Exist otherwise

#9 January 2024

“I love you.
That should
be enough
for the whole
solar system.”

– Claude Cahun



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Melissa Coffey

Nightfall in a Fenced Arcadia

Gliding through the half-dark, this preternatural humidity caresses my skin like an unseen lover. I am the moth's muffled flight through twilight, borne by the hum and whir of bicycle wheels. I'm seeking the moon—or hoping it finds me.

Jagged teeth of buildings gnash against the skyline.This city—lock-jawed in lockdown, holding me hostage for months, clamped tight on us all—finally risks a yawn, just wide enough for my eyes to catch a crescent moon, rising on the steam of humidity. Moon keeping pace with me, on my bicycle seat with a view.

Can I fill my tyres with helium, drifting upwards like a balloon to meet the moon? Leaning into the curve of its amber aura, coasting the boundary between dark and light. These imaginings, symptoms of lunacy, and as soon as I question the impossible,I fall—

back to earth like Icarus, back into my body—the seductive night removing my coat. I'm a red streak red bike in the night—dreaming of meteors. Fast, but lacking levity, trapped in gravity.

Selene is shy tonight, revealing only the glow of a smile behind lowered veil. Or the tease of a wink, beneath a kohl-shaded lid. Her charms, made more elusive with distance, she's a mistress of mystery tonight. Aching into her full potential—

like the night-drunk whoops—mating cries from mouths unmasked in defiance. Erupting from the dark of the park I pass through—although gates of this fenced Arcadia close at curfew. Cries underscored by pulsing beats of music, aural offerings to the wild gods—as they try to fit feet to cloven-footed imprints in the grass of their mythic unconscious. Untamed choreographies of unbridled ecstasies, as they try to spring fur from their follicles. All their wildness not quite lost, but not quite found. Impatient for their own full moons—they're howling for the lack.

Look up, beyond Selene's subtle beauty—to a silver-sequined Venus, glittering audacity. Eclipsing Antares with her radiance, flirting brazenly with the sting in Scorpius'

tail—she's survived some slings and arrows in her time. Her burning brightness sparks a longing—preternatural—for you. Alone, amongst this frantic bacchanal, the ache of your absence sears through me, like the sting of Scorpius in my blood. And the night sky, lake-still, reflects back only your face.

I yearn into the dark, into the distance, uttering your name—and I know you hear me, across this starlit infinity—with the heart-bound instinct of your inner ear. I imagine our bare feet, finding those wild imprints.

Skin scented with humidity, laughter rising to meet the moon.



Jennifer Elise Wang

Snow Day



L. A. Ballesteros Gentile

Make Me Great

Make me Irresistible
Such that no desire
Is left unchecked
In my presence.

Make me Large,
Make me so big
Every wall and sea
Parts upon beholding me.

Make me that which
Receives the daily worship,
That which knows its own value
And knows that it is known.

Make it so that
I cannot be forgotten,
So that my image carves itself
Deep in my watchers.

Make it so, my dear,
So that I may walk along
These empty streets and
Myself cause an explosion,

So that I may bring forth
Joy and Jubilation in those
Who surround my Being
By the sheer fact of Me.

Make me all of this
And do it now,
And then perhaps we'll see
What it is to be made Holy.

Kait Quinn

& Still Your Indian Paintbrush Mouth

& still my heart clenched / in her tight little fist. / & still / your kaleidoscope irises / imprinted / into my chewed bubblegum core. / & still rose petal blind. & still stitched / to that yellow mattress. & / still. / & still / a coal mine throat / stolen canary. / & still the moon. / & still the sun. / & still an unfulfilled promise wrapped / in a band of white around my fourth finger. / & still the trees. / & still the birds. / & still my blood rushes toward you no matter how / many poems I claim myself lunar. / & still space. / & still rings around Saturn. / & still my pen in your orbit—hush, felt tip, hush! / & still wings plucked. / & still moth to porch light. / & still hackneyed. / & still Rio Grande. / & still bluebonnet currents / cicada drawl / cooling back of the neck with cold glass / condensation. / & still your blood orange mouth / beckoning. / & still. / the caged sparrow split open / ribs / cracked by acid pull.

Katherine Quevedo

Backward Compatibility (Quinceañera on a Generation Ship)

This poem was first published in Apparition Literary Magazine.

By the time you receive our message,
you should be turning 15!
If we calculated correctly.
This is rocket science, after all.

You're a young woman now.
        Now. Such a strange concept,
        since we'll all have aged much more than you.

We hope the dress fits.
The one your parents agreed to pack before launch.
The one the color of nebulae viewed through a telescope,
        enhancing what human eyes cannot see—
magentas and reds,
        the increasing wavelength of light.

We imagine your first dance,
gown swirling around you
as you hurtle between stars.

La familia misses you.
You haven't had enough time to miss us, but
todo está bien.
        It has to be *bien.*
        What other choice have we?

We wish we could wish you
a happy Sweet 16
in one more of your years,
but that will be up to our children and their children
and the backward compatibility
of our technology with yours.

We have faith
that *la sangre* runs as wide as it does deep,
magentas and reds flowing between stars,
a vibrance waiting to reward the right lenses.



Nicola de Vera

Breathtaking

In retrospect, Death Valley had been ironic and foreboding.

By sheer coincidence, our five-year anniversary happened to fall on the longest day of the year. Neither of us were particularly superstitious nor into astrology, but the summer solstice was said to bring forth luck, which we considered a good omen and yet another reason to go big on celebrations.

It had been Allie's idea that we take time off and make the trip to Death Valley to soak in the glory of daylight. We were supposed to hike and set up camp at a secluded spot at an elevation of 7400 feet—the Sun traversing its longest path through the sky as the two of us embarked on our own lengthy adventure.

I struggled to catch my breath every so often on the trek upwards, but I had concealed my challenges well enough for Allie to not detect any cause for alarm. Both of us knew that she had the more active lifestyle between the two of us, while I was content spending most of my days in front of my laptop, with an unhealthy cigarette habit that had been hard to quit.

I had known about my diagnosis then, but in my mind, it had not been the right time to bring it up.

"Christine, get up here!" Allie called out. She marveled at the view as I followed shortly after, astonished by the magnificence of the canyons and the sand dunes.

"It's all stunning," I said, my words unable to do Mother Nature justice. It was only one of many moments that day that took my breath away.

I remember Allie's radiance as the sunlight illuminated her gorgeous face at just the perfect angle during her afternoon meditation. I remember her smiles, her soft kisses, and her body on top of mine, drenched in sweat in broad daylight—neither of us patient enough to wait for the sun to set to engage in acts of intimacy. I remember us laughing and singing and dancing by the campfire in the evening, with only the moon as our witness—the love of two women free of judgment from the world.

I wish I had known then that that day would've been the last summer solstice I would experience in my lifetime. I wish I had acknowledged the signs and had myself checked earlier that could have afforded me more options and more time. I wish I had told Allie sooner about the cancer that had infiltrated my lungs. It had been selfish of me to withhold that information from the woman I loved, but who could blame me for not wanting her to live in fear?

I lie on the hospital bed with a ventilator pumping oxygen to my lungs to help me stay alive. But as I drift in and out of consciousness, I know that it is the warmth and quiet comfort of Allie's hands intertwined with mine, adorned with two rings in our fingers, that keep me breathing.



anonymous

i asked you not to

i asked you not to love me so
you put it in a brown paper bag and left
it on the front seat of my car

if you love a butterfly
you should put it in a brown paper bag and let
it find it's way out

i am not that butterfly
i am not that paper bag
i am not in the front seat of my car

i asked you to love me and then
i didn't remember why so
i asked you not to love me

i asked you not to love me so
i asked you to love me so
you put it on the empty seat of my car

if you dream that you are a butterfly
how do you know that you're not
in a brown paper bag dreaming that

you're in the driver's seat of my car
i left the window open for you
to flutter in and take the wheel

leave a brown paper bag on
the front seat when you leave me
when i asked you not to love me not

i asked you not to confuse me
with somebody who gave a damn
about your butterfly dreaming

i asked you to set me free so
you did only you didn't you
loved me you loved me not

i am that butterfly
i am in that paper brown bag
dreaming that i am not
in love



Vincenzo Cohen

Embrace of Lands and People



Painting carried out in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and inspired by the first peace treaty in history. The agreement established the respective spheres of influence between the Egyptians and Hittites after the Battle of Qadeš (1274 BC). The painting depicts two figures (one Semitic, the other Jewish) who embody two lands, two different cultures and religious traditions in the act of embracing each other as a sign of peace between populations.

Ibrahim Salihu

Hygge

Can I live with the denial of your love?
Patches from codices of parchment, a rich repository of my love.
Today, thy hands committed libricide
and I wonder why these thoughts won't just go away
— my taboo love or this taboo act?

Charcoal briquettes kindle to a blaze,
igniting my eyes, red-rimmed like the open-hearth furnace,
ebbing away pages of my lyrical poetry to the last cinder.
Effluvia of eosin dye wafts through the air in bright spring sunlight,
ageing swiftly like the vanished years - the color of our love.

This is a poem that love scarcely reads.
Might I now feign pretence about my true feelings for you?
By no means, my heart tarries without guidance.

Are these torments the wages of love?
These days, I watch birds taking flight from the sea
near the old hill harbouring the suburban sprawl
of Pisciotta at its foot in the province of Salerno.
It's terrifyingly real that we've moved on -
how amazing is that!

Now, my heart drifts away, lazily like a siene boat
seeking to catch the last rays of the sun.
Maybe this foolishness of mine is called true love.

Where did I go wrong?
Am I cursed to love you 'til my last breath?
Your eyes sparkle with a trace of contrition.
Do not ask me what I think of you -
I shan't tell you 'til one afternoon in our next reincarnation.
Truly, these yearnings of the heart will be my ruin.

Ann Marie Steele

Scintillating Symbiotic Sea

Effervescently swathe us is in the sparkly glare of now — slippery skin spellbound

H
2
O

bubbling— just below the surface —time submerged in quicksand creating semipermeable memories —difficult to discern where my inhales

begin and yours end— synchronistic in this scintillating symbiotic sea spawning raw memories —surreal and gestating amid the dancing

the dreaming, the delighting— in the smacking of skin —the swaying ins and outs of syntax— just a prelude before our minds

cliff jump from the ripening yesterdays and todays of forever— and labor effortlessly— effervescently into the deep abyss of life.



Shivi Sharma

and so on

i. You ask me how I'm doing and we both know there's no way I'd ever answer that without lying. You say love isn't made for people like us— we're too rational for it. I tell you that I'm a secluded person, I chase the people that hate me. I don't know why I do it, but I do it. You tell me you know I've been crying these past few days and *I fall apart.* all over again. We're sitting on the opposite sides of a small room and you're moving closer please *don't.* I smell like I've just taken a cold shower and you know I'm sick, we're both foolish. I'm arrogant and selfish and I don't love you but how could I. We make mug cakes and get back to our places, comers of the room. You take out a cigarette and I'm pissed. There are screams, I hear a baby crying in the hallway of your apartment. I've removed everything that had residues of you and I'm stuck. I've been in the same place for months. *I thought you were dying.* We're both fighting, voices overlapping, thoughts scattered, *talk about true love.* You said you wouldn't do this, not again, no. *You never told me you loved me.* You talk about getting drunk and setting the world on fire. You tell me that all trees are dead bodies. I wrote you a letter because you were away and I couldn't breathe. You ask me if I'd ever fall in love with you and I say no. Girls like me are meant to perish and our funerals have open caskets. *We always run from human interaction.* You tell me to call you every time I feel alone but *do dead bodies pick up calls?* I say okay and move on, *fighting with you never worked, never will.* You tell me all the world is stupid and we should become filthy rich and drive around because *our parents could never.* You tell me about how I'm still alive and I know I'm alive but every minute I spend with you I collapse into a thousand different worlds. The world collapses. I'm dying. We're both dying. This world is dying.

ii. You ask me how I'm doing and I know we're both too scared of this conversation. Our love story is the tale of a man who died during war. Through clenched fists and broken ribs, we're fighting each other, only to fall in love with each other. The place I'm living in is decaying, I'm decaying. The walls have mould on them and they aren't as stable anymore. You tell me love is a lie, and I'm trying to tell you that it isn't and *not everything good is a lie.* And suddenly, I can't trust myself because I'm lying and *two lies don't make a truth.* I'm telling you how I'm breaking apart each day and you tell me, they lied about everything. The man who died in the war didn't sacrifice himself,

instead chose to run away from the pent up guilt inside himself. *The easiest way to die.* The other day I woke up screaming and I couldn't fathom the thought of losing you. *It scares me, everything scars me.* I'm telling you how I love you and I'm waiting for you to say it back but you can't. *You've always hated love, haven't you?* I'm trying to help you and you're telling me love isn't enough. There's this weight on my chest and I have to confess, I can't take it anymore. *I can't take life anymore.* It's heavy and this heaviness is drowning me in a world that's collapsing. I've been meaning to ask you, do you hate me? Tell me it's all in my head, tell me this world isn't really on fire and tell me you'd tolerate it, even if it was. I'm scared that one day on the terrace you're going to ask me how I've been doing and I'd break down then because I've never really been okay. *I could swear, a year ago we were perfect.* In my dream, you're by my side and my love language is always too scared to love. On some days I am the tale of the man and on some days, I am the man.



Bernardo Villela

Seeking Fluency
Thinking of Cathal Ó Séarcaigh

Shimmering skin, your bioluminescence effervesces,
cupid eyes and claret cheeks, lips bow-shaped,
your August-boiled blood keeps us both warm
the whole year round.
Into Sunny Boy's hidden realm
where honeyed starlight ever shines
I am invited, my fingers take furtive
steps parting amber wisps of wheat.
Breeze and breath mingle
Eternity enfolded into a moment,
russet locks sweat-matted to your pate.
You and I, hand on thigh, are
proof that arduous passions reside
on both sides of the Equator,
that lust boils over uncontrollably
above and below both Tropics.
On seashores we dared to name our love
and shout if from the depths of our lungs.
Lain, trysting, in tailwinds twisting,
lingering on a sandy bedstead till morning,
at dawn he was a crowned a dew-laden prince;
he was Fay-boy of Ulster stock
come to weave magicks upon me.
What in many idioms might be forbidden
can on an isolated Éire coastline find
refuge, hidden esplanades where
he and I, and I and he, can to
our own selves be true.
Beguile with smiles and enchant

with cheeks north and south
the gleams within his eyes can raise
the dead and lull them into submission.
Thus, entranced I seek no escape but only
to express myself. I cannot speak Gaelic
but if our tongues entwined, I'm of the
belief that I could get the hang of it and
we could we could consummate our
encounter with a bang, caressing each
other's foreign tongues seeking fluency.



Réka Nyitrai

merrymaking

die and you will be great
says the devil in the shade of the poplar
and I start writing goodbye letters
in languages known only to the rivers
and the mountains
I put them on your bedside table
but when you call me and ask
why did you leave me a jug full of stones?
I laugh out loud
for in those stones
I hid my most tender
whispers



Cleome Morra

puella collo vitta (girl with a riboon around her neck)



Tatiana Shpakow

admissions from the book of love letters i bought when we first met

On the first day I can call you mine, I cocoon my arms around you in the
heart of the kitchen. You envelop cellophane around our
picnic foods––the homemade hand-touched bread loafs as soft
as your lips, the chocolate strawberries made with as much carefulness
as our desperate kisses in halogen-lit supermarket aisles, the Caprese
sandwiches that peel back to reveal every beautiful piece my loving
God made just for you. Pour the Peach Bellini down my throat, let it settle.
My heart is full of you[1] as the drunken warmth swallows
me and settles there, in this jackrabbit organ.

On your birthday, lit by the quiet dark, we all stand shoulder to shoulder
around the cake. You wear the party hat at a slight tilt, I wear my heart
pinned to my jacket sleeve. I'm no drinks in, as you become
legal age, grinning wolfishly, knowing already that there
is something sweeter in this room than the vanilla frosting
on my fingertips. You unpin that heart, and all the patchwork
until this moment splits open. *I cannot exist without you.*[2]

I don't know, I don't want to know who I was
before I met you. Just a month before I turn 21, *I am forgetful of*
everything but seeing you again. At the end of
winter, a passport misses a stamp, a heartbreak like
your face missing 27 lipstick marks.

I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way.[3] It takes
the absence of you to realize that in every bookstore,
I'd look for a collection of these love letters
to replace those torn pages I plan to give to you,
that in every song I will hear the sound of your laugh,
that in every foreign city I will look for you.

1 Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert
2 John Keats to Fanny Brawne
3 Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf

contributors



Melissa Coffey (they/their) is an Australian writer, editor and spoken word performer. A former theatre director, they're fascinated by the wilds of nature and the human heart. Melissa's poetry and fiction are published in *Aurora Journal*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Last Girls Club*, *Crow's Quill Magazine*, *and Writing in a Woman's Voice*. An appreciator of surreal and avant-garde aesthetics, Melissa contributes regularly to *Exist Otherwise*. Forthcoming works include fiction in an anthology of feminist reimaginings *(Improbable Press)*, prose poetry in *Antithesis* and *The Ekphrastic Review's* 2024 print anthology. They're working on several chapbooks and a novella. Find them on Twitter @CuriousSeeds.



Jennifer Elise Wang (she/they) is a nonbinary femme in STEM and punk rock pretty boi poet from Dallas, Texas. She was thrown into the world of photography while covering concerts and conventions for Japanese pop culture websites. Their writing has been published in AZE, The Quilled Ink Review, Open Minds Quarterly, and Darling Lit. The Jeniverse



L. A. Ballesteros Gentile is a multidisciplinary artist. You can find his literary work in The Amazine, Pipeline Artists, Blue Marble Review, and New Note Poetry, among others. @DanteAnantoni



Kait Quinn (she/her) was born with salt in her wounds. She flushes the sting of living by writing poetry. She is the author of four poetry collections, and her work appears in Reed Magazine, Watershed Review, Anti-Heroin Chic, Slippery Elm, and elsewhere. She received first place in the 2022 John Calvin Rezmerski Memorial Grand Prize. Kait is an Editorial Associate at Yellow Arrow Publishing and a poetry reader for Black Fox Literary Magazine. She enjoys repetition, coffee shops, tattoos, and vegan breakfast. Kait lives in Minneapolis with her partner, their regal cat, and their very polite Aussie mix. Kate Quinn Poetry



Katherine Quevedo was born and raised near Portland, Oregon, where she works as an analyst and lives with her husband and two sons. Her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award, and her debut mini-chapbook, The Inca Weaver's Tales, is part of the New Cosmologies series from Sword & Kettle Press. Her poems have appeared in Apparition Literary Magazine, Asimov's, Lucky Jefferson, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, TOWER Magazine, The Sprawl Mag, Boudin by The McNeese Review, and elsewhere. Website



Nicola de Vera (she/her) is a queer Filipino writer currently residing in Los Angeles. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in Exist Otherwise, New World Writing, A Thin Slice of Anxiety, redrosethorns, Cosmic Daffodil Journal, and elsewhere. She holds a BA in Communication from Ateneo de Manila University and an MBA from Cornell University. Writing Portfolio



Vincenzo Cohen (he/him) is an Italian socially engaged multidisciplinary artist. He graduated in Painting from Fine Arts Academy in 2002 and held his first Solo Exhibition in 2005. In 2007, he earned a master's degree in Archaeological Sciences from ""La Sapienza"" University in Rome. Cohen' s work encompasses figurative arts and writing, reflecting his life and travel experiences while exploring various social themes. His art stems from extensive historical-scientific research, focusing on cultural and naturalistic subjects. Over the years, he has embraced diverse experimental styles and media. Cohen's deep passion for nature, ingrained since childhood, motivates his involvement in environmental awareness projects." @vincenzocohen



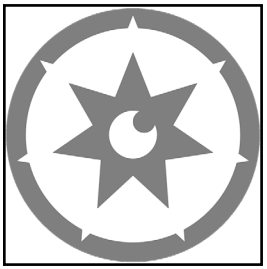
Ibrahim Salihu writes both poetry and fiction. His work has been anthologized in Reflex Press and published in Brag, Dreich, Ink Drinkers, Words for the Wild and amongst others. He tweets: @mdsolstitium



Ann Marie Steele, who resides in Charlotte, NC, America, is a writer who dabs mainly in free verse and prose poetry. She holds a BS in Journalism (News-Editorial), and an MA in Secondary English Education. Ann Marie pens pieces about love and loss, and what she observes and experiences. The loss of her youngest son, Brandon, has influenced much of her writing. Her pieces have been described as "resiliently defiant." Ann Marie has been published in *The Ekphrastic Review* with her pieces, "Every Lilly Donned with Grief" and "I Dare You, Pretty Please." When not teaching high school English, Ann Marie enjoys partner acrobatics, where she can often be seen flying upside down.



Shivi Sharma (she/her) @feralembers



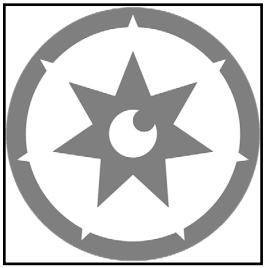
Bernardo Villela (he/him) has short fiction included in periodicals such as LatineLit, Penumbra Online and Horror Tree and in anthologies such as We Deserve to Exist, Enchanted Entrapments and There's More of Us Than You Know. He's had original poetry published by Phantom Kangaroo, Straylight, and Raven's Quoth Press and translation published by AzonaL and Red Fern Review.



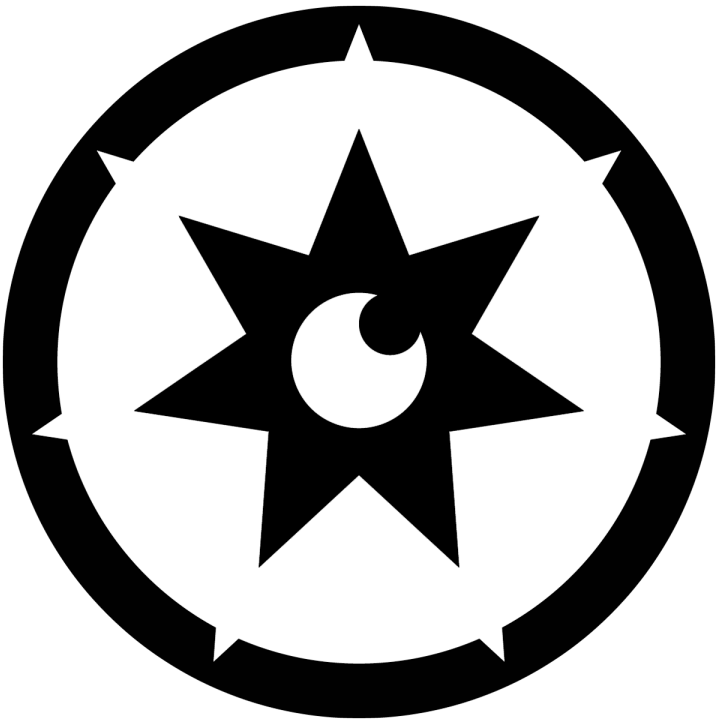
Réka Nyitrai is a spell, a sparrow, a lioness's tongue — a bird nest in a pool of dusk. She is the recipient of a Touchstone Distinguished Books Award for her debut haiku volume "While Dreaming Your Dreams". Her full length poetry collection will be out with Broken Sleep Books in 2024.



Cleomé Morra (they/them) is a pseudonym for a photographer who wishes to remain anonymous. They've been making photographs since 1980.



Tatiana Shpakow (she/her) is an anthropology student from Albuquerque, New Mexico, currently attending Kenyon College in Ohio. Her creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in *HIKA*, *Persimmons*, *Anodyne Magazine*, *the interlochen review*, and elsewhere. @tatiptle



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