

# SCAB

ISSUE #16

## CONTRIBUTORS

Geoffroy C. Dedenis, Cloud Sinclair, River Vetter,  
Matthew Avriel Croissant, Nicholas Alexander Hayes,  
Mark Ward, Cletus Crow, Dominic Lyne, Mac Wilder,  
Jesse Hausknecht-Brown, Graysen Wolfe, J. A.  
Gullickson, Liam Chimba, Maggie Bowyer, Gabriel  
Wilder, Neal Allen Shipley, Ezra Mars, Ellie Chou, Kevin  
Johnson Murillo, John Sweet, lotus eater machine, Tim  
Frank, Pedro Minet, Maceo Nightingale, Meg Mellor,  
Sophia Veronsky, Lucas M., Daniel Sheen

**EDITOR'S NOTE**



March 2025

D.

## Phedro

Line 67. Bus. Standing uncomfortably due to the humanoid overload, so much so that an out-of-sight “Connasse” crept through my headphones despite Soft Cell's *Memorabilia* playing. I glance behind to see an obnoxious old hag flapping her way across the mass of bodies and heading straight into my direction.

So I quickly return to my initial posture — a deep, lost gaze onto the second arrondissement scrolling beneath my reflection studded with water droplet residue or dried spittle — in order to avoid any eye contact with the rickety cunt. But too late, I sense a movement that I try my best to eradicate from my consciousness. *It is* right next to me. *Touching* me with some part of its body. I keep playing dead until a fleshy withered hand thrusts a “priority” card right before my eyes, the way FBI agents did on TV in the nineties. “Désolé j’avoulais pas vous déranger, mais j’ai ma carte de vieille blabla” she approximately says below Marc Almond going *Mememememememe*. “Oh non pas de problème”, I reply, not looking or moving any part of my face while I can’t stop myself from making a prognosis about how long she has before she croaks.

I had to stand, so I stood, like a hunky jack-in-the-box, exposing the bare skin of my belly on which the coarse hairs rising from my boxer shorts emphasized my floating ribs

before disappearing in the shadow of my crop top. Gaspard gave it to me as he was getting too skeletonized to wear it, plus it fits my curves perfectly, as anything else. I wonder what he became. It's a yellow mayonnaise top, on which you can read JESUS LOVES ME BUT ONLY FOR MY COCK in iridescent lettering, if you're not too mesmerized by the puzzling reminiscences my features generate in a secret part of you. A discerning eye would spend hours analyzing the similarities with Michael Ontkian, Franco Nero, Ricardo Meneses, and something else. My Calvin Klein boots belonged to a long-haired long-forgotten hookup, maybe named Léo or Théo, or another not-so-long name involving the letter o. Shoe size is the one thing I can be certain we shared. Upon that, we find some cool jeans Thomas left behind two Halloweens ago, after crashing at my place for fifteen days or so, 'cause his landlord died as he invited me on our first date — she was living with him and we never found out what happened, neither if she died before or after we fucked. Life is interesting. Causes are natural.

I'm about to muse on whatever happened to Thomas, but another old skank deliberately kicks the walker of an even older, disabled lady, probably obstructing her way to achieve nothing since we're stuck. No one notices. Lucky me, that's my stop.

I hear a voice calling “Andrew”, making me turn to witness city workers rolling out a gargantuan green carpet along the floor,

to make things Christmas-friendly. Their body language gives “prisoners breaking rocks”, their eyes solemnly fixating on the ground, sealed as their expressions, just like those guys holding your casket at the back of that hearse. It's only the twenty-eighth of October.

*[Anyone pulling out Xmas advent calendars before late November should be put to death]*

Maybe no one said “Andrew” after all. Plus, it's not the name I use these days. I started having fun assuming others' identities while still studying at the Sorbonne.

And the fun never ended. For instance, among the IFM students, I pretended to be Count DaSilva, Ashkenazy, or whatever the mood felt like. I didn't care if they believed me or not as long as they played the game.

Walking through Palais Royal, from a distance, I observe the crooked choreographies traced by the passersby's gyrations. Tourists, rich Parisians, or rich tourists, roaming the work-in-progress decorated streets like lobotomized victims.

Not everyone was agreeing about the inoffensive nature of my masquerade. Dimitrio Cardacci, my alleged therapist, for instance. I've been told you had to pay for the therapy to actually work, and since it was Chaton — my BFF, who

basically adopted me after high school, at least financially — who was paying, who knows?

*“He had no opportunity to form a coherent ego, so the whole thing is image: Am I being projected? Accepted?”* At least that's what Mr Cardacci very unprofessionally confessed to Chaton's stepmother after his fifth dry Martini, adding that I had “*a humiliation problem*” related to where and who I came from. Because I “*strived on being what they weren't*”. What does an Italian midget cunt, not even looking or sounding Italian, know about anything anyway?

I'd lost touch with what “seeing someone” meant. When I did contact somebody, it was mostly because the claustrophobia from my “studio” [*a maid's room at the top of a pre-Revolution stone dungeon*] was getting too excruciating. In those moments [*which occur around 5 p.m. these days*] I felt compressed from the inside, like the hull of a submarine lowered too far into the abyss. My oxygen supplies were lacking. Not knowing how to navigate the outside world unless on a mission to get from point A to point B, I'd grab my phone or computer to send a “Parc?”, “Ciné?”, but more commonly “Drink?” The people who knew me expected no further bows, at least those who had managed to stay around, attaching themselves to a worthwhile quality they found in my intermittent presence.

Sometimes, in those hours when the pressure shifted me the wrong way, I would ask them if I could drop by. Since they all lead average lives with average time-wasters, I often received negative answers. One of them, however, left a possible way out of the equation despite their unavailability: “Je serai pas là”. It's hard to say who formulated this one first, but I know I answered, this time, and every time thereafter: “C'est pas grave”. That said, they let me occupy their empty living spaces while they were away. Thus literalized my existence as a non-human.

I spot a distinguished Benetton gay couple, classy in an almost retro way, holding hands. You wouldn't guess the blond one was injecting 3MMC and swallowing GHB as I fisted him two weeks ago. But I would. When they're close enough for the blond one to finally recognize me, his face turns into a mask. His pale-blue icy eyes stare at me as I suggest the beginning of an invisible smirk, and feel nothing.

Richelieu's street is surprisingly empty and I can actually use the sidewalk. There's an open manhole where some city work apparently stopped without further ado. I take the POSKA marker out of my right pocket. I draw a semi-circular arrow pointing towards the manhole, under which I write WISH YOU WERE HERE over the sidewalk.

The statue of Molière has been restored, but they've removed the children or the little angels that were at his side. Have they

been canceled? Its new sleekness makes it boring as fuck and I miss its decrepitated, crypto-threatening old version. But you know, life goes on. Soon, we'll all be living in Hilton hotels. All looking like each other at least on the inside. And we'll no longer have any reason to move from one city to another by any means because every city will be exactly like the one you'll already be living in. Not sure yet if it's what's gonna be happening to everyone or just to the survivors of whatever we're throwing ourselves into with such commitment. There'll no longer be class struggle, because the only survivors will be rich. And the rest will be gotten rid of or eaten. What was I saying? I took the wrong direction. I have to check the GPS more wisely.

Cute dog. Cute dog number two. This one, I almost touched him, but I'm like, no. It's gonna be awkward with the guy holding the leash plus I don't want to talk.

Figured out the address. Finally arrived at his door. Can't remember if I knocked but it opened instantly. Not looking at anyone as I enter the room. I hear something like “Pedro”, as I sit in front of the table where champagne is already poured in faggy glasses. I drink two and smile back at the wall, because even if I don't look at his face, I'm pretty sure he's smiling. I hear another “Pedro”, to which I react only five seconds later. Too busy wondering whether what I'm about to do to him still qualifies as therapy.

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Geoffroy C. Dedenis is a French artist based in Paris. He's making videos, photos, collages and tapes, that use sounds, pictures and texts, to design mental images through audiovisual material. His productions are tailored for their emotional impact and energy, without regard for the genres or the mediums and are dealing with (homo)sexual desire, love, happiness, emptiness and alienation.

## **BOY-TOY FACTORY**

I'M HERE BATTING MY PRETTY BOY LASHES AT YOU.

I'M ON YOUR LAP,

HANDS ON EITHER SIDE OF YOUR SHOULDERS

YOURS ARE ON MY RIBCAGE

WHITE CHALK/BONE BIRD CAGE

I GRIN & SAY KISS ME LIKE I'M YOUR WIFE BECAUSE I CAN TELL YOU'RE GETTING SCARED

IM LAUGHING NOW, A DEAD COWBOY HANGING ON BY THE SEAT OF HIS PANTS ON THE LONDON BRIDGE

IF YOU SQUINT CANDLES & STREETLAMPS CAN LOOK LIKE STARS

IF YOU'RE DRUNK ENOUGH ANY STREET CORNER CAN LOOK LIKE AN OPEN DOORWAY

IF YOU'VE CRIED ENOUGH THEN ANY WILL BE KIND ENOUGH

YOU TELL ME TO SETTLE DOWN FOR THE NIGHT

BABE YOU'RE GETTING THIN

YOUR MOUTH IS A ROW OF GRAVEYARDS

& THE FUCKING GROUNDSKEEPER KEEPS FORGETTING TO TRIM THE HEDGES

YOU'VE GOT HAIR BENEATH YOUR ARMS,

THE VERY SAME TICKLES YOUR BELLY & ALL THE OTHER GOOD AND PRECIOUS PLACES

YOU SIT HUNCHED ON YOUR SOFA

TEA'S GONE COLD

& MAMA WONT CALL

YOU'VE GOT CALLUSES FOR SKIN & YOUR CLIENTS CALL YOU PRETTY BUT YOU'RE STILL NOT MUCH OF A MAN

I'M A HOMOSEXUAL I TELL MYSELF IN THE SHOWER & MY DISH SOAP RESPONDS WITH "ONLY BECAUSE ALL WOMEN DO IS HURT YOU. SHOVE THEIR PERFECTLY MANICURED HANDS WHERE THEY DON'T BELONG. SCRATCH & GRIP. DARE TO CRY WOLF. GO AHEAD PRETTY BOY. I'LL JUST BRUISE YOUR LIP. IT WONT LOOK GOOD. WOMEN KICK & PUNCH YOU OR LOOK LIKE YOUR MOTHER."

I WANT TO LAUGH IT OFF BUT MY LIPS PULLED TIGHT INTO A SNARL & BEFORE I  
KNOW IT IM KNOCKING BACK BOTTLES & CALLING MYSELF TONY.

TONY

GOT IT FROM THE BACK OF A PORNO MAG BUT THAT DOESNT MATTER TO YOU DOES  
IT SWEETIE?

NOT WHEN YOU'RE BREATHING SO HEAVILY & BREAKING A SWEAT JUST FROM TAKING  
YOUR TIE OFF

CALLING ME ANTHONY UNDER YOUR BREATH AFTER YOUR SWEET LITTLE TEN-YEAR-  
OLD LITTLE BOY BACK HOME TUCKED UNDER LAVENDER SHEETS

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Cloud Sinclair (they/he) 24 LDN (publications include insta: [@yappybebop](#) and substack:  
[software version 7.0](#)).

## Sip

Your mom isn't home  
so we're feeling rebellious—

clumsy, unknowing hands  
grab a bottle, your fingers

grasp its neck. We  
go to your room

lock the door,  
even though there's

no one home.  
Here, you try it;

you tell me, pouring  
the redness into my cup.

And I don't hesitate,  
I take a long sip

like I've done this before  
(but you know I haven't),

I pull back, and  
a drop hangs from my

mouth. Heady. It's  
good; I tell you,

nothing to compare it to.  
You try; I tell you,

in that way that is  
not quite a demand

but still demands of you.  
I watch you

I watch the click of  
your neck as you swallow

and then I look away  
because looking at you

sometimes feels like  
a kick to the shin and

other times falling  
into the rain

and today it feels  
like having another sip

so I do, and it burns  
a little more this time.

They say if you skin your knee  
you should spit on it.

If you bit me  
I don't think I would bleed.

Heady. I take another sip.  
We sit on your bed,

we talk about school and  
your dreams and my brother,

and we don't talk about girls  
or how you'll leave next fall.

We should try smoking next;  
unfurl like cigarette ash.

You'd hold the stick in your mouth  
and then I'll hold it in mine

If I touched you, what  
would happen? I play

it in my mind, the soft rubble  
of your skin with

the soft rubble of mine.  
I want you to pry me open,

take all my secrets,  
rightfully yours. I want

your elbows and your knees  
and I've stopped listening and

no one's home and  
I'm feeling rebellious—

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River Vetter (they/them) is a queer and trans poet getting their MFA at UMass Boston. They like poems that get a little dirty, in one way or another. Their work has been published or is upcoming in *Impossible Archetype*, *Vagabond City*, and other magazines. Instagram [@riv.er.v](#)

## Anteretrograde Amnesia: A Study in Muscle Memory

There is a wicked misnomer of the ineffable  
Youth— or maybe it's just a joke  
That you aren't in on. You might have  
Been, once, before the scraped, worn knees  
Of childhood bike crashes turned to  
A story that you could only tell secondhand—  
Only verifiable because you can still see  
The scar tissue stretched over your kneecap.  
The ineffability is a song— an old, worn,  
Brass band standard that everybody, save  
For you, knows by heart. But your youth,  
It seemed, was profoundly effable. Though you tend  
to Find profundity in everything, and nothing. Oh,  
I just got the joke.

Do you remember it well? No,

I didn't think so—

Your days' arc at their zenith—  
(I think they call that a full moon.)  
They drip from your ears like so much warm  
sap;  
Or oil, rather, since they never seem to stick.

It was then,

A man, maybe, that shattered your *I am*  
And removed your *I was*. I suppose it could have been  
A boy. No, don't be stupid, I wasn't  
Talking about you. You weren't quite there,  
Yet, were you? Too drunk for your age— Chasing  
Raspberry Svedka with mango Pedialyte and  
Choking on it as it fought its way down

Your throat, which took quite a beating  
That night, didn't it? Being made to  
Swallow Newport-flavored spit  
(Between mouthfuls of raspberry-flavored  
Vomit.) (Between mouthfuls of, well,  
You know.)) You party animal, you.

But bruises don't want for memory. How many  
Speckles of then-hurt litter the expanse of you?  
Have you counted? You don't need to,  
But it might help to know how many  
Cracked, bleeding fists made you,  
Too, broken and throbbing, and leaking  
The warmed blood of a too-heavy drink. You  
Pretend not to like how it feels. I don't blame  
You— (And I bet that this is the first time  
You're hearing that, sad little thing.) Bleeding  
Beneath the skin is more chic,

Don't you think?

Even so, you are the screaming, bloodsoaked  
Babe of every ticking, ticking second— every  
Grain of hourglass sand that slips, falls  
Between your frost-firm, flaccid fingers.  
Poor thing, you couldn't hold on

If you tried.

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Matthew Avriel Croissant is a twenty-four-year-old English student at Clemson University. He is a writer of poetry as well as genre fiction.



## I'm Not There

*Come over.*

*Come here.*

*Are you coming now?*

The other top is in the loo and can't  
send pictures. It's 4am and my gut's  
unprepared, nervous, stumbling. *Left yet?*

Every nerve in him humming, a struck chord.  
To feel life accommodate him. He thrusts,  
vaguely nauseous, as always. Another  
man snoring on the sofa, eyes open.

He keeps telling me he's going to come,  
to just give me a moment. I'm happy  
to be meat. The sleeper watches, bitter.

The other top accidentally slams  
open the door, curtains betraying  
us in midweek daylight. I never came.

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Mark Ward is the author of *Nightlight* (Salmon Poetry, 2023) and five chapbooks: *Circumference* (FLP, 2018), *Carcass* (7KP, 2020), *HIKE* (Bear Creek, 2022), the interactive branching sonnet *Faultlines* (voidspace, 2024) and most recently, *I Was a Teenage Exorcist* (Chaps Poetry, 2024). Forthcoming books include *Masters*, an ekphrastic chapbook responding to dead queer male painters' work, from The Emma Press in 2025 and a second full-length collection, *Real Estate*, which will be published by Salmon in 2026. He edits *Impossible Archetype*, an international journal of LGBTQ+ poetry, now in its eighth year.

## FROM QUOTES BY W.C. FIELDS

go out in traffic and play  
dressed like an open grave  
our brains are warped  
at a certain age  
our heads soft as balloons  
later I'll let you ride  
piggy back on my buzz saw  
my sweet your eyes  
are like linseed pools my dove  
my pus my glow worm  
my heart is a bargain today  
will you take it

## STARBUCKS

« I'll pay the difference. »

Too fucking right you will. I'm not a fucking charity. I don't come cheap. I'm the full-fat, triple-shot, cream-on-top cunt that's secret menu, *bitch*.

This is going nowhere. Like life. The words of that last sentence are the same, safe for a letter change; you can even switch them. Simple, no? If only. Saw a dog lick his balls, then his owner's face. Is that the metaphor for life, or is it the simile? The wind brushed my face like a pair of fat, flaccid dicks. Let's turn that simile into a smile.

Fuck me. Pound me so fucking hard that I scream the whole building down into rubble. Barney Rubble. I'd let him fuck me. Blonde short arse, bet he's hung. Dinosaur dong.

« What's funny? »

Doesn't matter, not thinking about you, sweetie. I'm sure your dick will make the hole in the lid of this frappuccino look like the opening of the Mariana Trench. Oil is just Earth jizz.

I know how to make a word make a sound.

*You have just received a GRINDR message.*

Go on, open it up. Yeah, I just *Hey'd* you. Annoying, but you heard it, right?

This is fucking bullshit. My guy here staring at me like he thinks he still has a fucking chance in hell. Broad-back Cadillac. Quasimodo Tesla. At some point I'da given him a ride, but now I'm more Belle than Esmeralda. Fuck being Cinderella; when this cunt goes to the toilet, I ain't leaving no clues. I'm gone, gone. GONE GIRL.

Grin. Fake suck on my straw. If I hollow out my cheeks any more I'll pass as the Crypt Keeper, face like a cemetery fellator. How long can I justify a venti frappufuckaccino? Its namesake in minutes... doubled... venti<sup>2</sup>? When did I become so fucking nice? Pleasant is the word. Accommodating.

Belle-like... keeping a nice composure, interested expression, dead-eyed nod. Well bred... sorry, habit, well read, but oh so fucking bored, and Grindr is just one app away.

*You have just received a GRINDR message.*

Go on... take a look. You know you just heard it, and if your phone isn't on silent, everyone around you heard it too. Now all eyes are patiently waiting to see who reaches for their phone first. FYI, it's a dick pic this time.

I can wait. Unfortunately, doesn't look like I'm going anywhere yet. Look, message's read. *Image received* is such a time speeder. All that anticipation and...

...fooled you. Just a cock shot, yeah, of an actual cockerel. Blow me to fucking Bermuda. If you can actually do that, I'll be your little King of England, squat low on your throne—

I'm literally shaking my fucking head right now. What the fuck am I doing? This guy has no fucking clue. Thick as a pig in shit; probably has a boner in his pants thinking about what he's gonna do to me.

NOTHING. Nothing, mate. That's what you're gonna be doing. N O F I N G. Yup, not even a finger. Now I'm curious. Fuck... old temptations. No, no, no. Centre. Fucking, centre, head out of the fucking Trench, or is that pig trough in this case? There's not enough snow in the world to make me be his White... not anymore anyway. I've decorum. I've grace. I'm Lady D with a D. I survived my car crash. Have some dignity. I earned the right for that at least. If life had a Starbucks stamp card, mine would be overflowing.

Oooh...

I'm holding my breath. *Giving space*. I guess that's what we're calling it these fucking days. He seems to be thinking something major. Moving. Preparing. Luckily, I can hold my breath for a few minutes. Practice, baby.

« I need the toilet. »

Finafuckilly. Sweet little upward grin, like Belle to the Beast when given the keys to the library of worm-eaten books. Go. Go. Quick, quick. I'm still holding my fucking breath. I'm sure I'm turning purple or looking like I'm promising that I'll follow him and suck a maggot from the pages of his dusty cover flaps.

He's gone. Thank fuc—

*I'm gone.*

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Dominic Lyne is a London-based author. His work aims to challenge societal norms and provoke conversations about the frailties of life and the complexities of the human condition. Published by Rebel Satori Press, he has also appeared in anthologies published by Guts Publishing and HarperCollins.

## **She says she's only ever seen a body like mine in porn**

& that starts before this additional disorder,  
trashy keepsake in my cunt,  
her name entangled in the inevitable.  
Lot of looking & not much bearing witness.  
She says she's been searching for my rack her whole life.  
She's arching those Ayo Edebiri eyebrows  
& expecting an elaborate reality.  
I pour her the mythical onscreen.  
We make a good team:  
my tile, her shelves. Mostly I feint  
& she thinks it's a stagger.  
She doesn't say she's gonna cum, she just starts  
telling me *No one else will ever  
make you feel like this!*  
It'll take 'til after I'm gone to realize like  
usual she's talking to herself.

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Mac Wilder (ze/zem/zys or any pronouns) is a homebound high femme whose work explores queercrip sexuality, high-control Christianity, & their intersection. Zyr work appears or is forthcoming in *Sinister Wisdom*, *manywor(l)ds*, *Corporeal*, and *beestung*. Zyr self-published chapbooks and zines can be found at: [justfor.fans/assonance](https://justfor.fans/assonance).

**after *Velvet Goldmine***

christian bale and ewan mcgregor are fucking on the tv screen  
– on the 50 inch – in my childhood living room

*my lips are made of ivory and gold*

and i am sitting still on the couch, on the love seat in the corner,  
but i don't know if i know what love is,

with or without

flesh and raw energy, screaming and righteous anger and

there is something carnal, i cannot describe the look  
of a twitched lip and a fold of glittering eyeshadow

*you're a slick little girl*

is what lou reed said and i took that shit to heart –

my girlhood is now slick with drag and i'm performing something but  
no one has bothered to tell me what it is.

the bouncer didn't like it when i defaulted to a demure flirtation  
that didn't work, per se,

not any more

– and simply, crudely, turned me from girl to fag

there was no hair to be twirled nor lip to be dipped down into sexual suggestion –

no. my allotted time for that was up and now

sex marks me differently, cruelly, and i cannot walk on that stage,  
such things require work and the smell put me off so that –

i'm back to my childhood living room where i am enthralled.

trapped – i don't know what i'm supposed to learn from this – but i'm being told that

boys can fuck each other too and sometimes they are  
glitter and gold as well as flesh and blood and i think

– fuck, maybe my ivory tower is cracked and it's toppling over,  
gold coming in. to mend the cracks –

afterwards.

when the movie is over and christian bale and ewan mcgregor have consummated. and I, consumed, stand with my father and he speaks, vehemently, about guitar fellatio, and I have to pause –

*did you know that was supposed to be Iggy Pop?!*

yes, I tell him, yes I did.

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Jesse Hausknecht-Brown is a transexual writer and filmmaker from Iowa. Their literary work has appeared in the *Mount Holyoke Review* and *Snaggletooth Magazine*; their journalistic work has appeared in the *Mount Holyoke News*, *The Iowa Gazette*, and *Investigate Midwest*. He can be found on Instagram at [@heyjesseo0h](https://www.instagram.com/heyjesseo0h).

## **my father said he'll pray for me**

he's never struck me as the religious type—  
no sunday morning church, no penances, no amens,  
no lord our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name  
because he's already hollowed out my name in his throat,  
taken a pickaxe to the syllables i gave to him  
to carve them into something more palatable, more satiable  
so it doesn't soak his gums in blood & pus & bile when he evokes it.

either way.

i can't picture him kneeling by the altar until his knees feel cracked & bruised,  
wishing that he didn't have this weird daughter-  
not-daughter-maybe-son for a child.

he knows i will desecrate my body,  
turn it into a (w)holy site  
where knife cuts through flesh cuts through muscle cuts through rot.

i meet god on the operating table, my own willing crucifixion,  
chest flayed open as if to greet him with open arms:  
here is my heart, exposed, break open my ribs,  
take back the spare & i'll make my body worth it.

& once the surgeons wash their scalpels clean,  
will he pray for me now that god's buried himself  
in the casket of my body & stitched himself across my chest?

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Graysen Wolfe (they/he) is an openly queer educator currently based out of upstate New York. They hold an MA in English from the University of Maine and use writing to explore themes of queerness, death, and grief. They can be found on Instagram [@its\\_me\\_wolfiee](#).

## The Cruellest Joke

The cruelest joke I was ever told came silently in the sunlight. It floated in with the gentle breeze. It was drenched in sweet morning dew. I never saw it coming.

Like much-needed sutures, I believed I could bring things back together. Believed things could be fixed. When your hand pressed deep into the back of my skull, I felt what sleep must be like. My body grew limp and heavy. Breath slowed to a glacial pace. You pressed further and I could feel your fingertips creeping across the back of my tongue. You brushed against my uvula, but I couldn't bring myself to gag.

The cruelest joke I was ever told made me smile with disbelief. It landed without a parachute. It killed indiscriminately and without reason. I never saw it coming.

When I saw your fingernails inching past my lips, I knew it was time. I remembered my mantras and my favorite pieces of scripture:

*Hope is a lack of information. The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.*

It wasn't that I was seeking salvation. You could just never be a savior. I wanted your false flag operation. I wanted your alibi. I wanted every reason you could not so that I could.

The cruelest joke I was ever told didn't bring me to tears. It dropped me to the floor. It made me buck and writhe with ambivalence. I never saw it coming.

I could count the curves of your fingerprints easily now. My mouth was effortlessly wrapped around your wrist. You gently pressed your index and ring fingers into my vision for a better grip. Your middle finger pressed hard against the bridge of my nose. I knew your smallest knuckles were gripping the zygomatic and palatine bones in my eye sockets, but I couldn't feel a thing. When you started to pull, I leaned into it to help.

The cruelest joke I was ever told was described as ahead of its time. It wouldn't make sense now but it would when you're ready. I never saw it coming.

You pulled as hard as you could, my skull jerking forward. I lost my balance. We laughed together, not knowing what you expected to happen. The whites of my eyes bounced and rolled across my cheeks and you apologized for knocking them loose. I smiled, my teeth gently pushing against the soft skin of your wrist.



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J. A. Gullickson writes for other people during the day and for himself at night. He lives in Virginia.

## Split-Second Face

His adamantine back wore the sky, enclosed in beryl mirrors like Atlas—if Atlas could squat two plates and had a stricter training regime. He was the hands of a busy train running across my shoulders. Oops, my top button just fell off. He was the popular guy at my high school who'd taken pity on me, just to reveal his secret, coyish nerdiness just like me. Oh my gosh, thank you for offering yourself to me! He was demanding to see me eat whipped cream, wear a shirt with the care bears on it, tie myself up, tie him up. Before that, he was listening to me talk about my girlfriend. Before that, he was a massage gun made of octopus tentacles. Before that, a script of convex tablets. He was all of those things at once, two mirrors facing each other, a hall of fantasies that expanded outwards in infinitude, ceaselessly cold. The only continuity that I could find was in his name, it was the only permanence, even if it was symbolic. But I called him the ram.

He almost told me his name when we first met. His apartment was buried under a solid blue sky. It was dark inside. Crumbling. He led me to a hallway, through to the end of a spiral staircase where his face escaped the light. He parked me in the middle of the room and told me that no one was coming. It was just us. Don't be worried, everything is transactional. Conversation is an exchange of masks.

I was still unconvinced and, for some reason, he had drawn out a pack of cards from his thigh. The veneer of plastic scraped against his hip, then up, then towards me. Oh, the emperor, that's a good card. He flashed a man sitting on a throne, downcast eyes that led me towards two ram skulls for armrests. The staircase spun above me. A skylight was clad with a deep-blue paint. He pulled me further into the building where vinyls overflowed from the entrance to his room. He saw me staring at his hoarded collection and chuckled to himself. The image of a gazebo obscuring the sunlight, the architecture casting even, geometric patterns onto a finely cut field. It's Horse Rotorvator by Coil. An album about death and AIDS. Like Foucault? He squinted and ignored me, picking the album up as he unlatched the last lock and walked into his room. I crossed the threshold after him.

I was reeling from something. The ceiling was made of dark-blue blots, Rorschach tests that dripped down onto his cluttered room. His eyes were dark rectangles. They stared at

me and then to my side, towards his bed. I was apologising in case he could read my thoughts. No, no, it's alright, would you like a drink? He waded through the piles of vinyls and into an en-suite, producing an aquamarine cup. The water was spinning, sprinkles of what looked like salt were hidden on the top. He repeated his earlier statement that no one was in, we were free, no one was in. The words spun. Bones grew out of his temples.

I've never really believed in my memories. They're a collection of sounds pasted over the moment, the real moment that happened; something to obscure and colour the past like bad paint. I could never be relied on for my own history. Leave that to the people who knew me. The Horse Rotorvator thing might've just been another attempt to pull a pall over my head, to submerge myself in innocence like I did so often. Look at me, the sheep led by rams! It was pathetic, really, but unavoidable, automatic. I remembered feeling a hotness to my mouth, a tablet or a tongue or my own words spawning inside of me. Tasted like egg yolk.

Pink was a good colour on me. I had feminine features. And it would've been a waste not to enjoy them whilst they lasted, or at least to let the ram enjoy them. I had dreams. I tried to exhume those parts of myself, to dig them up like coffins, but only found gnawed, rotten wood.

Maybe it was all wood.

Oh, I was losing the point again. Watch it fly around. Chase it and find nothing. Just a pink shirt with a rainbow on the front and care bears on the back. I could lie about some prelapsarian past, bucolic fields outside of that apartment, but it would just be falling back into that lying point. I lived with the ram for weeks, months. I can't remember. But I enjoyed every second of it.

Love and death were two horns from the same face. Wasn't that the lesson that the universe had taught me? A father who loved me enough to cast me out, hypnotics that hated me enough to let me fall to sleep. I reached out towards him, towards the love/death horns, and gripped them tight. The ram should hate me enough to love me, to have enough

of me to let my mind cross that threshold, to sink in the ground and let me pass! Hate me. Love me. Just let me cross.

He handed me the shirt again. Red rhinestones adorned the hem of the garment. A shoddily cut v-neck, cropped at the waist. The water in my cup fizzed.

Rites of passage were things that just happened to me. Like running away. Or my first kiss. They came and went, trying to invite me into a state beyond apathy, but finding nothing. Nothing. The ram was much the same. His square pupils pulled at me, tried to force my own vision away from my chest and the care bear shirt. It was all the same. The sacred interrupted by the profane, the profane by the sacred, all of it spinning into one boring room where the penetralia meant nothing to me.

---

Liam Chimba (He/Him) is a graduate of Creative Writing and Philosophy from the University of Chichester. He lives on the East coast of England. Published in *Fugitives & Futurists*.

## predator

I curl your corpse  
into the crook of my arm,  
lull you gently to sleep  
    (the gash in your throat  
    bleeds into me, slowing  
    until we are matted together.  
    I lap at the wound, savoring  
    the last taste of you on my lips).

I dig my fingers into  
the decaying skin of your neck,  
thrust you off of me, then lick  
each of my appendages clean.

    You're stuck  
    in my bite,  
    the gap between  
    my front teeth.

I wipe my lips, smearing  
crimson across the scene  
    (my arms ache  
    with restraint,  
    a knife sliced  
    against my palm,  
    fingers twitching  
    towards your  
    prone figure).

There is not enough time  
before sunrise  
    (*it's blue hour* and  
    your warm hands  
    are still in my lap).

When I turn to leave,  
I don't say anything  
    (*wouldn't want to  
    wake the ghosts  
    and your hands  
    are cold*).

---

Maggie Bowyer (they/he) is a proud cat parent and the author of various poetry collections including *Homecoming* (2023) and *When I Bleed* (2021). They've been published in *Chapter House Journal*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Wishbone Words*, and more. Find their work on Instagram [@maggie.writes](https://www.instagram.com/maggie.writes).

## Cheap Spaghetti Western

Do you want me dead or alive?  
Did you tear all the wanted posters down just so that you could stop seeing my face?  
I've become the poster child for studs and transsexual men  
Have I taken enough drugs yet  
Or consumed enough alcohol  
To remind you of your deadbeat dad?  
This western tale does not end happily  
In the dry desert heat  
Of our Holiday Inn down in west Texas  
Our small shootout starts  
A duel to end the fighting we've been doing  
One last war to end all wars  
The bullet hits me straight in the chest  
You tell me,  
You've always seen me as a (wo)man

---

Gabriel Wilder (they/them) is a trans and queer poet based out of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Their debut poetry collection, *A Feminine Rage*, just released during summer 2024. Their work has also been featured in *Juice Journal* and *Aurora* and *Blossoms Poetry Magazine*. Their social media handles are [@theacademicbimbo](https://www.instagram.com/theacademicbimbo) on all platforms.

**Sometimes, when your memory denies me sleep, I Google your face**  
*after torrin a greathouse / for Matthew Shepard*

I.

It was early October, the first blush of fall seeping into the Aspens, when you were approached by two murderers (whose names deserve no remembrance) in a bar where at least one person likely smiled thinking you were one of those boys looking for love in the corners of someone else's mouth. The men offered to give you a ride home (planned to rob you then and later) but got a wild hair and took you as far out of town as they could, pistol-whipped and lashed and left you for dead on a split-rail fence (kept your wallet and your shoes in their truck). There are no pictures (I've looked, you were so handsome) but the media perseverated at the time on the brutality (your face completely covered in your blood, except where it was cleansed by your tears). You remained lashed to that fence eighteen hours until some cyclist found you (thought you were a scarecrow) and the doctors deemed you inoperable: fractures to your skull behind your right ear; severe brainstem damage; lacerations on your head, face, neck; your body lost the ability to regulate all vital functions. It was mid-October when you were taken off life support (you were nearly twenty-two).

II.

early October the first blush of fall seeping into  
a bar where  
you were one of those boys looking for  
a ride  
far out of town whipped and lashed and left  
on a split-rail fence kept your wallet and shoes in their truck  
the media perseverated on  
your face covered in your blood except  
your tears until  
your skull  
your right ear your head face neck  
lost  
you

III.

the first blush of fall seeping into  
you  
far out of town  
the media  
covered in your blood  
until  
your skull  
your head face neck  
your right ear  
lost

IV.

seeping into  
you  
far out of town  
your blood  
lashed and left  
your  
face  
you

---

Neal Allen Shipley (he/him) is a behavior analyst living in Colorado with a modest collection of pets and an unhinged collection of plants. His work can be found in *Impostor*, *Creation Magazine*, *Wyld Craft* and *The Talon Review*, among others. Despite the horrors, he loves a gourmet hot dog. You can find him on Instagram [@nealio9](https://www.instagram.com/nealio9).

## **All the Things I Am Because a Lover Left**

I am twelve thousand cut-off hands afraid to touch a living thing again.

I am a cactus shoved in the corner of your bedroom.

I am a crying newborn with fetal alcohol syndrome.

I am the sea and everything it has swallowed.

I am your throat and everything it has thrown up.

I am a heart broken.

I am addicted to being broken.

I am a puzzle with the missing piece thrown away in the world's largest landfill.

I am all the dreadful things you said I am and none of them.

I am kind but not today or tomorrow.

I am love in its nastiest form come to knock on your window in the cruelest night just to leave in the morning with no note.

I am the note.

## **Amateur**

My ass, a soft weight,  
solves the city  
where I want to be stupid, like unannounced,  
and hide in a plainspoken way.  
They'll remember my feet as berry stones  
or a gelatin column, arched like dessert  
and where would they find me  
under all this world?  
It's the first time ever  
of me, me, moi  
and you'll have to be  
so gentle with me  
in this feather cap.  
Nothing could be as special as that.

## This Is Libidinal

Éleanor was late to the party. She looked like a ghost. No one would dance with her. She stood by the punch bowl and watched the boys rub their dicks against their classmates. She would have liked to be in that position.

“Hey! Elly.”

That was Maurice. They were in Chemistry class together.

“Hi.”

The sound exited her braces awkwardly.

“Are you by yourself?”

“Tina said she couldn’t come.”

“Oh, I see.”

They had nothing real to say to each other, nor was there any real chemistry between them, so M. left as soon as the pause in their exchange was long enough to justify it.

É. masturbated furiously in the bathroom. She was quick to wash her hands when she was finished. The next girl inside was an Asian called Janet. J. was secretly attracted to Tina, É.’s best friend, but there was a glow in É.’s pallid face as they switched places, and J. wanted to kiss É.’s neck.

Downstairs, É. was given a shot of vodka by Pedro, another half-Asian boy. She felt less ugly, and even began to dance by the stairwell. P. whispered something in her ear; she couldn’t hear it.

“Huh!?”

“Nevermind.”

She imagined him grabbing her cunt the way she saw T. grab Jeremy’s balls at the party last week. She half-didn’t mind the idea.

P. was buff. His skin looked orange in the light.

---

Kevin Johnson Murillo works as a translator en el Valle Central, Costa Rica. Born Canadian. He's contributed some things to *EgoPHobia*, *samfiftyfour*, and *Expat Press*, and his favorite place is nowhere.

## **cruelty for cruelty's sake**

and all the good times spent  
fucking in windowless rooms,  
lights out and stoned,  
and all the hours wasted  
trying to find the goddamn door

all the days spent crawling around  
looking for lamps,  
for light switches,  
for the rest of the percocets,  
and no one ever stops to ask why  
the kid in the corner won't  
stop crying

no one ever stops to ask  
why he's on fire

little fucker's always just there

always just begging  
for attention

---

John Sweet sends greetings from the rural wastelands of upstate NY. He is a firm believer in writing as catharsis and in compassionate nihilism. His poetry collections include *NO ONE STARVES IN A NATION OF CORPSES* (2020 Analog Submission Press) and *NOT EVERYTHING IS ABOUT YOU* (2024 Apathy Press Poets).

**i only keep you around because i'm lonely**

photos of new friends  
wonder how long it will be  
til you delete them

i can't be honest  
i want to so badly say:  
"you are a rapist"

i look at your posts  
watching you fuck your life up  
makes me feel better

i hate you so much  
i only keep you around  
because i'm lonely

---

lotus eater machine is an artist (who wishes they weren't one). their art can (regrettably) be found on [deviantart](#), [youtube](#), and [substack](#).

## How to Make a Friend in Prison

Prison is the hardest place  
to make a solid bud.  
But there are some lonely fiends  
with blistered veins  
bursting out like stars  
at deepest darkest dawn.  
So, seize a hopped-up cell mate  
the one with flowers  
in his socks,  
prod him with a taser  
into your salivating lair.  
Your friend will taste  
your filthy tears  
with his rubber-bladed tongue.  
He'll drink your massage oil  
and shine your gold front teeth.  
Then slip him something dark  
and turn the lights down low,  
he'll be comatose in minutes  
as you cuff him to your cot.  
You can watch the eastern storms  
spiral on ABC  
and dream of mating lice  
teeming around your toes.  
Soon enough, your friend  
will die of septic scabs  
from crouching on his knees.  
Who cares? he was a haughty little snitch  
with herpes in his blood  
and grungy spunk beneath his nails.  
Yes, it's sad  
you have no friends  
but junkies  
are a dime a dozen.

Soon, another hollow piece  
will saunter past your door  
and slurp your flaccid limb.  
Just give a siren's call  
and dash your brains  
into a pulp of finest relish.

---

Tim Frank's work has been published in *Bending Genres*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *The Metaworker* and elsewhere. He has been nominated for Best Small Fictions. His debut chapbook is *An Advert Can Be Beautiful in the Right Shade of Death* (C22 Press '24).



### **SOMETHING LACKING**

heard he was waiting for me wasn't sure why or for what exactly or maybe i was but it's nice to pretend to dry out once in a while could feel the filament twisting and the slit icing the skin to turn it into glass from which i could see his reflection in the back of the theater counting his money while i walked up the stairs felt like i was coming out of the screen and in a way i was i mean i was in there and then here i was couldn't even wait till the credits rolled and the crowd erupted before leaving the image to become the shadow they said he had me requested pressed his knee to my hip and handed me candyland bills made his way with me to the nearest diner and then the limo and then his penthouse got a pretty role and a pretty cloak to store between the tutu and the OCP until my last sacrifice next spring last week i got bludgeoned by a serial killer it was fun you see he was by the brownstone bridge like it said in the script told me he knew me then held me tight i ran and ran and ran with my tear leaking death got to the arcade

spotted some johns from preschool and elementary and then my best friend who won't be my boyfriend but all his boyfriends hate me 'cause he won't shut up about how special he feels for being friends with me must be the definition of what stardom is i can't count can't read i'll be posing with my head blown on the red carpet and a plastic angel will come down to read my line for me i was supposed to ask do you know me? but all i could let out was a stutter and a jet of piss the cuffs were already bent pricking into my wrists like i was about to get crucified but i only got a headshot overexposed into pale constellations of boyish radiation all the channels broadcasted it some alien got notice cornered me in the studio bathroom said my face should be plucked out and auctioned to be the face of the apocalypse are you there? still or maybe walking somewhere i'm always walking somewhere no feet or street but trust me i'll always get there he says i smell metallic *is that état libre? ghost in the shell? or the one that smells like blood and sperm and spit? can't tell the difference between a ghost and a pit open your mouth so i can spit trust me this is real though you'll never be* but what if i kill? instead of opening my mouth so you can spit? what if the hole could toss it back to you what if it speaks? if i decided to kill you right here right now before you turn me on my back stain my cheek grab the needle what if i decided to cut the world open before you could cut me what if? would that just be another way to get myself killed? at the end of the day sir is all this spit all this pit just me?

---

Pedro Minet is a writer and artist from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He's been published in *SCAB* a few times. Find him on Instagram [@pedrominet](https://www.instagram.com/pedrominet).

## SEND ME THE HEAD OF NORSEGOD

His bleached blonde hair glowed under the streetlights  
And his pet monkey crawled around his neck.  
Please don't go back to New York,  
The toilet is filled with duck feathers  
And your jeans are ripped  
And your arms are crossed  
And your soda has been sipped.  
Poop in my underwear and a snake wrapped around my arm.  
A warm night, filled with cotton candy skies,  
There was a party inside the mansion on the hills.  
The chandelier shined like a rat with 9 eyes  
And they sniffed the remaining cocaine with their droopy bird noses.  
Dogs on leashes barking and biting through toys  
I was wearing this suit that was too big for my body  
And the sleeves covered my arms and hands.

Violin streetlights danced under the burning building  
Like a pencil without a hand  
Gaze upon the night sky of terror street  
With a soul full of bird poop  
And she wore a polka dot dress  
That cost \$50 and two buckteeth quarters.  
What's there to write about when  
my phone is tapped by the government  
Doctor fed banana  
colored pills to cure my broken foot  
Like a monkey swinging from a yellow tooth  
"Suck my foot."  
"It smells so bad though."  
And  
    she  
        ripped the polka dot  
                dress.

## Gods Like Us

Flashlight beaming in your face  
UFO style.

Real talk, full disclosure:  
What do you think of my body now?

Is my hair too short and others too long?  
Are my legs pressed together too tight?  
Do you want it raw, the truth? Or do you want in.

Does my unsexed divine demeanor make you feel insecure?  
How about the phallus I choose to bear? It's pink and sparkly and bigger than yours.

Are you a man?  
I don't think so.

Twist the story, change the narrative, flip it.

You dog.

But I pity the fool, I look in the mirror – no smoke.

And I laugh at what I see.  
Poor baby.

Put your hand on my cunt to feel my warmth  
Slip inside me for a deluded sense of motherly love  
'Cause you won't get any up here, Ponyboy.

Gods like us don't go to hell but you're a self-righteous sinner.

I'd tell you to go back to the pit of despair you grovelled from  
& relapse in the abyss of your bed

But hell froze over without you  
& your childhood bed will have to do.

I'm untouchable.

Queers have wings that spread smooth like butter  
And you can't see them in the dark.

---

Meg Mellor is a genderqueer poet and short-story writer from Montréal, Québec. Based in Toronto, Mellor travels, meets strangers in hostels, writes, immerses themselves in queer-culture spaces, drinks too much coffee, and eats good food. Their literary work targets themes of intersectionality and often focuses on generational violence, trauma, and queer identities. More of their work is forthcoming in *The Trinity Review*.

## Morning Star

*“On the day the Lord gives you relief from your suffering and turmoil and from the harsh labour forced on you, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has come to an end! How his fury has ended!” - Isaiah 14:3-5*

Tina feels violent

(she got evicted yesterday)

Tina feels empty

(she betrays who she loves)

She threw up

(eye sockets deeper than penetration)

Neon laser beams lights fill the empty basement

(only two remain)

(parties are for losers)

Sitting on a stained couch

(murders probably happened there)

(everyone is gone)

(the beer cans pile on top of each other)

(like a mosh pit)

Black boots

Neon-green hair

Scars from her mind made present

Cigarette smells

Oh my god

Her urges consume her

(will he notice her)

(she pees herself from the beer)

(she feels turned on)

Oh my god

She is too young

SAVE HER

(acts annoyed)

She can't see

She takes out her weed stash she has been hiding  
(the only light she is able to see)

Life is amusing

She only got here yesterday

She grabs her phallus bong from her bag  
(she got it from a corner store)  
(thought it was funny)  
(her tears stain her face)

Jamie walks downstairs from the empty kitchen  
(empty pizza boxes line the counter)

(basement)  
(mold lives here)  
(dust floats like glitter)

(pitch drop noises)

“Skinhead”

(bald)

Straight edge

(pleasing god)

(he might be gay)

Jamie

(no feeling)

He sits on the couch next to Tina

Oh my god  
Respectable to the king was once this basement  
Youth genocide

(he sees her deformities)  
(makes him question his sexuality)  
(makes him hard)

(he betrayed him)

## I CAN'T BE MYSELF

Tina sees him for once  
Doesn't see him anymore  
(wants to hurt him)

## WE ARE THE SAME

(her eyes close)  
(how she talks to god)  
(she says she can)

## CAN YOU TELL THAT I AM A SINNER?

Cathedral in flames

She passes him the bong  
(he takes a hit)

Time kills

Jokes about the circumstances

## I DESIRE SIN

(he sucks on it)  
(he likes it)  
(they laugh)

He stands

(zipper unzips)  
(flings out)  
(disobey)  
(his cock lies still of disappointment)  
(he is high)

Tina doesn't care

Shoves it up herself to feel human  
(the bong)  
(maybe she'll be turned on)

Stickers of failed experiments

Alcohol

(not Jesus approved)

(beer cans)

(fluttering pain bruises line his back)

(not from shows)

(he is sensitive)

(wants to wear dresses)

I AM NOT WEAK

Tina takes her pants down

(for god to see)

He stares at her pussy

(looks like the entrance to hell)

(not for him)

(she still loves him)

(not him)

(she suffers)

A cross lies across her chest

He is repressing

He is smiling

She is smiling

Eyes interlocking

LET'S STAY IN THIS MOMENT

He is pretending he doesn't hate women

(he should hate men)

CLEANSE ME OF MY IMPURITY

Jamie stares at Tina

(he finds her confidence infantile)

(she finds his brain to be purple)

(eyes entranced in an ocean of kaleidoscope visions)

The smiles disappear

They are both naked now  
(bodies are objects)

(hating women)  
(wanting to tie them all up and shoot them)

Tina masturbates  
Tina feels sexy  
(she rubs her clit piercing for feminism)  
(nothing comes)  
(self-pleasure is guilt)

YOU SEEM KINKY

She belongs to something better  
She wants to go home  
She wants to be safe

I SEE SOMETHING IN YOU I DESIRE

He sees his mom in her  
(there is no escape)

Visions of the high hallelujah

Has a loaded gun  
It lies on his side

WOULDN'T IT BE FUCKING INSANE IF I SHOT THIS BITCH  
(the gun is aimed at her)

Tina looks at peace

(all women are pigs)

(god won't save her)  
(she's fucked him though)

Stranger danger

(the gun goes off)

I CAN NEVER ESCAPE YOU  
(Blood splatters on the couch like a hipster art piece)

PEACE BE WITH YOU  
(a fucking man)

Her eyes go blank  
(at peace)  
Bullet wound to the heart

Visions of god  
(heroin tracks)

Sent to earth  
(angel skin)  
(she was loved the most)

(he can't escape)  
(femininity haunts him)

WHAT HAVE I DONE?

Takes his things  
Runs  
Leaves her body there  
Like she was rust who was destined for pipes  
Eyes full of life

I LOVE YOU  
(is he god)

Tina arrives  
She has been waiting

Tina strips  
(for him)  
(sucking him off)

She loves him  
She is back home  
She cares for him

Afterparty visions

Childhood wonders

Adulthood wasted

Living to come back to him

Eternal regret

YOU ARE FREE AGAIN

---

Sophia Veronsky is a writer and visual artist from New Jersey. She has been published in *Expat Press*. You can find her work in other places such as Substack [@hellboundhearts](#) and on Instagram [@sveronsky](#).

## **Reasons Why I Love It When He Rapes Me/Reasons Why I Hate It When He Rapes Me**

Because he wants me to cry.

Because he knows I like being hurt: the titillating sting of pain,  
the shame I feel after—

because it differentiates me from him.

Because I know he's in control and I'm not.

Because there's comfort within the filth.

Because in my absolute abjection I possess a purer not-power power.

Because I will always think of his hands at night—and then

I will never want to be touched by someone else.

Because the love he gives me is the last I will get:

because nobody wants spoiled flesh, anyway.

It's because he wants me to cry.

## The Empty

I'M HUNGRY. I don't think there's any other way for this story to start. I haven't eaten in three days and there's a hue to the world that reminds me of sand. It's a sickly color, like the desert, like when the sky gets funny before a storm rolls in.

I dig my last Marlboro Red out of my pocket as I pass the community pool, the chlorine making my nose scrunch up. It's one of those things about this place—no matter how far I walk, that fuckin' smell follows me everywhere, tight-clinging to my skin like when my little sister puts on way too much of Mom's perfume.

Not that many people hung out at the pool last year. Some boy, thirteen maybe, all bones and summer tan, cracked his head open on the springboard and that was enough to make 'em shut it down for the rest of the season. I remember I had some cool red shorts that summer. The same color as the slick pool of blood on the tile, and sometimes I get stuck thinking about that. All that water and blood and skin and bone together, everything all mixed up and wrong, kinda like how my brain feels when I get to thinking too hard. I don't know, maybe I'm not remembering it right. But I remember him doing the scary shaking on the tiles. I know that much. And then I remember running home and jerking off because I thought he was cute or something.

Wiping the spit from my mouth, I cut across the gas station parking lot, heading towards the edge of our estate where the tower blocks stand guard like ancient brutal robots against the darkening sky. Carpets of weeds invade the yellowing grass around a burnt-out car, choking out the engine, threatening to take over.

Two banger kids selling meth or crack or brown or who-knows-what are sat on a partially exploded couch on the corner of Westview. They give me the stink eye. Even though they're younger than me. Even though I live here!

I roll my eyes at them.

What are they gonna do? Make my day even worse?

I pass the gross communal dumpsters where all the flies hang out, but then I loiter in the doorway of our tower for as long as I can because at this time of night the neighbourhood is almost peaceful, and for a second I think about not going back inside at all. But then someone has to get the girls their supper, and let's be honest, Tyler's probably well into his usual bender by now—always watching football way more than he ever watches the girls. Or Mom for that matter. The Mom-shaped woman. And I say that

because real moms don't push you down the stairs and leave you lying on the floor with your arm broke while they go out to party. I'm pretty sure that was the time she didn't come back for two days. I was seven years old. But I don't think on that anymore because it makes me go all funny inside.

I stumble into the stairwell, graffiti covering the walls. Stick figures. Tags. Local gang signs. After running up five flights of stairs—the fucking elevator is always broken—my breath's coming hard as I palm the key with my greasy thumb, relieved to find the door's not double-locked tonight, that the chain is still hangin' down loose.

It's dark inside, the air close and hot with the smell of weed, my eyes forever confused and streaming. But at least there's no shouting. No crashing or splintering noises. Although it's so dark in here that at first I think we don't got no power 'cause maybe Tyler forgot to pay the bill again, or maybe he ripped out the fuse box like he done before. "You fuckin' people are stealing my electricity," he screams, yanking out the fuses with his bare hands—the memory of sparks and frothing teeth in the darkness. Fuckin' idiot! But no, it ain't that neither, 'cause through a crack in the living room door I can plainly see the wild blue light from the TV dancing silent on the walls. It must be on mute for some reason.

I've no idea who's here, so I do the sneaky walk down the hall with my heart going bang and my head going crash but eventually I make it through the house without disturbing anyone. Inside my room I wipe the dark from my eyes, reaching for the light switch and throwing the bolts on my door. I have two of them now. Then I toe off my shoes and crash-land on the bed, open schoolbooks bouncing, loose pieces of paper fluttering through the air like startled birds before they all get sleepy and fall down dead in the corners.

The floor itself is a wasteland of unwashed clothes. Anything could be under all that shit. Pirate gold or dinosaur bones or anything! But at least my half-empty vodka bottle is still there, sat beside the Playgirl mag I just *had* to steal from the new gas station last weekend. The vodka looks exactly like an old bottle of water. That's my secret. That's why no one else has touched it.

But as I roll over, I spot a single pill lying white and still on the blanket. I don't even know what it is but I pick it up and dry-swallow it without thinking, even though I'm pretty sure I read somewhere that you can burn a hole in your throat like that—and that's when I smile, thinking about how skinny my corpse would look if I died right now.

THE FIRST TIME I skipped a meal on purpose was two years ago. I was ten. I don't know why I done it considering our history. As a family I mean. I should've just been happy we had any sorta food at all. But that was when the Mom-shaped woman had just took up with Tyler, who said he was a businessman, although in our neighborhood that's usually just code for selling drugs. But whatever—for once we actually had food in the cupboards. And alcohol. And heroin.

But that day my head said no to food. So I went to bed with my gut hollow and growling. And that's when it started. Although even back then I knew the sick joke of it, because I'd always gone hungry, long as I could remember, even though I'm pretty sure no one else ever thought much about it, 'cept for me. I'd thought about it a lot. But then something magic happened, and the more I said no to food the more I loved the feeling of the hole inside, that feeling of empty. Like when you're half-asleep and everything feels weird and floaty. Then one day I noticed my clothes were getting bigger. Weirdly, it started in my wrists. But soon enough it was crawling up my arms and down my chest, one rib at a time. I even had to poke new holes in all of my belts using a tool set I found in the laundry room.

My body felt weird, but good weird, like I was makin' somethin' new that only I could feel. I'd sit in class for hours playing with my newly jutting collarbones. Those little knobby bones in my wrists. And when I got home I'd lie in bed and float on the white clouds of empty, my fingers doing the counting dance on each flaring rib, almost like my hands were playing a tune, up and down, up and down, hypnotic, like the strings of my old guitar.

I don't know what it was. Maybe I just wanted to see how long I could go before I broke. Or maybe I just liked wrapping my fingers round my arm, or watching the pointy hip bones make tiny mountains under my skin. Because I really did like it. I liked this careful control of myself. It made me feel safe. The way it kept me in check. Kept me empty. Kept me from feeling anything whenever Tyler fucked me.

And over the years the empty came and went like a tide. Sometimes big and loud in my head like a drum and sometimes lying quiet for days at a time. But it never went far. It was always just around the next corner, humming its squeaky little tune. The tune only I could hear. And if I ever got too spinny in my brain I'd go and eat something and feel a little better and then I'd start all over again. And if I had to sit down in the shower, or if my skin bruised easily, or if I failed a quiz at school because the empty drowned out all my thoughts and the world got small and blue and soft and very far below me, well, that's no big deal, it weren't like I was *dying*. And anyway, I never thought about that stuff when I started up

again. I'd just wake up feeling wrong. I'd wake up with my knees going purple and a thick coating of hurt lining my throat. I'd wake up and I weren't interested in breakfast, or lunch, and by dinnertime I'd remember how much I loved that happy-dizzy feeling of hunger, that sick kinda pleasure of your legs shaking weak underneath you, like that day I jumped on Mike's trampoline for too long. But mostly I liked that nobody else knew about the empty. It was a secret between me and me only.

But after a week of being empty, the hungry would start being loud again. Like whenever Tyler used his angry voice. So then there might be a sandwich or two, or three, and maybe some doritos and a slushee and two helpings of tuna casserole—and before you know it I'm in the bathroom, making it all come back up.

Trouble was, I got to like throwing up. I liked doing it even if I didn't eat too much. Even if it was just one slice of bacon and a small tub of shitty yogurt. If it felt too heavy in my stomach, I got rid of it. My knuckles bloody and raw, my face puffy and red, my throat all scratched up inside like when you use the scrubby side of a sponge. But when I stood up again, I'd never felt lighter, like I could just float away.

AFTER MAKING SUPPER FOR the girls I head back to my room. Throw the locks on my door. Crash-land on the bed. I'm still empty. Course I am. Can't remember the last time I wasn't. But as I lie here, I'm thinkin' there's a certain kinda holiness to the act of starvation. In the way my head grows so light I can see angels when I stand up too fast. In the way the sun shines through my ribcage. In the way I'm certain that one morning I'll wake up to find there's nothin' more I have to lose and that will be the end.

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Daniel Sheen is a queer artist and writer. He's been nominated for the 2023 Pushcart Awards, Longlisted for the 2024 Voyage YA Award, and Longlisted for the 2025 Caledonian First Novel award. He's currently editing a zine, curating a gallery show, and writing his debut trilogy of novels. Find him at: [www.danielsheen.net](http://www.danielsheen.net), [@DanielSheenUK](https://twitter.com/DanielSheenUK) on Twitter, and [disaffected.youth](https://www.instagram.com/disaffected.youth) on Instagram.

## **AFTERWORD**

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