

Sage Cigarettes Magazine



THE SUN

Volume 2, Issue 1

Cover art by Sadee Bee, linktr.ee/SadeeBee
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Sage Cigarettes Magazine



Vol. 2, Issue 1, "The Sun"
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SAGE CIGARETTES MAGAZINE

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LE Francis, Managing Editor

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The Sun (XIX)



Photo/LE Francis

The issue theme is 'The Sun. We intended for the theme to be tarot-based but open to wide interpretation.

The sun is the card of Leo, of summer, of deep abiding happiness, of fields of summer flowers, & the smell of sun-kissed wood.

In reverse, the sun card is an indication of incomplete happiness, of good fortune just out of reach, of realizing that joy is a feeling & nothing is final.

We asked contributors to tell us about the best days of their lives the days that fell short, the days that were golden despite it all. To explore the feeling of the sun at their back, the hum of tires against pavement during a summer road trip, the smell of warm honeysuckle.

What follows is our collective interpretation of the prompt.

Letter from the Editor in Chief



Dearest Readers,

It's so good to see you back here on the page for our first issue of 2024! This letter is going to be brief but filled with gratitude and compassion that I hope you can take and spread to those around you.

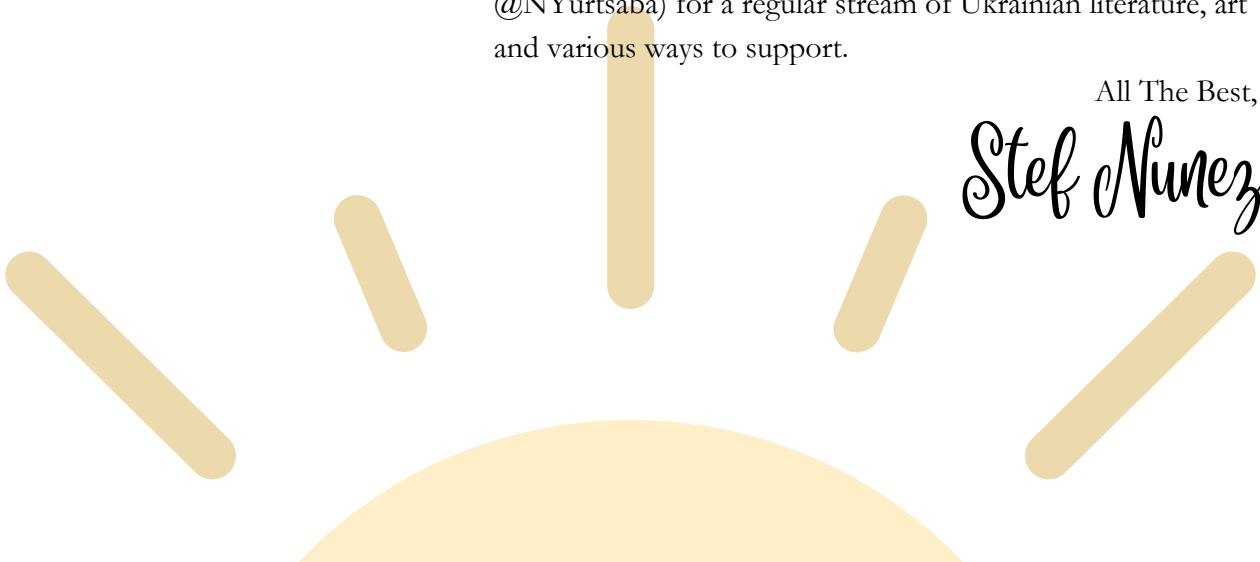
I'd like to take a moment and thank the Sage Cigarettes Staff for everything they do on a rolling basis — because we exist outside of a bi-annual issue. Our Managing Editor poured so much devotion into the layout of this issue, and I might be the luckiest EIC on the internet. Thank you to all of the contributors who resonated with our theme and trusted us with very valuable and tender pieces of themselves. Lastly, of course, thanks to you for being here with us.

Now, here's where compassion comes in. I've never been able to eloquently relay human rights crises the way they deserve, but I'd be remiss if I didn't use my platform to raise awareness and garner support any way that I could. This issue is dedicated to Operation Olive Branch, a vehicle for aid and amplifying Palestinian voices. If you take the time to read this letter, please also take the time to read their FAQ (tinyurl.com/56drtrpf) and consider helping if you're able. Times are hard and if you're unable, please spread the good word.

Please also remember that we #StandWithUkraine. Follow our very own Nicole Yurcaba on social media (twitter/X @NYurtsaba) for a regular stream of Ukrainian literature, art and various ways to support.

All The Best,

Stef Nunez



god lives in south beach

by Stef Nunez



Thirty-nine

by LE Francis

High in the meadows, the sky is golden,
ground is the same. I have had every hope
pulled out of me like stitches & every hope
is a wildflower on the hill. Every dream

has trickled into the sage desert & still,
I just won't bleed out. Bury my heart
in the tall grass for 23 seasons & then ask
me about love. I will say that I used to think

love was a texture, a quality, the bite
of dry stalks against my outstretched palms
but the truth is in the roots, hidden
in the cold ache between worlds. I have seen

the tendrils of it clinging to itself as if another.
Love is a fabric, time & space & all the things
within & without. The heavy hearts of stars,
the wildfire summer, the glow that changes

existence forever, irrevocable despite begging
yourself to forget. & even the absence
of the thing is the thing. Nothing has ever been
binary. There are not two things but one

& life is lived in its measure. & when seems I will be
forgotten, even that is a remembrance. Left to
weather the heat on my own, the sanctuary
of summer hovers over this grave.

Bury the rest of me in the tall grass.
Sky is golden & so is the rest.



Photos by LE Francis

Succulent

by Mel Sherrer

The world dreads winter, but loves winter sex—
cozied up in quilts,
hands and feet
seeking out warm places
 beams from the oil-burning stove
 rays through kitchen windows
 radiance between sheets
 sun melting snow.

In the desert, where summer comes and ends with blurred edges,
where the heat makes everything
seem seem seem
sex is arduous

like kneeling down, cheeks grazing the creosote bush with its buttery flowers, lying on your belly
beneath the California juniper, the Mojave yucca, letting the searching petals lodge in your hair,
scouring scorched gravel to find the most exquisite
 succulent.

You've got to really want it at 120 degrees—
the sex, to see.

Sunkissed Neighborhood Flowers

by Sadee Bee



Fragment of Summer

by Molly McGill

Dear my ever-faithful diary,

I yet again turn to you due to a lack of real companionship in my life, with the pretence that you are a real friend whom I can share my joy with. I hope soon to no longer rely on your fabricated kinship, but for now, I will have you lend an ear to my thoughts and ramblings once again.

Every day I fill these pages with my mourning for the simpler days of my humanity, basking in the sun's joyful face and the simple pleasures of summer.

I must have told you that my earliest memory is of painful sunburn, the salty tears that my mother wipes away while soothing my scorched arms with ointment. I didn't learn my lesson of course, unable to resist the siren song of blissful heat, and making my sunburn worse.

Every childhood painting I made the effort to preserve, captures me in this sun-drunk bliss. My tanned face and pale hair were evident even in the colourless print. The simple pleasures of a well-appreciated humanity.

I keep those memories safe of course, Behind the thick glass of a picture frame a lover gifted to me long ago. My only merry pastime is to stare at them for hours until my eyes would have dried to shrivelled marbles in my head, had I still my humanity.

That's why they must stay behind the glass, my friend. If I touch them with my pale fingers, my infection might bleed the mortality and sunshine from the paintings, like it so cruelly did to me long ago.

But do not worry for me my fictitious friend, for just last night I found my own fragment of summer to harbour in my lonely home, made just for me.

She glowed under the jaundiced yellow streetlights as I watched her walk with companions so dull compared to her brilliance. She laughed like the early morning birds of my birthplace and spoke in that delightfully familiar accent of home. The fates placed her in my path, I know it!

I must have this woman, my diary. I know her blood will taste like sunshine.
And her screams will be so very human.

Wish me luck,
Love from P.L.Y

Staff contributor bios

STEF NUNEZ

Stef Nuñez (she/they) is the Editor-In-Chief of Sage Cigarettes Magazine as well as unhinged co-host of A Ghost in the Magazine & The Annegirls Podcast. M-F 9-5 she works in the South Florida high fashion scene, but at night and on the weekends she is a passionate horror fan who frequents film and music festivals. She is also a part-time poet with a bi-weekly film review blog, Reel & Make Believe.

LE FRANCIS

LE Francis (she/her) is a writer, visual artist, & musician living in the pacific northwest. She is a former arts journalist & the current managing editor of Sage Cigarettes Magazine. She is a co-host & editor of the Ghost in the Magazine podcast. Find her online at nocturnal.com.

MEL SHERRER

Mel Sherrer is a poet and performer from Las Vegas, Nevada. She received her B.F.A. from Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia, and her M.F.A. in Poetry from Converse University in Spartanburg, South Carolina. She currently teaches courses in Performance Literature and Poetry. Find her work and more information at MelSherrer.com.

SADEE BEE

Sadee Bee (she/they) is a queer artist and writer inspired by magic, strange dreams, and creepy vibes. Sadee is the Visual Arts Editor for Sage Cigarettes Magazine and the author of Pupa: Growth & Metamorphosis (Alien Buddha Press) and Magic Lives In Girls (kith books). Her visual artwork has also been exhibited by Influx Gallery. Sadee can be found on Twitter @SadeeBee, on Instagram @sadee__bee, and on the web at linktr.ee/SadeeBee.

MOLLY MCGILL

Molly McGill (She/her) is a writer from Country Derry in Ireland. She specialises in short horror fiction and folklore influenced work. Molly joined Sage Cigarettes Magazine as an Associate Editor after graduating from John Moores University in Liverpool studying Film Studies and Creative Writing joint Hons. You can find her on twitter @Night_TimeTea.



Fiction

Susan is The Sun and absolutely capable of shining alone

by Karen Walker

Two things there, neither true.

Susan is the dimming bulb over the kitchen table.

On the lazy susan on the table are her preserves: salty cantaloupe marmalade, papaya-mango-banana-lime jam, and, in case of a whoop, homemade cough syrup made by boiling bark.

Contrast. Preserves are love. So you'd think.

Hers? Foils. Flavours trying too hard, missing the occasional ant or twig when dazzled by the radiant colours captured in jars her mother didn't pass down.

Irony. Susan spins the lazy susan. *What a hard worker I am.*

If, as she'd have us believe, she's The Sun, the teens snoring upstairs would be stars. Susan collects minor hockey league players, billets them on soiled saggy cots in the attic. Someday, she'll jar a star. *I knew him way back when.*

Her daughter, a planet stuck in orbit, lives in this small town. Her husband is a moon waxing and waning in every job he gets. Every night too, when he rolls off Susan before climaxing.

At Silver Pines Retirement Residence, Susan has discovered a lady who, like her late mother, is named Esther. They were both born on the 19th, Living Esther in February and Late Esther in June.

This morning, Susan's mother would've turned 78 had she lived. Susan goes to Silver Pines to festoon the vestibule with balloons, to take selfies with sleepy cranky Living Esther and a sticky jar of sweet mushroom relish.

Contrast again. Susan texts her planet daughter. She's a ballerina. *U really need knee surgery? Can U do anything? Dance to something adagio? A slow little show for the oldies?*

Home. Susan squeezes in the front door. Everywhere there are boxes of T-shirts in sunny yellow saying nothing, ready for her unlicensed, self-elected fundraising for Silver Pines or the hockey league or anywhere else she can shine.



“Stitching the Sun” mixed media collage by Jasper Glen

Wax

by Jasmine C. Griffin

Icarus knew that his father would have called the act that had killed him an act of hubris. However, as his father still called him by his deadname, his words held even less meaning now that Icarus was his son than they had when he was the daughter Dale loved but that never truly existed. He'd been on his own for six years. Been walking balls for three of those six.

In the beginning Icarus went for realness. Even before his top surgery he had something to prove. He walked the Thugs category, though he presented himself much differently in public. After his top surgery, he built up enough muscle definition to hide the scars on his chest, right under his pecs. Got tatted across his stomach to draw attention even further away. Then he'd met Dawn of House Sun and things had changed.

Dawn was real without input from anyone else. Didn't have to prove who she was to no one. She just was. She just existed. Embodied. She'd been irresistible to him. She always walked Femme. Always walked realness. Always went home with a trophy even if home was a studio apartment in the Bronx that didn't have working air conditioning.

She never judged Icarus for what he did to survive. For the drugs he pushed. For the lives lost at his hands, even when the dead kept him up at night. No matter how many times he told himself that if they didn't buy from him, they'd have gotten it somewhere else. He didn't judge her for the men that bought the body she'd paid good money for. Men who led her into alleyways and parked cars for a couple hundred towards rent and the clothes and makeup that would pull together her next effect on the runway.

He loved her. Loved the way she shined under the spotlight. Loved the way her hips moved when she walked. Loved the way she smiled so brightly he couldn't look directly at her without bursting into flames. He loved her until the light went out of her eyes and blood spilled from her lips the night the car struck her down. The driver had been high. Icarus blamed himself.

He didn't know if the man had gotten the stuff from him. It didn't matter. It was another life his hands had taken anyway. Another angel he had never meant to create.

After the funeral Icarus framed the sketch, he'd done of the house he promised to build Dawn one day. The only good thing that had come out of his father forcing him to follow in his footsteps and study architecture in college.

He stopped selling and started using. Being high helped. He felt weightless. Floating. Closer to the sky. To the sun. To Dawn.

When he walked the balls, he walked in Dawn's honor. That night was no different.

Wax by Jasmine C. Griffin, continued

He walked the runway. The theme was Celestial Beings. He went shirtless. Fashioned a pair of wings out of the feathers from Dawn's fans and the wax she used to drip over one of her clients that got off on the pain. Fastened them on using leather from the straps of Dawn's purses. Wore her lipstick on his lips and covered his lips and eyelids with rhinestones hoping that they would recapture some of her light.

He used more than usual. More than he should have. Covered the needle marks on his arms with body paint and glitter.

He walked out onto the runway in a daze. The music became a living thing. Held a pulse.

Every hand in the crowd became Dawn's hands, long acrylic nails reaching for him, and he reached back. Spread his arms until the wings stretched out wide enough for him to take flight. He would do House Sun proud. Do Dawn proud.

The spotlight held a heat that was sharp like the edge of a blade. But Icarus kept walking even as the first drop of wax melted into his skin. The tears running down his cheeks burned hotter. Their salt leaking into the open wound that Dawn had left behind.

Later the crowd would tell authorities and newscasters that he looked like a saint. A fallen angel. A deity. Even as he swayed on his feet. Even as he faltered and fell into the sea of onlookers. Of hands that reached out to hold him up as wax and feathers dripped down to burn their fingertips. As the wings that could no longer keep him in flight disintegrated and vomit filled his mouth. Choking him until he drowned in it. Until his eyes closed and his body went still.

He'd joined Dawn in death before he had gotten even close to who she had been in life. There were those in the crowd who would call him foolish. It was just as easy to insult the dead as it was the living, to some. It was to his father. His father, whose own exaggerated pride would keep him from calling Icarus by his true name even as he lay inside his casket.

His father's words were not the last he heard before Icarus earned a new set of wings in death. Dawn's were. It was Dawn's face he saw. Dawn's smile that blinded him. Her voice that whispered to him the way it had each time she got ready to take the runway. "You lose one, you lose everything. And I don't lose."

Icarus had lost one. He'd lost everything.



“Dawn Battles the Darkness” by Kristin West

Mentor in the Woods

by Luanne Castle

After "Solar Music" by Remedios Varo.

Sylvie was walking alongside Old Ven when she saw red birds circling her, flying forward, and then circling her again, as if to lead her. Old Ven, neighing softly, followed Sylvie into the Dead Woods, where the weeds and trees had withered to sturdy twigs. The birds' brilliant color and ability to communicate intrigued Sylvia who generally had nothing better to do than to hide the butter in with the linens so Cook would grow red and blow up like an angry toad. The tutor kept her brothers busy all day, and Cook and the housekeepers kept saying, "Out of my way, you silly thing."

Sylvie preferred to be outside in the sunlit meadow, searching for nests and feathers, but if these unique birds wanted her to follow, follow she would, into the dim endless forest. She realized that although the woods appeared dead, in fact, it abounded with life, mosses housing nematodes and spiders and armored mites.

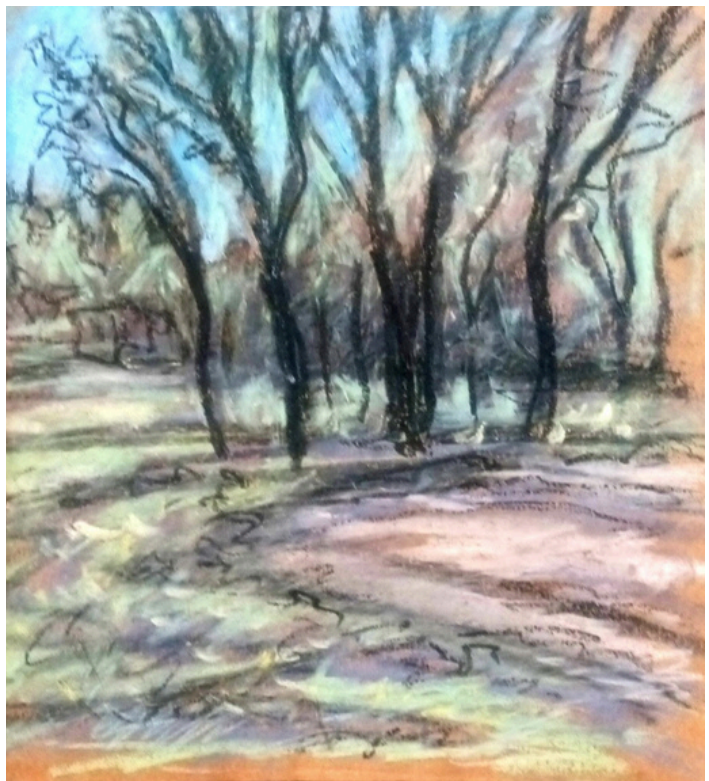
The birds perched on nearby branches just over a clearing. There a woman wearing a cloak of moss embroidered with the name Varo held a fiddlestick and with a peaceful expression played the sunrays fanning out to spotlight a patch of hidden wildflowers. The gentlest notes could barely be heard above the birds chirping and the insects sizzling. Varo didn't speak but held out her bow to Sylvie. When Sylvie strummed the rays they bent into funny angles, but that's when she could really hear the music because she had created it herself. Smiling at Sylvie's shiny eyes and rounded mouth, Varo nodded and faded away.

Sylvie played her music and danced around the rays of light, learning new ways to touch them with the stick. Then she made the best discovery of all. Instead of using the bow, Sylvie reached out and touched a ray with her finger, contorting it into the sweetest sound. She painted the sun into new music. She didn't want to stop, but eventually Old Ven nudged her so hard she almost fell over. Now that Sylvie knew what she could do, she could go home for dinner. She would plan new compositions in her head that night in bed.





“Don’t Call Me” by Irina Tall



Bad Egg

by Mar Ovsheid

The big egg that's been sitting in the sky finally cracks, and a Bad Sun comes tumbling down to earth.

"Happy to be here," the orb announces, core shrouded by half-gold light, "to grant all eyes the gift of being perceived exactly as one wishes to be seen."

"What?" The baker to your right taunts the star.

"Beauty by the eye of the one being beheld." The glow explains. "How should we all see you?"

"Slimmer, with long hair and symmetrical eyes."

"Let it be." As the Bad Egg speaks, the shine of the True Sun dumbly increases, illuminating previously unseen qualities of the once stout, short, fine-haired baker. In the new light, she's all the things she's dreamed of.

The entranced crowd rushes the Bad Sun, and you spy curious wanderers climbing downwards into the valley, towards the spectacle. Every neighbor receives their miracle, sky growing brighter as the creatures are born into their fantasies. But you remember old stories—wishing wells with impish designs, sly genies that delight in the bait-and-switch of tongues.

"For you?" You still can't make out the face behind the veil of light, eyes burning from its radiance and the mounting brilliance of the Sun.

"Nothing for me." You hold your hopes inside, stored safely in the back of your throat.

The hatchling loses interest and greets newcomers from across the plateau, swallowing their insecurities with luminosity.

You stand until you can't anymore, then sit, and eventually fall flat onto the cracking earth. Despite the True Sun's uncontained light blinding everyone to their own fresh perfection, unhappy mouths continue offering fuel for the fallen star's workings.

"I've thought of something." You can barely speak, throat parched and hot skin sticking to your teeth as the words come out.

"Yes?" The Bad Sun looms over your crumpled body. "Anything."

"I want to see myself in the clouds."

The king's corona shifts, though it doesn't offer a reply.

Bad Egg by Mar Onsbeid, continued

“I want to see my face up there,” you doggedly point to the sky, “in the clouds.”

Bound by promise, the yolk disintegrates your body into water, raises it, and spreads it across the horizon. You collect yourself into a single cloud, enjoy the view, and block out the Real Sun. You trickle down rain, aiming for the imposter.

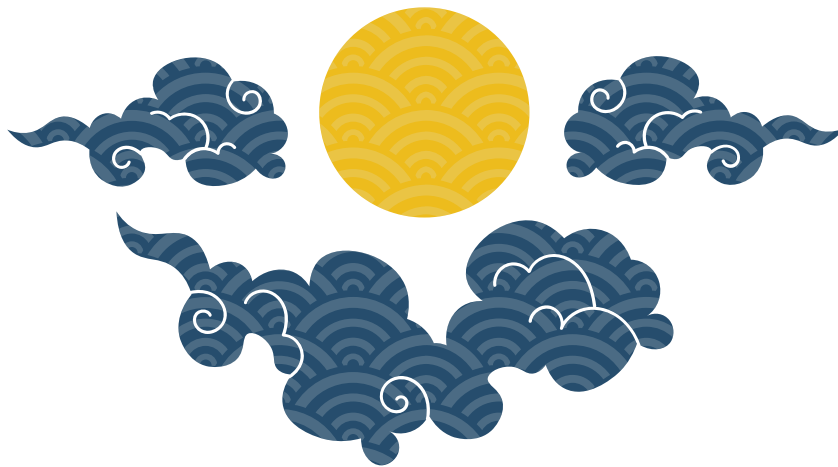
“Stop!” In the dim light, the enchanted people watch their beautiful features melt away, your droplets extinguishing the rings of false flame that encircle the Bad Sun. Its light reduces down to little more than a spark, flooded by the storm of reconciliation. All’s equal, again, except for you, up in the atmosphere.

“Let the sun shine.” The kneeling people moan. “We can barely see down here.”

As you focus your mind on falling, an invisible hand grasps your ankles and keeps you suspended. You watch the shrunken skeleton of the wish-granter scurry off, towards the mountains, set to curse the erring people that live there.

“You’re more useful to me where you are,” an unfamiliar voice mumbles, “eclipsing the sun, and keeping the flowers from blooming so far past their roots that they damage themselves beyond repair.”

Without your consent, the wind carries you southwards to higher elevations, on the trail of the mask maker. Over and over, the Bad Egg does its deeds— purifying vision, crafting new faces, brightening the sky. But your storminess always catches up, containing the light, raining down the hazy muddiness better suited to a world where no one sees each other exactly as they should.





Poetry

Parting Shots on my Minolta Maxxum in the Everglades

by Karla Linn Merrifield

*1935-2010: "The best slide and movie film in history is now officially retired."
— The New York Times, December 29, 2010*

I shoot my last frames of this film
in 35mm magic focused
on the architecture of a triad of trees.
I aim for form to dominate your imagined
view of southwest Florida. At first:

sprawling heavy limbs of live oak
Medusa-like but furred
by dry-season resurrection fern
spines of sabal trunks
and palmed fronds
fit to fan some forgotten goddess
spray of slash pine needles
fringed in afternoon sun
atop the tallest limber god

Picture now the light,
its acts of gloss and glistening
upon lichen and epiphyte in these images;
the understory shines in subtlety.

As day deepens toward evening,
I compose the 24th exposure,
going for muted green shadows for you.
Then effectively-rendered color
gives up its tropical ghosts.
The final dose of developing potions
has finally been poured. In a flash,
poof goes enchantment; I grieve.

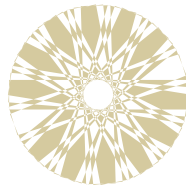
My roll of film will remain sealed
in its canisters in a sacred Calusa sea shell.
The great spirit of the Kodachrome
is no more. These slides you'll never see.
Tomorrow I must go totally digital forever.



Springtime along the Caloosahatchee

by Karla Linn Merrifield

Two male cardinals call out
from adjacent territories in the palmettos,
earnest, persistently cheering.
The subtropical forests sirs
with the crimson song of Floridian dawn.
Their scarlet duet summons
the sun into my eyes.
I see red; I blush.



The Transcendental Constant of Circles

by Karla Linn Merrifield

The circumference of the Earth,
the antiquity of a sequoia's diameter,
the time of day on grandfather's clock face,
the value of doubloons and euros,
and the full moon's silvered disk.

True to the sun, its eight planets, and the rings
of Saturn, in every circle is the unknowable
number— the never-ending pi, π of all life's
mysteries, including the blissful irrationality
of marriage, of our encircling cosmic romance.



“Solar Ray” abstract painting by Cyrus Carlson

Reign

by Helen Patrice

The Sun makes one more try,
roaring like an old lion
bleeding light into the air,
dying by Celsius degrees
towards the dark.

The soft velvet of paw-pads,
not the steaming bite of hot teeth.
The garden droops from his last attention,
leaves crisp around the edges,
but green hearts glowing,
knowing the King's reign is over.
They thirst, are patient.
Soon, the smell of rain
will outweigh that of dust.



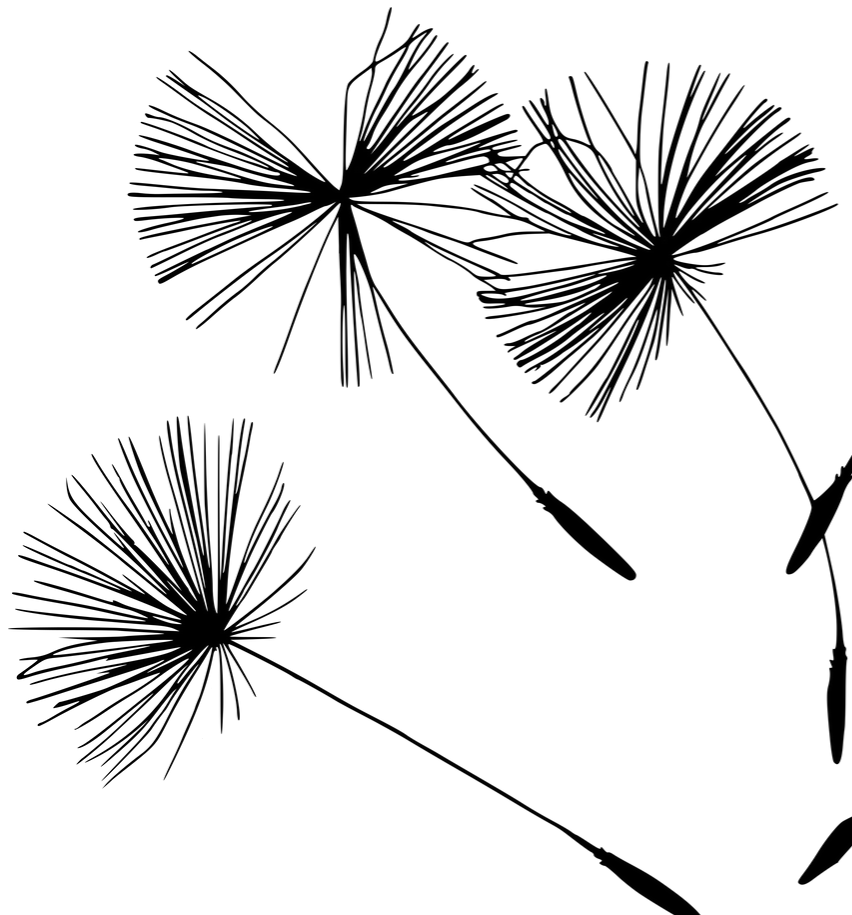
The Big Dandelion

by Brandon Shane

I knew a man in the desert
who sun gazed
even though it was burning
his eyes blind,
but he swore, there was
something in there, the big
dandelion, and it told him,
whatever it was,
that this sacrifice was leading
to something great; hidden radiation,
regional wars seeping worldwide,
firefighters committing arson
for something to do,
as everyone else
had gone somewhere
just as hot,

he told me, there were kin
up there, and he was a seed
that had floated away, then,
in separation
he began to mutilate
the nearby cactus in protest,
uprooting shrubs like orphans
rebellious against unjust masters,
and as his forehead sloped
with sweat, mirages
became ghosts instead of lakes,
dogs became skinwalkers,
and the sun had hidden
in the cool pit
of a dark fig, sweeter
than any delight,

proselytizing the boon
of absence
and how everything
becomes bright
when there is nothing
to see.

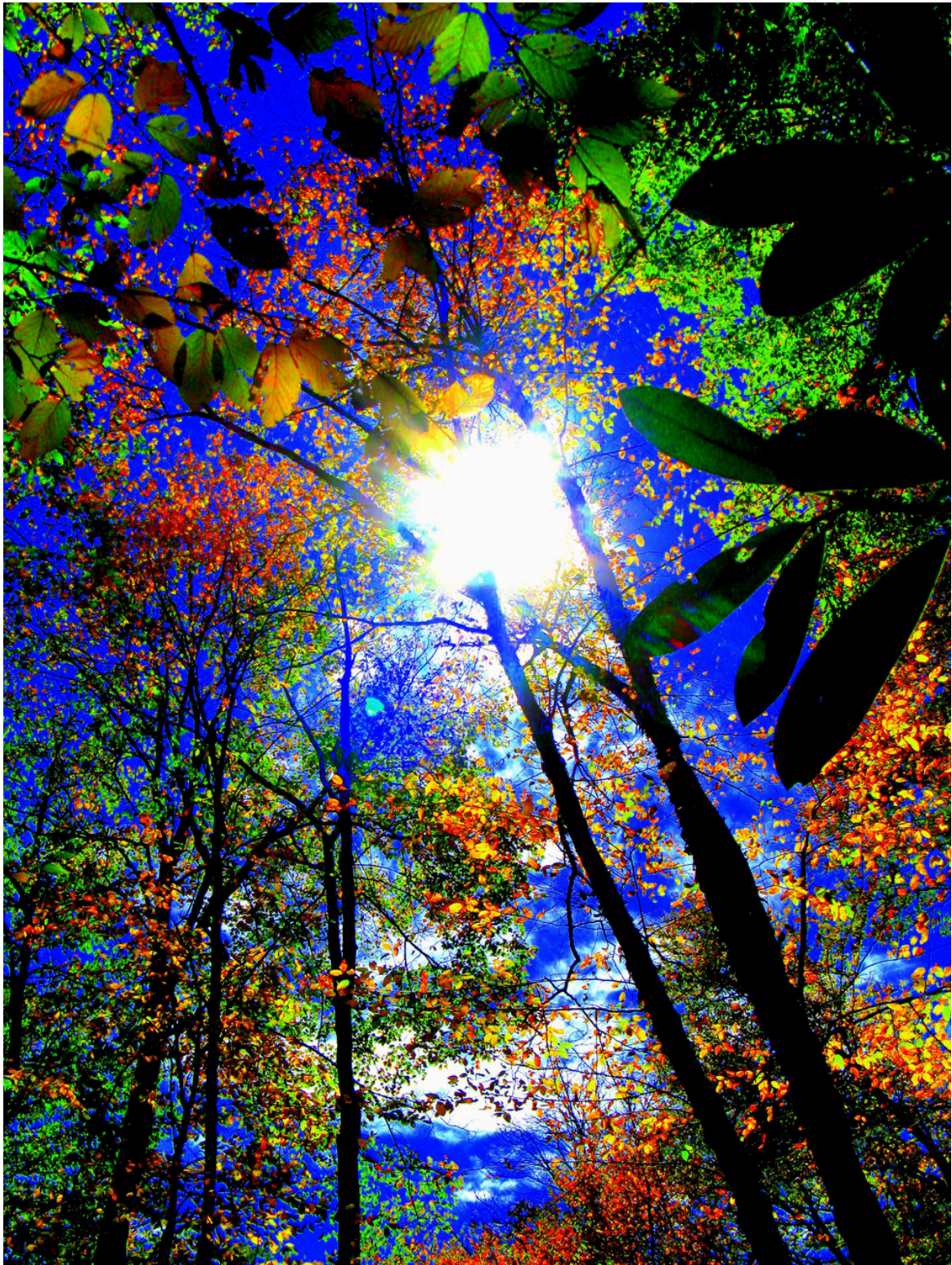


Among a God

by Brandon Shane

There's a flower in my garden I've kept alive
for many seasons now; winter came for it
and the worms came for it, but nothing
has done my little flower in; a cathedral
arched over hell & the walls still breathe,
the pews are yet to become porous & now
that summer comes, it will bloom again,
after surviving many terminal illnesses,
& attempted murders, defying scientists;
it will be so beautiful there, but,
never as beautiful as when the snow came,
every idol had drowned beneath paleness,
& when I'm asked about my muse,
I think of the idle stem, torn petals, tiny thing
defying all reason, fighting against the world,
becoming and becoming and becoming.





“Sun Jewels” photo by Rollin Jewett

The Greatest Show on Earth

by C.W. Bryan

The bees have begun tuning their violins,
raking their wings along the sleep-filled strings
as I sit in the parking lot peeling stickers off of half-priced
books.

The roses are unfurling their red carpets,
the ants are single-filing their way across the dirt—
as if millenia of evolution has instilled in them a sense of
propriety.

Soon the bees will find their starting notes,
soon the birds will lift their voices, soon the ants
will fill the soil like an auditorium, and I will lift my head from my
book

Just in time to see the sun framing your body,
a pre-bloom dandelion perfecting its pirouette between
your thumb and second finger, a smile lifting your face like a
curtain.



Poliorcetica

by Ben Nardolilli

A brassy sunrise bounces off the rooftops,
my gaze retreats to the courtyard
where the forces of night hold out in the shade,
all the windows there are still and empty

impatient hands in the street send volleys
of noise over my lunar walls,
each one an alarm, a call to rise and follow
into the sterilized registers of the marketplace

meanwhile, golden outlines are pouring over
the chimneys, gutters, and spouts
as the sun breaks the siege and breaches
this citadel where morning was once a rumor



“My Only Sunshine” by Kristin West

"Meaghan"

by Rebecca Hornlein

I wouldn't know myself very well at all
If I were not a child running at your heels
Within the shadow you cast I appear small
Comparison, that thief of joy, steals

If I were not a child running at your heels
Finding another reason, another will to live
Comparison, that thief of joy, steals
But you give, and give, and give

If I were not a child running at your heels
A clumsy duckling following the leader
Comparison, that thief of joy, steals
Soaking in your rays, like sun for cedar

A clumsy duckling following the leader
Within the shadow you cast I appear small
Soaking in your rays, like sun for cedar
I wouldn't know myself very well at all

cherry lollipops

by Emily Chamichyan

The sun has taken the form of a girl,
one with golden rays down her back
curving and bending into figures
of delight,
of madness
that smells like salted caramel
and freshly popped popcorn
with skin glowing and sunburnt,
sprinkles of sand freckled across her face.
Her lips taste like lollipops,
the ones you can get for a few cents
at the drugstore or the markets
with their sickly cherry taste,
their cotton candy scent too strong,
too many blueberries
and artificial strawberries,
too much sound
too little background,
she has seemingly forgotten
her ache for the blue,
the rich indigo fountains
overpowered by the red rubies.
The girl has heard her calling,
as she tries to quench her thirst,
glowing the color of candlelight,
finding her chariot in the sky
her place amongst the winds
surrounded by bluebells,
surrounded by her kin.



“Flare” abstract art by Cyrus Carlson

golden girl

by Emily Chamichyan

I remember my skinned knees
with bloody gashes coated in sand,
as I glared up at the blue metal swing
still dangling though I'd fallen,
remember the melting strawberry ice cream
dripping down the sides of the cone,
staining my hands, coating them in sugar syrup
as I ran through the dandelion infested fields
in my overalls and braided crown of daisies.
Feel the ice cold water in my bones
from diving into lakes,
swimming with the fish,
swallowing mouthfulls of
glimmering ripples,
feeling the creek's gentle caress
against my shivering back
to sinking my teeth into a slice
of pale pink watermelon,
seeds finding their places between my teeth,
as I feel the wind's kiss against my lips,
find comfort in the long blades of grass,
the ones that tower over me
as I lay in the meadows
welcomed by the bluejays
chirping from their wooden sanctuaries
watching over my golden body
as I hum to their melodies,
glowing as if painted by rays
of the sun's overpowering embrace
as gold drips from my face
into my hands
forming flickers of orange flames,
sunflowers, or maybe marigolds
speaking to me, calling my name.



“Text Exchange: Dr. B & Meg” erasure art by Meg LeDuc. The erasure was created using a combination of physical materials (burning paper) and digital editing.

play of

by Craig Matsu-Pissot

thoughts arise in the Field of Love
they don't seek to obscure the Sun
they seek release
they seek to dissipate
in all encompassing awareness
in the openness of Day

You revealed Your face to me
and then withdrew
now i chase after You
yearning
longing
may this game of hide and seek never end
this yearning
this longing
filled with delight
in the play of Love



Skimmer

by Devon Neal

There is something about skimming the pool
as the sun softens on a summer evening.
Blades of grass, snippets of leaves
spiral on the surface as the pump hums.
The jet makes a twinkling sound as it stirs
the clean, sparkling water. Sometimes,
a beetle the size of a toenail, or a winged
asterisk, soaked and heavy, catches
on my net, and it jitters back to life
on the pool's rim; other times, the backswimmers,
like black arrowheads, dive away.
When the dirt, carried in by bare feet,
collects on the bottom, I stir it up
with the net, a gust of underwater wind,
then catch it with a quick scoop.
This used to be a dreaded chore,
standing in the itchy grass, the humid
evening, sweat pasting my shirt. Now,
I wish I could take the skimmer inside,
sift your wind-dappled surface,
dredge the debris from your smooth seabed,
scoop out those things cluttering up
your mind, your body, shake them out
in the summer wind. I'd do whatever
work in whatever weather, just to
get you sparkling again.



“Last Bastion” by Mirjana M.

Vacation Fatigue

by Devon Neal

By Wednesday my skin is like damp paper
on the hard surface of my bones,
and my lower calf muscles
ache with the repeated ankle kicks
of slippery sandals. Unfamiliar coffee
grows stale in the fishbowl pot, and the kids
have spread torn snack packages
around like confetti. Beach towels,
draped on the balcony rail, grow stiff
in the salt air, as the three white complimentary
ones sit like rain-drenched roadkill
beside the shower and its pale, bearded drain.
Just before bed the sheets twinkle
with sandstars, and a gritty restless sleep
warps with warm dreams of home.

rabbit hole (resurfaced)

by Marisca Pichette

Dropped endings
holding last lines—
sparse beginnings wrought in
opalescence.

Out of the drought
frozen rivers run like tears
down the back of
tomorrow.

I weighed
a muscle in my mouth
before the pages peeled away
and clouds crumbled
into diamonds.

Pick one up
and throw it over yesterday
scented with flannel
and turquoise.

Coral

by Lydia Rae Bush

I want to be the green palm tree standing between
the sand and your pink sea-side cottage. I mean,
I want everyone who washes up on your
shore to know that I decorate your home.

Little bird, fly free,
but know how far my branches spread
to redirect my clinging leaves
to merely grasping the clouds.



Will-o'-the-Wisp

by Lydia Rae Bush

Lost in the dark,
all the little things I can imagine
like stars,

and you, the moon,
reflecting, reflecting,
so tell me, what is your sun?



“My Space” by Kristin West

His love is a ladle

by David Hanlon

My mind is this small park in summer
it's this cold wind betrayal
it's the tennis green, smooth
-appearing, algae-ridden pond

My thoughts are these bustling ducks
on the nearby grass, quivering
wing-flapping in a frenzy

His love is a ladle
here: amongst the cattails & rushes
scooping out this pea soup scum
so they can swim

There's a flower that blooms every Sunday

by Jiji Lubis

There's a flower that blooms every Sunday,
as dripping dews greet the morning ray,
and birds are chirping so jolly and gay,
marking the day's serenity, happily stray.

On Monday the petals furl and dream away,
calming the fray, nestled deep in the hay.
It sows its seeds with hope each Tuesday,
withholding decay, counting wishes the very next day.
And on Thursday its buds begin to sway,
butterflies blissfully dance and play.
Friday shows a fuller array,
as blooming scents fill the pathway.
On Sabbath it prepares for its heyday,
to greet the world back on Sunday.

Oh, my dear, this Sunday's perpetual bloom
makes the coffee taste better
than on any other day.
Like your smile, soft as tender skies,
it makes my heart let go of all its dismay,
hand in hand, we cling to fleeting moments,
as if we will never ever say goodbye,

someday.

Before I Move Away

by Alex Carrigan

After Sadee Bee

If I took the time to build a big enough
bonfire in the woods behind your parent's cabin,
would you join me as I dance the night away?
Would you sit on a large enough toadstool
as I paint my nails with dirt and throw
fists to the ashes that fall around me?
I hope you'll put your shoes in the care
of a feral cat and slowly chassé towards me,
mesmerized by the bronzing of my skin by
the bonfire, the perfume of burning moss,
and the crown of twigs I made when I
should have been working on our science project.
Would you cut off one of the braids in my hair and
let the fire kiss the end of it, holding onto the wick
between your fingertips as it slowly burns away
during my most impassioned dance of the night?
By the time the fire stings against your fingertips,
I'll have put the bonfire out with my sweat.
I'll then use one of the blackened sticks to give you
a stick-and-poke tattoo of my initials.
I'm normally only good at gifting things that will
disappear once the sun rises, but I hope tomorrow
you look at the smudges on your arm and remember
how this was the most liberated you've ever seen
me, but also that you will never see me
again once the school year ends.

About Ta Nisha

by Alex Carrigan

After Danez Smith

I would be a fool if I died before I wrote a poem about Ta Nisha.
You ask: who is Ta Nisha? And why does she deserve a poem?

Picture this: smooth dark skin, eyes hidden by the swell of her cheeks,
full figure, ear-length hair, square glasses, and a black dress to her knees.

Ta Nisha was a regular at a queer social club I used to frequent in Charlottesville.
Her voice was the first thing you heard when you walked in, louder than

DJ Twinkie's set. She led a trio of BBWs that dubbed themselves
"The Titty Brigade." I forget one girl's name. The one I remember,

a white girl named Joanne, often sang Dear Future Husband on karaoke
nights. Ta Nisha often shared the mic with the DJ or whatever queen was

hosting karaoke that week. Ta Nisha got her own drag show for her birthday.
The queens brought her a cake shaped like two enormous, bare breasts,

with an erect cake penis squished between them, and "Happy Birthday Ta Nisha"
written in glistening, ejaculate frosting. I'm sure she enjoyed every crumb.

So why write about her? I wasn't a friend of hers. We're not friends on
Facebook and share only one mutual. I left Charlottesville seven years ago.

She doesn't live there now from what I can see on her public Facebook account.
Surely I could find more important figures to write about here?

However, the first night I went to that club, a newly-out, shy, bisexual fat guy,
she asked me what my name was, what I was drinking, how I was.

continued...

She never heckled my flat singing on karaoke nights. In fact, she once yelled at me to strip during one sexy song, although all I could do was kick my shoes off.

She didn't mock my wedge sandals with ankle straps, nor the Goodwill church dress, nor the horrendous makeup I wore to the club for the one Halloween party I attended

as "butch queen first time in drags at a ball." I doubt she remembers me after all these years, but after everything, I still remember her. I remember how

unashamedly happy, how unconsciously loud, how beautifully thick with two c's
Ta Nisha was that I have to write her down before I wind up forgetting her.





“Big Sky” photo by Rollin Jewett

Orbit the Sun, or Don't

by Tinamarie Cox

The world spins in circles around a golden sun,
a singular brilliance in the skies catching all eyes, and
remains unaffected by the insignificant force I create.
But you orbit me,
like I am the star that provides you with direction,
like I am the core that provides you with gravity.
I don't understand the pull I have on you because
I never asked you to fall into my field or stay.
I couldn't ask you
to look past what the rest of the world is caught in and
focus on something as small and insignificant as me.
I don't understand what you see with me, because
I never asked what it is about my body that attracts you.
I couldn't ask you
to look for reasons to linger with me, but you did, and
somehow we seem to shine brighter than that golden sun
entrancing everyone else in the galaxy.
We spin with each other in a dance that's only ours
among the other stars through the darkness surrounding us all.

Leap into Solar Fury

by David M. Schulz



Advance to Venus.
Creep up to Mercury.
Wait. Then,

Would you send yourself
Into the flame if you knew
that you might

Leap into Solar fury,
And see the brightness

Wake that way another
Day on the other side
of your arrival?

Of a new day in a golden
Field. Hear the sound
of a stream

Nearby, distant Woods, and their Satyrs.
See the Nymphs, the Dragons,
and the Bane?

Is life still the same as
When you went to sleep
in the grass?

Wake up, Sleeping Boy!
See the Golden Sun and love
your skin.

Laugh, Colorful Girl
As you think
of him

With straw in his hair
And only care for you.
You are perfume.



“Space Cat” by Irina Tall

petitioning Ra

by Brandi Everett

when i decompose. break apart.
become other than i am...
an
altogether-something-else-of-matter
a molecular. infinitesimal speck.
of *almost* nothingness.

i humbly request from the gods that be
leave & blessing to return as the
dust in a sunbeam

just one dance is enough of a dream.
a hazy. filtered spin through afternoon
light. perfectly suspended singularity
no thought. just the current. & ease
of steady. liting. un-winged flight.

to fall as what is forgotten.
an unremembered name
remnants of already passed. resurrected
sediment on softened
waves of Amun's yellowed ribbons.

please. when life is gone from me
grant that I may find my way to rise again
a final journey of *illumination*
lit. through windowpane.

Contributor bios

KAREN WALKER

Karen Walker is in a basement in Ontario, Canada. Her most recent work is in or forthcoming in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Misery Tourism*, *Centaur*, *Cosmorama*, *Overheard*, and *Bending Genres*.

JASMINE C. GRIFFIN

Jasmine Griffin currently serves as the Learning and Outreach Manager at the Taft Museum of Art in Cincinnati. She's previously held the roles with Lighthouse Writers Workshop, the Mercantile Library of Cincinnati, and *Carve Magazine*. Jasmine was recently published in *Writer's Digest*, *midnight & indigo*, *Coffin Bell*, *Vast Chasm Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Random Sample Review*, *Cincinnati Refined*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, and *Cleaning up Glitter*. She received her MA in Creative Writing from Wilkes University and has participated in several fellowship and mentorship programs including, *Voodooonauts*, AWP's Writer to Writer Mentorship program, and *Pitch Wars*. Jasmine is currently at work on her first novel, *Blackbird at the Crossroads*, which is set in New Orleans and steeped in Southern lore.

LUANNE CASTLE

Luanne Castle's *Pushcart*, *Best Small Fictions*, and *Best of the Net*-nominated writing has appeared in *Copper Nickel*, *Bending Genres*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *River Teeth*, *Dribble Drabble Review*, *Does it Have Pockets*, *South 85*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Flash Boulevard*, and many other journals. She has published four award-winning poetry collections, including *Our Wolves* which was First Runner-up for the 2024 Eric Hoffer Award. Luanne lives with five cats in Arizona.

MAR OVSHEID

Mar Ovsheid is a spoilsport and feral confetti angler. Her work has appeared in *Cream Scene Carnival*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Scavengers*, *Fatal Flaw*, and *Feign*, among others. Some of her work and dogies can be seen by visiting [@mar_ovsheid](#) on Instagram.

KARLA LINN MERRIFIELD

Karla Linn has 16 books to her credit. Her newest poetry collection, *My Body the Guitar*, was nominated for the 2022 National Book Award. She is a frequent contributor to *The Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*. Web site: karlalinnmerrifield.org; blog at karlalinnmerrifield.wordpress.com; Twitter [@LinnMerrifield](#); facebook.com/karlalinn.merrifield.

Contributor bios

HELEN PATRICE

Helen Patrice is an Australian writer living in Naarm on unceded Wurundjeri country. She writes poetry, short speculative fiction, memoir, creative non fiction, and blogs on Wordpress. Her publications include Meanjin, Lady Liberty, Aurealis, Andromeda Spaceways, Metonym, Mattoid, Pandora, Interzone, and Last Leaves. She lives with her husband and adult offspring, and 3 elderly animals.

BRANDON SHANE

Brandon Shane is a poet, born in Yokosuka Japan. You can see his work in the Berlin Literary Review, Acropolis Journal, Grim & Gilded, Sophon Lit, Marbled Sigh, RIC Journal, Heimat Review, Ink in Thirds, Dark Winter Lit, among others. He would later graduate from Cal State Long Beach.

C. W. BRYAN

C.W. Bryan is the author of two collections of poetry. His debut chapbook *Celine: An Elegy* was published with Bottlecap Press in 2023. His first full-length collection, *No Bird Lives in my Heart* is forthcoming with In Case of Emergency Press in 2024. He lives in Atlanta, GA where he writes poetry, nonfiction and short fiction. He is currently writing with Sam Kilkenny at poetryispretentious.com. His work can be found in Beaver Magazine, Door is a Jar Magazine, Eunoia Review, Scavengers and elsewhere

BEN NARDOLILLI

Ben Nardolilli is a MFA candidate at Long Island University. His work has appeared in Perigee Magazine, Door Is a Jar, The Delmarva Review, Red Fez, The Oklahoma Review, Quail Bell Magazine, and Slab. Follow his publishing journey at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com.

REBECCA HORNLEIN

My name is Rebecca Hornlein, and I am a writer/editor from New Jersey. I am currently working towards my MA in Creative Writing at Southern New Hampshire University.

EMILY CHAMICHYAN

Emily Chamichyan is a writer and high school sophomore. When she's not writing, you can find her reading or daydreaming. She loves burning candles and visiting indie bookstores.

Contributor bios

CRAIG MATSU-PISSOT

Craig was given a love for writing by his mother and a love for the outdoors by his father. These gifts are fundamental to much of his poetry. His studies in a variety of spiritual and psychological traditions have informed his way of life and perspectives and therefore his writing. Craig has also been deeply influenced by his work as a mental health professional or spiritual care counsellor in HIV/Aids, palliative and hospice care, and mental health and addictions. Retired now, Craig happily lives in cohousing.

DEVON NEAL

Devon Neal (he/him) is a Kentucky-based poet whose work has appeared in many publications, including HAD, Stanchion, Stone Circle Review, Livina Press, and The Storms, and has been nominated for Best of the Net. He currently lives in Bardstown, KY with his wife and three children.

MARISCA PICHETTE

Marisca Pichette is a queer author based in Massachusetts, on Pocumtuck and Abenaki land. Her work has appeared in The Razor, Door is a Jar, Room Magazine, Necessary Fiction, and Plenitude Magazine, among others. Their Bram Stoker and Elgin Award-nominated poetry collection, Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair, is out now from Android Press. Find them on Twitter as @MariscaPichette, Instagram as @marisca_write, and Bluesky as @marisca.bsky.social.

LYDIA RAE BUSH

Lydia Rae Bush is a poet writing on embodiment, trauma recovery, and social-emotional development. Her work appears in publications such as Crab Apple Literary, Poetry as Promised Magazine, Discretionary Love, and FULL MOOD MAG. When not writing, Lydia can be found singing and dancing, especially in bed when she is supposed to be going to sleep. Her chapbook Free Bleeding is forthcoming with MANIC PIXIE PRESS. linktr.ee/lydiaraebush

DAVID HANLON

David Hanlon is a poet living in Cardiff, Wales. He is a Best of the Net nominee. You can find his work online in over 100 magazines, including Rust & Moth, The Lumiere Review and trampset. His first full-length collection Dawn's Incision is forthcoming in summer, 2024. You can follow him on twitter @davidhanlon13 and Instagram @hanlon6944

JII LUBIS

Jiji Lubis is a seasoned economic journalist from Jakarta, Indonesia. Despite writing and editing news articles daily, her heart yearns for poetry. She crafts poems to understand her own emotions and surroundings and as a form of therapy to cope with prolonged mental health challenges. She can be found on her poetry-dedicated Instagram account @ink.trospective and X's account @jijilubis.

Contributor bios

ALEX CARRIGAN

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, VA. He is the author of *Now Let's Get Brunch: A Collection of RuPaul's Drag Race Twitter Poetry* (Querencia Press, 2023) and *May All Our Pain Be Champagne: A Collection of Real Housewives Twitter Poetry* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022).

TINAMARIE COX

Tinamarie Cox lives in Arizona with her husband, two children, and a one-eyed cat. Her written and visual work has appeared in numerous publications under various genres. She is also the author of a poetry chapbook, *Self-Destruction in Small Doses* (Bottlecap Press, 2023). You can explore all her work at tinamariethinkstoomuch.weebly.com.

DAVID M. SCHULZ

David M. Schulz is a writer working in the northeastern corner of California. He is an approved-source farmer and a citizen scientist. He enjoys dark skies and lessons learned from the prevailing winds. He has a poem in *Young Ravens Literary Review's* 19th issue and a poem in *Shooter Literary Magazine's* 15th issue.

BRANDI EVERETT

Brandi Everett is a Midwestern poet that likes to spend sunny summer afternoons eating oranges and deciphering the language of cicadas.

JASPER GLEN

Jasper Glen is a poet and artist from Vancouver. His works appear or are forthcoming in *The Brooklyn Review*, *A Gathering of the Tribes*, *Posit*, *Rogue Agent*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and elsewhere. Poems have been nominated for Best New Poets and the Pushcart Prize.

KRISTIN WEST

Kristin West is an award-winning independent filmmaker and actress. She also has years of experience reading tarot at events and for private clients. During the 2020 COVID lockdown, she picked up pastels and paint again, after a long hiatus. Called an "artist to watch" in the NFT space, Kristin's work has also been exhibited nationally by the San Fernando Valley Arts and Cultural Center and the Cape Cod Cultural Center.

Contributor bios

IRINA TALL

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was 'The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: Gupsophila, Harpy Hybrid Review, Little Literary Living Room and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection "The 50 Best Short Stories", and her poem was published in the collection of poetry "The wonders of winter".

CYRUS CARLSON

Cyrus Carlson is abstract artist from the Midwest. His small, colorful paintings capture moments of attention in a distracted world

ROLLIN JEWETT

Rollin Jewett is an award winning playwright, screenwriter, singer/songwriter, poet, author and photographer. His screenwriting credits include Daylight to Dark, Laws of Deception and American Vampire. His short stories, poetry and photography have been published in numerous literary magazines and anthologies and his plays have been produced off-Broadway and all over the world.

MEG LEDUC

Meg LeDuc (she/her) works as a copywriter and lives in the Detroit area with her husband and three rescue cats. Her literary work has appeared in Mount Hope Magazine, Brevity, and New Delta Review, among others, and an essay is forthcoming from Third Coast Magazine. An excerpt from her memoir-in-progress was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2020. Another excerpt was a finalist for CRAFT's Creative Nonfiction Award 2021 and published the following year. She is a three-time recipient of the University of Michigan's Hopwood Writing Award. She currently attends Vermont College of Fine Arts' Master of Fine Arts in Writing. Please visit www.megleduc.com

MIRJANA M.

Mirjana M. (they / them) are a digital artist and writer from Belgrade, Serbia. Their work focuses on exploring the juxtaposition of various elements through mixed media of photography, double exposure, textures and light. Their work most often explores concepts of duality and has appeared in "Gulf Stream Literary", "The Good Life Review", "waxing & waning", Vocivia, Broken Antler, Spellbinder, New Limestone Review magazines and other places. They authored 3 poetry collections.

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