my daily source of caffeine, the various books I need for class, the necklace my mom bought me at the checkout at a boutique even though I saw the crazy price, my phone, the mascara on my eyelashes that Emily recommended for me to try, and the wallet that my dad's sibling sent me for my birthday.

Now, as a queer introverted teenager who has spent her whole life attending a Catholic school, I carry impatience and yearning. I don't allow slight remarks to bother me too much, or at least I attempt to be unaffected. I carry made up memories of my grandpa and my aunt and my dad's sibling courageously carrying this same weight, on an even grander scale.

Everyday I design a plan for the next phase of my life. Sometimes it includes kids, but there's always cats (I carry a list of potential cat names in the notes app on my phone). Sometimes I move far away from Appleton; I always feel guilty for leaving my siblings. My cheeks have carried sweet tears, salty tears. Happy and sad smiles have bloomed on my face. I have carried hopeful sighs as I reflected on the regretful ones.

I carry these things because I have a responsibility to. I wield the choice to deny who I am, ignore the existence of others carrying the same weight, and avoid the difficult future this aspect of my life brings me. However, there are queer people that came before me who fought for and envisioned the chance I possess to live authentically. I carry a responsibility to them to grasp it. There are people who look up to me and other queer classmates of mine as an example of how to live in this frightening terrain of high school. I carry a responsibility to show them the beautiful consequences of being true to oneself. And yet, as

I carry all of these things-- yearning, hope, responsibility-- I still have uncertainties.

Truthfully, I have only formally come out to one person. Undoubtedly, thinking about saying the words "I'm bisexual" out loud to someone makes me cower into the depths of my brain, like I'm backed into a corner where all my secrets go to freeze. Honestly, when someone asks what my favorite movie or book is, I hesitate because my answer would tell too much. This part of myself is a sensible juxtaposition that feels like a mother tongue as well as an unfamiliar vexation. It's a deep seeded secret that I am so accepting of. I am not ashamed, yet I carry it close to my heart for only a few to gaze upon. I do not know why I carry it this way. I swaddle my secret in my soul like the sweetest abomination, the most vibrant discoloring. Although I dream of the day when I can take my final deep breath in and let all my fears and discombobulations out for good, I patiently protect the things I carry now, nestled between the pining and the trusting thump of my heart.

Hope manifests in different ways to manage different facets of dreaming. There is wistful hope, the kind that conjures up white picket fences and perfect fairytale endings. There is motivational hope that keeps ambitions high but realistic; soaring although grounded; big-city-bound yet congenial. Each is vital and invites worries and wonders alike. Hope may not always be steady, but it's there. Even if it is hard to call upon, whether it is dim or bright, the future shines forever.

But, you know this. You, of course, are my future. I, present-day Ramsey, cannot read your mind or your face or even a letter. The point is, thinking of you brings forth hope as the world changes so rapidly. I hope you carry yourself with confidence and poise. I hope you still hold close little pieces of the people you adore. I hope you carry passion and throw around love. I hope you are still clinging to the future.

Thoughts on Aging

Greta Kitto

I hate that time keeps passing when I'm not there.
But I guess that's a part of growing up.
Apparently it's not scary
Or at least that's what people older than me keep saying.

I've always hated the concept of aging,
But I think it's more so the growing
The delving into the unknown.
But I say that's why I have siblings
To provide a path I've found I can't follow

"I hope I die before I get old" feels cliché
But I keep returning to these Lyrics
Pete Townshend really gets me in that sense
It's not the fear of physically aging
But of becoming something you don't want to
Of becoming unrecognizable to who I am now

But I'll always have Queen and Buddy Holly,
I'll always be listening to Eight Days A Week
In the back seat of the family minivan
The car where I learned how to drive,
One of my brothers next to me
My other brother and sister behind,
Playing Guess Which Beatle is Singing,
Even if now it's just me next to my dad
Returning to my college town I've never left.



Because Dreaming Costs Money

Carly Davis

Dry etching on plastic

Oil

Damian Trenchev

It was so long ago
I hardly remember him.
We were boys, still.

Was it August? The smell of oil and sunflowers.
That spot behind the trellises
at his parents' house –
his back pressed into overflowing
yellow jasmine.

His shirt lay on the soft clover
by our feet, my thumbs tracing
the two plum-colored scars on
either side of his chest.

I remember how, before
we went inside, I'd held
his shirt-hem up and kissed
the tiny marks the jasmine
had pressed into his back.

Heavy Cover

Carly Davis

When Cyrus found the vampire in the hayloft, disheveled and half-mad from the sun, he'd nearly skewered it with his pitchfork.

He lost his footing and crashed hard on the uneven floorboards, swearing the whole way down.

The vampire shuffled further back at the sound of it. He hid under the barn's sloped roof and folded his limbs in front of himself like a crumpled marionette, all disjointed and loose. He looked animalistic, a sunken thing with his head lowered into his chest, breathing low and heavy. His wrists crossed over each other where they were draped over his legs. Sun-burned skin stretched over the angles of his hands and fell into the spaces where Cyrus figured hands should be fuller.

That was the thing about vampires, Cyrus's mother had told him. They never looked quite like people should. He scrambled for his pitchfork, righting himself and trying to find purchase on the loose hay and smooth wooden floor.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, his voice shaking as much as his hands. "This is my farm, not some abandoned shed you can nest in." Cyrus took two steps forward and one back, not wanting to get too close to him.

Eye-level with the pitchfork now, the vampire groaned. A mop of dark hair curled over his face and the curve of his shoulders collapsed with each pull of air through an unseen mouth. "I don't nest," he said. His voice resonated low across the loft. "I only needed somewhere to sit for a minute."

He pulled his arms towards his body, letting his legs relax and slide out in front of him. Cyrus watched as the vampire lifted his chin up, his hair falling to the side. His head knocked against the wall as he reclined, revealing the flushed column of his neck.

He was burned pretty bad, Cyrus figured. Weeks ago,

he remembered freeing a coyote from a leg trap out in the woods. It had howled something awful the whole time Cyrus had its hands on it, but it never bit. It just keened the ways wounded animals do, all high-pitched and mourning. It didn't seem like a coyote at all. When Cyrus sprung the trap loose, the animal was gone before he could clean the wound.

Here Cyrus had another coyote. He tossed his pitchfork on to the bales. "Are you alright?" He asked, rifling in the pockets of his overalls. He kept a tin of beeswax salve for when his hands got chapped, but it wasn't much use in the summer.

"Am I alright?" The vampire repeated. He looked at Cyrus cautiously as the farmer pulled the tin from his pocket.

Cyrus tossed the beeswax towards him. He watched the vampire's eyes track the little tin as it arched through the air.

The creature snatched it quickly, looking at it in his hands. He popped off the lid and dipped two of his fingers into the wax, tentatively spreading it on the back of his other hand. When the salve touched his reddened skin, the vampire sighed.

Cyrus nodded, rocking back on his heels. "It work any good?"

The vampire nodded, breathing out through his nose. "Works just fine." The skin on the back of his hand slowly faded to a white pallor. Cyrus watched curiously as the vampire spread more of the beeswax up his forearm, methodically going over the areas burned by the setting sun.

Through the cracks in the wall, Cyrus could see the edge of it dip below the horizon.

"My name's Cyrus," he said after a beat.

"Anselm," the other man answered.

He walked over to the bales and sat down on one of them, sinking in a little. "I've never met a vampire before," he said. The hay shifted and Cyrus leaned forward on his knees. He'd baled it all up a few weeks before, putting it off through most of the summer. After he cut it in June, the hay sat in the field for weeks, propped up by tree branches while Cyrus avoid-

ed the baling issue altogether.

He hadn't figured out how to do the neat little rectangles his father used to make, stacking them up into a fort that Cyrus and his brothers used to play in when they were boys. Eventually, the August storms forced Cyrus to figure something out, and he rolled the hay up and spent a week pulling it into the loft with a skid and some rope he'd gotten from Meyer's up the road. The rolled bales didn't look very neat, but Cyrus wasn't complaining. After his brothers moved down to Oklahoma City, Cyrus had been taking care of the farm by himself and was damn proud of getting anything done over the summer.

"Are you a farmer?" Anselm asked.

Cyrus's head snapped up. "What?"

"I've never met a farmer before. You've never met a vampire before," Anselm said. "Guess we're both in unfamiliar territory." He grinned and held the beeswax tin out towards Cyrus.

Taking it back, Cyrus shrugged. "I guess, but farmers are real folks. You only hear about vampires in the stories your parents keep yarning about so you don't go outside at night. And you're all animal people, bats and carrions who blight crops and kill livestock."

Anselm lifted a single, dark eyebrow. "I'm not a real person?" He reached behind his head, knocking on the wooden paneling. The sound echoed through the loft. "Sounds like flesh and bone to me," he said. He brought his hand back to his mouth and blew across the skin, shaking out his hand. "That was stupid of me," he said. "Skin still hurts."

"I mean," Cyrus stammered, "you're plenty real, but it's not quite the same as, well, you know."

"I'm not sure I do."

"People who bleed," he finished. It felt like a rude difference to point out. Anselm grinned like he had been waiting for Cyrus to walk himself into that.

“Don’t worry,” he said, laughing good-naturedly, “I’m not hurt by it.”

Cyrus shook his head. He stood up, brushing off the front of his pants and reaching out towards the man. “It was still mean-spirited of me to say,” he said. Looking over to the latched door to the roof, Cyrus checked through the cracks to make sure the sun had fully disappeared. Before he could stop himself, he turned back towards Anselm and asked, “Can I show you something?”

His brow furrowed, but Anselm still took his hand and pulled himself up. As he steadied his feet and stretched, his dark shirt shifted, stretching tight over Anselm’s shoulders and revealing a cross hanging from a silver chain around his neck, the skin where it rested over his sternum scarred-over and smooth in the pale blue light. Cyrus averted his eyes politely, like his mother taught him to.

He led him to the once-latched door to the roof, finding it unlocked and pushed shut clumsily. Anselm must have come in through it, desperate to get out of the light and too rattled to lock it behind him. Cyrus pulled it open and felt a cool rush of air against his face. He took a step out on the barn’s shallow, slanting roof, leaning into the incline as he climbed up the side and sat against the dark shingles. He and his brothers had only replaced them a few years earlier when Pa’s health started getting bad, and Cyrus was suddenly grateful for those long days spent working in the sun.

He laid back on the roof then, patting the shingles to his side for Anselm to follow suit. Awkwardly, he complied and stretched out next to Cyrus, his long legs reaching further than Cyrus’s own. “This is nice,” he said, closing his eyes to lean against the still-warm roof.

Cyrus nodded, humming in agreement. In the summer, when the days were hot enough to heat the dirt, the barn roof kept that warmth for a while still after sunset. “My brothers and I used to come up here when I was kid,” he offered. “Hav-

en't done it in a while."

"I like it," Anselm said. His eyes were still closed, and Cyrus took note of the way his eyelids seemed heavy and purple like a fresh bruise. He wondered if vampires slept much. "Feels like when I used to be able to lay outside all afternoon. It's nice," he repeated.

Saying that, Anselm relaxed, his chest rising and falling slowly as the tension seemed to drain out of his body. He was taller than Cyrus by a couple of inches, he noted, and wore shoes that would've been real nice a decade-or-so ago. His clothes were nothing special save for the crucifix he wore, which Cyrus couldn't see now under the opaque cover of his shirt. Anselm wore an old leather belt, worn and tearing at some of the holes. He wore it tighter than Cyrus did, but he didn't have much meat on his bones. Probably didn't need to do much labor, being a vampire and all. Not a lot of folks were looking to hire workers who couldn't be around in the day. Still, his lithe arms folded over his chest with a strength that Cyrus couldn't figure out.

His hair was dark and long around the ears but shorn close at his neck. Tousled parts of it fell over his face as he relaxed his head against the roof. Cyrus had thought Anselm was a fair amount older than him when he first saw the man, but now he wasn't so sure. Cyrus didn't want to bother him from whatever he'd been thinking of, but he spoke anyways.

"Anselm," he said, shaping the name carefully in his mouth.

The other man turned, opening his eyes slowly.

"Yes?"

The cicadas buzzed from the trees at the edge of the field and Cyrus, for a moment, felt the same nervous chattering in his stomach. "Why'd you shelter in my barn?"

The cicadas seemed louder in the silence. "I was coming through here from St. Louis," Anselm said. "I spent the summer there. I had pretty good cover from the trees for most

of the morning, but all the acres around the woods here are cut down and I thought I'd be able to clear them if I was quick enough." He stopped, and the rest of what happened sat unsaid in the air.

"I'm sorry about that," Cyrus said. There wasn't much else he could say.

"It's alright. I don't blame you for working the land around here," he said, turning on his side and propping himself up with one arm. "My turn. Why aren't you afraid of me?" His grin made it seem like he was more amused than curious, so Cyrus smiled back.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging a little bit. "Maybe you just aren't real scary. Or it's that you seem like an awful good man."

Anselm's brow furrowed. "I'm not good," he said.

"I say you are. You're just wanting to seem some kind of predator." Cyrus looked over to see an unreadable expression on Anselm's face. After a moment, it cleared and Anselm leaned back down, staring up at the darkening sky. On the horizon, the last purple bruise of the sunset faded to a gray-blue.

"I could hurt you," Anselm said.

Cyrus shook his head. "I don't think you would."

Anselm moved to get up, quicker than Cyrus thought a person could. He reached up and put a hand on Anselm's chest, holding him down to the roof for a moment. The force of his hand felt like a steel beam. Cyrus thought back to back inside the barn, when he had seemed too weak to muster up any force.

"I'm not going to stop you from leaving if you really want to," he said. "But I don't think you want to go." It was a gamble, but Cyrus wasn't quite sure what he was saying anyways.

The cicadas hummed.

"Okay," Anselm said, gentler than he had sounded since Cyrus found him. "I'll stay."

“Okay,” Cyrus echoed. A beat passed without either of them making a sound. “I mean, I want you to stay,” he clarified.

“I know.”

“I think I don’t want you to leave.”

Anselm pulled back, reclining once again and looking to the darkening sky. The fading light didn’t give much detail to the man’s face. Cyrus kept talking.

“You could get up early and take care of the cows before the sun comes up, and I’ll make breakfast. And I’d tend the garden and take care of the rest of the harvest and you could sit on that big wrap-around porch in the shade and do the house stuff when the sun’s out since I’ve never been much good at it anyways, and the house is too quiet since Pa died, and-“

“I said okay,” Anselm interrupted, laughing. “I’ll stay. We’d make an interesting pair, I think. A farmer and his shut-in. I could be like your prairie housewife.”

“You could,” Cyrus said before he could stop himself.

He thought he could see Anselm lift an eyebrow curiously, but it was getting too dark to tell. “I could what?”

Cyrus had always had a problem with talking faster than he thought. “Be my housewife,” he said and felt himself go red immediately. He covered his face with his hands. “I’m sorry,” he continued, “that was awful presumptuous of me to say, I don’t mean to...” He trailed off, gesturing loosely in front of himself with one hand, the other still half-covering his blushing face. He tried to focus on the insects buzzing in the nearby trees, or the sound of his dogs barking for their late dinner. The wind sounded louder than Cyrus ever thought it could be.

After a moment, Anselm took a slow breath in and opened his mouth. “I could do that,” he said.

Above them, the sky had filled with dusty constellations. There was a hazy, dark space between the two men, but Cyrus didn’t try to bridge night’s toothless heavy cover.



freak of nature
Houa Vang
digital illustration

Nikol Golysheva

And when this pain will subside,
and the hold will loosen,
I will retire back to my adolescent bedroom, in my mother's house.
With calm blankets and drawn curtains,
blocking the rest of the world out.
I then will sleep for however long this will take to heal.

Tiktaalik

Kath Neubaer

Hands-not-yet-hands
found purchase on the beach
and pulled my animal body ashore

cut down the middle
by a rosy-fingered sun that cauterized the seam
and left a burning closure aching against sand

here is the hurting thing:
each wound salted and left out to dry
while a pulsing tide brushed over the first legs
pushed seafoam over my stomach

gasping for strange air and shaky-handed
I felt for invisible scales and found skin

WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?

Houa Vang

01: WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?

01: who the hell are you?

My name is Houa. My first name was Sara. My mother chose Sara because she thought she was pretty. She always wore skirts or dresses and her favorite color was pink. She drew rainbows and clouds and every holiday, she made her mother a colorful card.

02: i am the first deadname.

Sara's hair stayed long and on picture day, my mother would braid pink ribbons into her hair, throw her in a pink dress and shoes, and rounded it all out with a necklace of leather and pink stone... But then... Something terrible happens!

SARA FUCKING DIES!!

03: the softness of childhood will be beaten blue by reality.

At some point—whether consciously or not—this is what Sara came to know. After all, you can only break so many promises before a dog learns to be helpless.

04: get over it, you sad sack¹.

So, Sara dies and replacing her over the years are a multitudinous series of identities fighting for dominance until eventually I come outta the other side. This new guy tells story after story about the same gosh darn thing over and over again until they're cringing because WOW it's been so long—get over it, you sad sack.

02: MANIAC AT THE CROSSINGS

05: BUT I CAN'T GET OVER IT!!

So I write down meaningless things, collect trinkets, indulge in sloth and rage and complain hopelessly—I make my repetitive art because

I can't for the life of me seem to get over the crippling absurdity of modern life.

06: tenderness ↔ violence (love)

Crossing #1: Love as something both gentle and brutal—holding both the warmth of touch and the horrors of loss. This is the softness of childhood colliding with the reality of adulthood. This is affection becoming entangled with sacrifice, guilt, and memory.

07: ignorance ↔ adversity (nostalgia)

Crossing #2: Nostalgia as comfort that carries grief underneath. This is memory blurred, romanticized, even aestheticized. This is illusions, expectations, and inherited legacies that shape us before we are even born.

08: cloth ↔ flesh (fiber)

Crossing #3: Fiber as a physical manifestation of connection. Cloth carries culture, protection, legacy, and care. Flesh represents vulnerability, desire, and violence. When cloth meets flesh, it creates a space where I can explore gender, shame, rage, and intimacy.

03: THIS IS THE BUTCHER SHOP!

09: to the processing plant you go

These obsessions are born out of socioeconomic realities. Tenderness, ignorance, and cloth interrupted by demands of “onwards and upwards!” and disciplined into productivity. Here, humanity is processed like meat, your labor and identity exchanged for endless pursuit.

10: capitalism interrupts

I want to celebrate the beauty of being human, but I'm always reminded that there is a register to man, a shelf to stock, a street to pave, a file to file, a check to be made, a bill to be paid, an assignment to complete, people to be fed, and a world that must keep moving towards glory.

11: meataphor

And within the glazed over eyes of fish, poultry, and flesh—yes, you all too—you can see humanity’s greatest sins. The meat freezer is a mirror and a legacy. You’ll be sectioned for the stew into appetizing cuts and when they put you on the market, you’ll be unrecognizable from the rest.

12: body commodity

I see this and I work anyway. I stay up until my spine bends in on itself and my head turns to scrambled oats and I want to kill myself and I’m in the top ten percent of my class and people tell me I am a good student, a good friend, a good daughter, a good person worthy of good.

04: GIRL/BOY APOCALYPSE

13: that’s so gender

Sara was soft in the way little girls are allowed to be, but as she grew, she learned that to be a woman was to be extracted, depleted, and measured. She learned of beauty, that she was not it, and then she perpetuated within herself an inherited misogyny.

14: am I really me or am I simply just a moment?

*i lean down, kiss her nose.
there’s no room for us both.
one of us has got to go².*

I found myself looking inward and there, I embraced something else. I wanted so desperately to believe that if I shed enough femininity—if I embraced this something... this queerness—I would never be reduced again and I became stuck within the polarities and labels of gender identity.

15: softness as rebellion

I don't think that I'll ever be able to call Sara dead, even though she died a long time ago and I'm the one who killed her.

I can never fully separate myself from womanhood. It is a fundamental part of my reality. Eventually, I came to find that the answer wasn't rejecting womanhood, but redefining it—finding a way to carry queerness, gender, and survival without abandoning softness as weak.

16: the ugly of my tongue

you hold me and cry and all i can hear is the rotten barking of a dead dog.

GIRL/BOY APOCALYPSE is my name for embracing softness and indulging in rage simultaneously. It is the men in my notes beaten into tenderness, it is quiet plotting that replaces outright confrontation. It is rotten, grotesque, passionate, and full of grief.

17: the men in my notes

YOU ARE ALREADY DEAD. WE ARE ALREADY DEAD.

Beneath it all is the realization that open wounds reproduce themselves. In my notes, I have an entry that reads “you are already dead. we are already dead” and this is less of a threat than a mourning for all that is lost in the generational trauma and broken promises of “I will never die.”

05: MEMORY OF A YELLOW ROSE SEEN AT SUNSET³

18: art, design, and meaning-making

This is all to say that ultimately I'm an over-thinker who practices meaningless meaning-making. I have always found it easy to represent my philosophies and motivations in my artwork, but as a designer, I struggle. After all, how does one represent the eternal-lega-

cy-of-the-human-condition in their... design practice?

19: evidence i leave here on purpose

we are poor passing facts⁴... so we leave evidence for others to unravel¹.

Regardless, I am compelled to endlessly celebrate the beauty that is the romantic, pink-tinted rollercoaster ride of the individual human experience. In the butcher house of society, the one thing we should indulge in is celebrating our humanity, our memory, and the meaningless declaration of a name.

1. *Twenty One Pilots*. "Drag Path." *Clancy, Fueled by Ramen*, 2026.
2. *Asbnikko*. "It Girl." *Smoochies, Parlophone/Warner Records*, 2025.
3. *Borges, Jorge Luis*. "Two English Poems." *Selected Poems*.
4. *Lowell, Robert*. "Epilogue." *Day by Day, Farrar, Straus & Giroux*, 1977.

Nikol Golysheva

It tempts me to something,
grasps me and does not release.
Twists my arm behind my back.
My want is forlorn,
afflicting.
The way you make make me shudder,
I am ill.
I am amoral.
My mouth is pooled with saliva.
I have pled for mercy,
closed eyes and clasped hands,
in prayer,
but no prayer could ever clean me of you.
For how can I resist when you rip me open just so,
diligent and cautious in awe.
It devastates me.
I am blasphemous in action.
I am profane in thought.
My companion,
my confidant,
my agony,
my sin.
Solely my own.
Tailored for my spirit,
my soul.
Tethered to one another,
connected for eternity.
An immortal bond never severed,
for how can you sever something so seemingly absolute.



flesh that makes me

Houa Vang

recycled paper fiber, tulle, organza, thread

*hunger
vile
mass*

*tender
womb
claw*

*love
meet
lost*

milkweed

Emma Leigh Jacob

I take you	maybe	I could
and I	as I run	water you
I	each	and watch you
hold you	lump	bloom
so close	on your body	you could be
and if I had	on your brain	my little flower
any more arms	underdeveloped	like I always hoped
I would pray	still bleeding	you would be
to anything	amniotic	maybe
for	maybe	when I get home
something	you could just	you'll be healed
but I only	keep growing	you'll be young
have the strength	like you never stopped	you'll be breathing
to carry you	and when	hungry
away	the sun	and babbling
from this building	catches you	and ready
through the halls	through the streets	i just need
the lot	you could	to take you
the streets	photosynthesize	away from here
and	and grow	so I run
with every step	like milkweed	and run
that pit in my stomach	and spread	and run
that you left	all over	and i
hopes that maybe	my torso	hold you
you'll heal	and latch onto me	so close
	so sweetly	

A Slow Eclipse

Mx. Hana

Blindness

[I am]

Destitute of sight. Enveloped in darkness. Cloaked in obscurity.

Losing my vision felt like slipping off the horizon's edge.
Tumbling off the verge of reality, dissolving into the cosmic void.

An emerald serpent has swallowed the sunshine.
Alone, witnessing the edge of reality,
Disintegrating into obscurity.

I am soaking in bittersweet memories of our sun-kissed mornings, sipping gingerbread lattes together on the neglected balcony. The verdant ivy embraces the crumbling bricks, your electrified dreams flowing into my bloodstream like a transfusion of Tito's vodka.

If we leap off the cedar planks, will we transform into wind-walkers twirling into the bright sky? Strolling on liquid nitrogen, we'll ascend toward the pinpoints of starlight. As the lavender Indica smoke curls upward, you exhale the musky floral scents into my mouth, your silky lips caressing mine. A translucent lime hip-hop record swirls on the turntable inside.

As the luminescent high fades, the faded lullaby sinks somnolently into the gray carpet. Your smile radiates through the screen latticework. An overflowing soul, charred flesh, camouflaged passion, decaying feelings, transmuting into a pyrotechnic flow.

A memory of the nightingale, *Mélisande*, resurfaces. Her silvery blonde locks cascade out of the lofty tower, her lover *Pelléas* awaiting in rapture below. Her coloratura soprano voice diffuses into the murky sky, raised in a solemn prayer to the celestial bodies, exalting the firmament of stars, hailing all the holy spirits who bless two wandering lovers.

A resonant baritone voice caresses her locks, her bosom, her heart, her soul. In a fit of wild passion, they spin wild tales of forevermore, clinging onto her precious golden locks, safeguarding the sacred threads of her everlasting beauty.

And I'm petrified.

I imagine witnessing her tumble from the heavens, radiant locks slicing through her porcelain skin. Her snapped neck, blank eyes, warped flesh. The Rorschach of dripping blood mutating into your flinty eyes, twisting the strings of my lacerated heart.

My final breath flees.

A silhouette.

Leaning off the suspension bridge, babbling about incandescent lights, a supercharged battery, the unknown waters lurking below, the fabric of darkness engulfing us.

Clinging to your sleeve, the fabric splintering.

What if I had surrendered to the cosmos?

And let (you) go.

Shadows whirl across the walls. A floating body, melting past their averted gazes. Choking on slippery words, bleeding silence. Adrift, disoriented, disjointed, recovering remnants of a spectral self from the biomedical wreckage.

Unraveling, fissuring, rupturing, disintegrating, crumbling, collapsing.

In undoing, the rebirth of 'I'?

Emergence, reassembly, resurgence, metamorphosis, renewal, renaissance.

Time flutters across my fingertips.

As the world spins away, they flutter away like dragonflies among the milkweed and water lilies, buzzing toward the stars. The absence of sound, movement, space.

The eclipse collapses into the horizon.

Humming a tune without words, a whisper of the dawn.

Feel that sonic wave breaking free now, ascending toward the starlight.

Fragmenting into the future.

—

The wintry gales tosses my ragdoll body into the exosphere of consciousness, phasing into the nebulous networks of infinite dream-worlds. Cloaked in foggy smoke and ominous cello sonorities, this hallucination fuses into the expanse of time untold.

Kneeling before the sightless fountain, they lament, “I played in a dream, around traps of destiny... Who woke me up suddenly? I’m going to run away shouting with joy and pain like a blind man fleeing the fire of his house.”

Fleeing in her tattered dressing gown, Mélisande skirts the edge of the moonlight, her bare skin caked in blackened earth. “Come into the light,” a sultry voice croons.

Suddenly, they’re caressing her, kneeling before her in supplication, burying their head in her bosom. Stumbling into blissful ecstasy, kissing, waltzing, falling.

“No, no stay here...I’m closer to you in the darkness,” the mellifluous voice pleads.

The lush orchestral lines weave a collage of ominous motifs, agitated strings moaning, timpani thunderously shaking. The ether explodes into earth-shattering howls.

Escalating toward the ruinous finale, the spotlight splinters into streaks of light, exposing a shadowy figure wielding a jagged broad sword.

The jilted brother savagely tears their flesh, blood gushing into the scintillating dirt.

A bloodcurdling cry of anguish crescendos, dissipating into the dark forest.

The stars fall, cascading out of the heavens, blossoming out of the Earth.

Unfolding across time and space, cascading into the light beyond.

Jupiter

Damien Trenchev

Sometimes, when we hold each other
I am so angry we cannot meld into each other
that I wish we were on Jupiter being flayed
by hydrogen.
You're knitting a bonnet on my bed, for the cold,
and the sun golds your dark hair.
Your chest tattoo shimmers.
Black fern fronds reaching upwards in curls.
I tell you that Jupiter is a star
that did not grow big enough to ignite like our sun.
And yet this fury— this desire— the Great Red Spot's centuries
of rage. Its blood brown winds.
Does it still yearn to become a sun?
When I looked at you last year, running down the beach at night
happily, like a fairy girl or a devil just born,
I pled to the universe to remember this image of you
in my stead when I die.
I ran behind you through the dark,
forcing my eyes, my brain, into a camera,
into a picture I would always have.
Burn this in me, burn this in me,
my eyes torn from the wind and my thoughts.
Right now, you knit a hat
in my bed in the waning sun.
How I desire Jupiter's shred
when I look at you.

Personnel

Carly Davis (Creative Writing Editor, Layout Editor) just finished a master's degree in creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Their poetry and prose consider how identity and relationships are constructed amidst political turmoil and within creative communities. Davis's work can be found in various small presses.

Isabella H. Fincher (Managing Editor) is a queer feminist scholar and writer from Colorado. They recently graduated with a master's degree in women's and gender studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. They graduated summa cum laude from the University of Colorado Boulder with bachelor's degrees in journalism and music performance. Their research has been published in several academic journals, including the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and various news media, such as *Guitar World*, *Loud Women*, and *shesaid.so*.

Ali Nowac (Creative Writing Editor, Assistant Layout Editor) is currently a PhD student in creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. When they're not writing, they can be found drinking too much coffee, bothering their cat, or hiding in libraries. They've been published in *Ripples in Space*, *Short Vine Journal*, and has a forthcoming publication with *Alternating Current Press*.

Houa S. Vang (Art Director, Cover Design) is an interdisciplinary queer graphic designer and artist whose practice is rooted in long-standing explorations of memory, childhood, family, and loss—informed by their identity as a queer Hmong American and critical design. They're drawn to the tension between the brutal mechanisms of capitalism and the enduring resilience of the human spirit as well as the intersections of tenderness and violence.

Contributors

Nikol Golysheva is a third-year philosophy student. They are a twenty-one-year-old second-generation immigrant who grew up in Wisconsin. Writing has always been a passion and coping mechanism of theirs. It provides comfort and release: a way to connect with themselves and everything around them. How they were shaped and came to be has always fascinated them. Golysheva explores the way certain factors from their background are expressed, subtly or not, in their writing.

Mx. Hana is a pen name.

Emma Leigh Jacob is a student in linguistics and speech pathology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She's always had an interest in creative writing and speculative fiction. Her dream is to one day sell a horror screenplay.

Greta Kitto is still playing Guess Which Beatle is Singing.

Ramsey McGrath is a first-year art student from Appleton, Wisconsin who is eager to create and connect. She works primarily in oil paint and other 2D materials.

Kath Neubauer is a pen name.

Damian Trenchev is a Bulgarian-American writer from Virginia. He holds a bachelor's degree in filmmaking from VCUarts and a master's degree in English literature from George Mason University. He is currently a PhD student in creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He writes about love and loss.

