Exist Otherwise

#11 July 2024

“The rule interests me only for its leftovers with which I make my swill.”

– Claude Cahun



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Brian J. Pilling

Death Rattle

The pretend parishioners, slowly swallowed by their prey, walk past white steeples. Boa constrictors disguised as old women's fashion statements steal their last breath. Crocodile cowboy boots, suddenly alive, feast on the remains. The absurdity of it all, not lost on the naked undertaker signing the cross with his missing fingers. Is this how the believers disappear from earth? Naked and lost in the garden department of Home Depot.



Sophie Farthing

The Game

Mommy said I had to wear
the red turtleneck, Aunt Laura's gift,
tarantula legs wrapping round my throat.
It was Davy's second birthday,
and I was four. This is the game
I have to play. Fuzzy scarlet fingers
pressing into my pulse point
killer Elmo static up and down
my arms I screamed get off get off!
She marched me upstairs Mommy
I screamed get off she lifted me
into the shower get off get off!
The turtleneck crawled up toward my ears
squeezed my esophagus I screamed
and sobbed the icy water
blasted into my face with a shriek
she would not let me out!
This is the game I have to play
small selfish sinner I did
shut up at last spun out thin
from shock and dripping and
"In conclusion," she said,
"you could have stopped your tantrum
any time you wanted to."
In the photos I am wearing
a party hat.
I did not have cake.



Christine C. Rivero-Guisinga

Child's Play

The cabinet doors slide open: a stage —

red and blue ceramic mushrooms *(they
don't dance)*
poodle-head perfume bottle *(might dance)*
glass deer chained to her babies *(she can't
stop to dance)*

The dog-eared books in the corner look on:

the Holy Bible *(pages tissue-thin,
no pictures, just lines for figures)* bookends
Father Ben's Joke Only *(Father Ben
wasn't very funny)*.

Lola's reading lamp is hot to the touch,

wires all gangly, unwieldy *(unwilling)*
spotlight
on the mushroom tops flat like flaps of
skin, and the unscrewed poodle that head reeks
of old perfume.

Sometimes the glass deer slips.
"*You might break…*" the constant admonition.

Fragile legs
are the first to break.



Cleomé Morra

Eb, Bb/D, Cm7, Bb/D



Amanda Weir-Gertzog

An Amanda Doppelganger

how loud should i holler
when you knock me back down
if i concur i belong
here on the cellar floor

how long should i wallow
in my sense of incompetence
when you berate me for
not being or doing more

oh the hallows and shallows
of my once wee gray growing
gentle fontanels of unknowing
and soft valley mapping brain

so dr daddy psychologist
how did you deduce what might
bloom from your first seedling
while watering her with
lies bitterness and shame

oh i stayed so loyal so blue
so blind so true to the notion
that you were broken and
needed me as your anchor

instead you were the weight
that sank me like an albatross
around my negating psyche
as you sucked the very marrow

from my aching pulsating
neck to feed your vampiric

urges til what remained was
an amanda doppelganger

tell me dr daddy psychologist
did you dream of using your
scylla and charybdis to take
down the family you stacked
on prior corpses

i was left
alone
barely there
a shell
a cut-off-tongue —

a shaky-semblance-shadow…



Samuel Samba

Foul Play with Non-binary Antics

A spherical object—mid-air, is reason enough to come for your head:
another way to harm your gayest memories.
an opponent launches an attack,

& we crowd over the round omen, shelling body by rumpled body.
once impact meets fresh ground, the ball levitates.

whichever fist seizes it first stays dead or worse.
say, I put it nicely: the way skin wades past bullet-shaped hands,
till our loin reddens with demand.

say, the wind frustrates a killer pass,
we ram endlessly into each other till oxygen is spent.
& when the whistle yawns in high pitch,
we break free at impulse.

the ball throats skyward yet again
& gravity repeats a sharp pull at our loins—lawless lots:
Sammy & his neat burden of teenagers holding it down.

these round bunch of never-do-wells,
these ghastly wreck of knee & ankle snowballed into chaos on village soil:
this—our most cherished hazard.

surviving each die minute barely alive & intimate with dust,
I hunger for a rematch.

in truth, I dread injuries
yet, wish the next collision guts me open beyond repair,
leaving me still bound, motionless—as a corpse.

if nothing else, the silence holds ghosts.
& while we're all a tangled mess of knee, muscle & displaced thighs,
your rehearsed hands meets me wet—

first, as a blessing: a tight-fisted plea between my groin,
close-range, as thighs slice through affection.
each impact dazed with reward.

we outperform nature.
one finger breeds two that breeds a whole bunch of hands, grappling at our innocence.
our tongues caught offside—shooting blank.



Autumn Thomas

The Hairdresser

Everything in life has culminated to this moment. Sitting in a leather chair with long worn padding, grasping long thin fingers against the denim of your pocket, counting change, making sure; Hairdressers and farriers both only have three questions: *how do you do? What do you do? And who do you do?* All of which surprisingly could be logically answered with "good man" Mull it over. One time my Uber driver told me to *be careful of the wolf*. They all think I look 16, remind them of a daughter, a sister, a wife, the girl they held down at the junior prom, the body shown earlier on the news, and I just smile and thank them, what else am I supposed to say; me and you, we're just masks at the feet of false altars, praying to false gods; last time I went to church it wasn't church at all, it must've been in a dream, the pews shook as I walked down the aisle; never been good with time, the unexpected, that's why I listen to true crime podcasts, call us crazy but you'll never call us unprepared; so I sit in this tattered old chair, with my unexceptional neutral hair and I raise my pink cheeks, just as I was told and nod when you say, *just an inch?*

Tim Murphy

Take It From Me

As someone
who's had both
COVID fatigue and
Long COVID fatigue:

one
a match
only dangerous
once lit by apathy
and dropped
in the woods

the other
a tree
who cannot escape
licking flames
a tree
that is you
burning
in a fire
that won't
go out.



Chey Dugan

Imitators

I was admiring the aristocratic Grande Dame portrait on a Tuesday afternoon; a day when the Abruzzo Museum of Art History is hauntingly inactive and I'm free from the perturbed looks I get from the usual late-week crowd. I'm reluctant to admit, but somewhere along my embryonic development my Pavlovian wires got crossed and because of these ritual Tuesdays, I could just exist in my oddity. I would thank myself at the end of the week for getting this out of my system.

I was deep within myself and sure I was alone until you interrupted and said, I like what you're doing with your face.

My face. A mirrored impression of the Grande Dame. I went ice cold as my brain was dedicated to manipulating my face back to its restful state. I searched for the memory of what that felt like a minute ago. I experienced the shift back to normalcy like a dense cloud allowing the sunbeams of consciousness to seep into my hair shafts and penetrate my skull. The softness returned to the angle of my lips and I was back. It took less than a second, but those moments live in eternity.

I knew exactly what you meant, but showed you I didn't. You projected back that expression—one so full of contemptuous judgment only earned through a royal lineage. You replaced your effortless forehead with a notched streak—and you let that bottom lip hang. It looked like it weighed at least two pounds. Had my lip, too, been an impressive two pounds? Not as regal as the Grande Dame, I thought. My face shot hot red. A familiar feeling. I diverted eye contact.

No. No, you said. I liked it.

I didn't realize I was doing that.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to call you out.

It's alright. It happens from time to time without my knowledge. It's a little embarrassing.

I lied, I was very embarrassed. I smiled to show I had recovered, but this too was a lie. I was faltering.

It was an accident, I said. Most times people think I'm making fun of them.

So this is what you do? Will you try with me?

Well—I don't think so. I don't know you. And it doesn't really happen like that.

Okay.

Okay.

You made it awkward by being so normal but really I was the only one who made it awkward. You walked away to admire some other painting. That's it. I'll never see you again. No, it's okay, better this way in fact; he exposed you.

I stared back into the eyes of the portrait. Now this eighteenth century broad knew there was something wrong with me too. I felt her disappointment grow. Such a waste of a woman, she said through pinched lips; her French accent escaping. I focused intensely on the muscles in my face, making sure to keep them at rest, or at least my idea of what I thought that looked like. It felt like a frown. If you looked over at me maybe you'd just think I was studying the fine detail of the painting. Maybe you'd think I was a curator or a professor of Philosophical Theories of Art History at the University, if that class even exists—I don't know, college was in my past. Maybe you'd think I was just a self-made woman with plenty of dough to spend my days being self indulgent and cultured. Shit. My face.

I went back to resting my muscles. I glanced to see if you had noticed, but what I saw sent a cruel chill up my spine.

You stood near—not really standing—with your body contorted in the most unnaturally beautiful way. I watched. Like a piece of art so striking and far superior to all that surrounds it, it commands your unwavering attention and dilates your pupils.

A strange elation filled me and I restrained a toothy smile. I had no intrinsic nature to reciprocate your posture; it only happens with subtle gestures—the reason it's so easy for me to not notice. But it made me happy.

I was sure you heard my footsteps come up behind you, but you didn't turn around. I was aroused by your seriousness and present, unflinching posture. What a game you played.

I began to arch my back as you had, fully conscious of my action. I raised my arms and twirled my fingers together like you. I bent at the knees as profoundly as yours.

My breathing became deep and I realized you must be in shape. I knew at this point you could feel my weighted breath on your neck. I had imagined your hair tingling on end—this vestigial trait left behind for one reason; a message that you wanted me as much as I wanted you.

The slowness of your head revolving to look at my body left my mouth watering. Eye to eye. I never wanted this to end—I tried not to blink.

You smelt amazing, yes, cedar and tobacco. I thought our breast bones could open impossibly to let the other in. Slower now, you transposed a form that reminded me of an ancient God-like sculpture. I imitated.

Your flux quickly developed; it was difficult to predict. Time surely had subsided to exist the more we fell in concord. These portraits and the hands behind them were born into an ineffable patience that hung many years in many different places—waiting for our exhibit. The Grande Dame smiled on us now.



Hannah Katerina

Untitled



Kathleen Hulser

Pirate's Breath

The graphic squawk of tattoos
ringing a bicep,
blue ink scrambling over ancient scars
Time for more pirate's breath prose,
a hot sauce thick with
chunks of the unsayable and unacceptable.
A cutlass of metaphor
always out of the belt,
swish slicing the air of conversation,
knuckles rough from salt,
palms scored with rope burn.

Casey Aimer

Past Tense Jewelry

My engagement ring dozes
in a square blue satin box
worn a year then removed.

Tonight it's open, ring gliding
across my fingers like her
missing hand.

I twist the jewel expecting emotions
but like high school yearbooks
it exists only for others to gawk at.

It weighs on my knuckles
a Stonehenge boulder
powerfully perplexing.

Throwing my ring into the street
I run it over with my car,
pick up a scuffed memento.

I tuck it under my pillow a lost tooth,
hope a supernatural fairy
will carry it away.

Next holding it over candle flame
I watch carbon fight with alumina
in front of fractured carbon.

I carry it around the house
loose on my finger
like my ideals of marriage.

I rest the ring inside my closet
next to childhood magic toys,
both existing as forgotten party tricks.



Zoe Grace Marquedant

Tanka for Finger Foods at Funerals

television set
of the body dark but still
warm to the touch, was
switched off between commercials
boxed he collects like dust

beneath bereavement
the death of a mechanic
blue collar daughter
sits in front of his ashes
licking clean her fingerprint

just as a child might
erase the mess with the mouth
scorn the cloth napkin
was it all-consuming grief
or transubstantiation

a dusting of him
circular, sticking to her
is this his body?
a grit placed against her tongue
what remains she swallows up

Bill Wolak

The Tingling of Slow Arousal



Dorothy Lune

New Holland 1788

After Lingua Ignota's "The order of spiritual virgins"

Sinner get ready
God will save my upper back & the

brick upon my knee
to soon ricochet, no hope no fear.

Sinner get ready—
there's sanctum in a fragile void,

like a tender wishbone,
teethe your way to its substance to

stand some kind
of chance. No hope no fear—

foreign A6 flyers in French
advertise a nun in a 14 carat gown. &

I will be the holiest
optionable of Botany Bay in

a brittle pinafore like a
precipice. Sinner you get dressed,

chow down the dust
upon my knee to soon ricochet

like you, a fragile
void cannibalizing our navel.



Kelly Piggott

in praise of my happy trail

my body is a hungry maw, bearskin
wired along the mound streaming to coarse
red and thick as my blood. overeager
swim upstream, dark—nearly black—on stark
pale, it is a beast within the flesh machine.

these hairs travail happy with each roll
on a stomach stretched with desire:
thick red strands coating over silicone
and watery lube, hooded nerves tender.
move with me as blood does my gut.

these hairs spring from aching blisters,
forged from cheap silver, sown by foam.
stop killing me, they cry, only the deserving,
kind and true-faced should meet me.
kiss me here, kiss me there, kiss me all low

notches of living and survival. this trail
is woman-made as much as my beard—
clean-shaven and skin puckered sweet.
these hairs cradle, these hairs breathe,
these hairs heal in their capacity to be.

these hairs will feed.

Hugh Gately

The Gate

You're halfway over Quincentennial Bridge when the music stops.

Your perfect fantasy comes to a gunshot halt, and you look at your phone as the battery dies and the screen fades to black. The world you were living in crashes down around you in an unholy, cataclysmic, millisecond apocalypse, and now it's just you and the things you're left alone with: an empty road, a night filled with eldritch silence, and a great, beautiful blackness that greets you when you peer over the banister. It dares you to wonder if it's a still river reflecting the night sky, or an empty, bottomless abyss into which you could step and fall forever. Part of you knows it's stupid to wonder. Part of you wants to step off of the edge just to see. You can't tell if they're the same part.

As the fear begins to kick in, you look around. These streets are too empty, and this city is too quiet. This path is the path you walk every day, but the ground beneath your feet feels unfamiliar in a way that you can't put into words. The air is crisp and clean against your face, a light breeze that leaves the stillness of the night unchallenged.

You find yourself trying to recapture the frame of mind that, only moments ago, made you feel so alive, but though it's slipping away slowly enough for you to feel it go, it's too quick in its escape for the flailing tendrils of your thoughts to latch on.

Eons ago, this night was blissful: yourself and the others, laughing and chatting and living, your worries and insecurities abandoned in a mindset that you've grown so loathsome of, and had since transcended. You were untouchable. You were immortal. You were free.

You left the party in the early hours of the morning, for no reason other than that the notion to do so struck you as appealing, and life was brimming with the sort of perfection that provokes adventure just to prove how untouchable that perfection is. You slipped away quietly. No one noticed.

You observed rather than determined where you were going, and at first thought that you were headed home. You walked along the Headford Road, struck by the stillness of the night; no cars, no people, no life. At the time, this wasn't a problem. At the time, this was everything you could ever want in life. You walked into the middle of the road

and stood there for a few minutes and listened to the silence until a car eventually came, shattering the peace of the night, and you left the road, jaded, confused as to why anyone would ruin such a moment of contentedness.

You floated into the 24-hour Spar at the petrol station, where it was just you and the shopkeeper. She gave you an uninterested glance as you walked through the door, floating. You perused the aisles aimlessly, enjoying the colours and the varieties and the aromas of the baked goods in the corner of the shop. You weren't looking for anything in particular, but as soon as you found yourself face to face with the drinks section you realised that you were parched. You went to the till with four bottles of iced tea, just to be safe.

Outside the shop you found a lone black cat, who looked up at you fearlessly with beautiful green eyes, and you wondered how you were to know that this cat wasn't God itself.

'Are you God?' you asked the cat.

The cat said nothing. It didn't seem to know.

By the time you reached the turn for your apartment it was apparent in your mind that you weren't headed home. You continued on, past the turn, throwing the iced tea bottle that you'd already emptied into a bin as you went, and turned left onto Dyke Road, continuing on along the route that you walk every day to… somewhere. The walk was so familiar to you, but the silence that still hung heavy in the air seemed alien to the city. The odd taxi passed every now and then, but otherwise, this street was all but yours. You were the only living creature here, which made you the strongest creature here, and as such it made perfect sense in your mind that you should be king of this tiny domain.

You continued on past Éamon Deacy Park. You had played there once, in a cup final for your local Sunday League amateur side. You had lost. You couldn't for the life of you remember why that had upset you.

By the time you crossed the small stream breaking off from the Corrib, you had finished your second bottle of iced tea. You wandered a few metres into the green area,

away from the glow of the streetlights, the dew on the grass soaking through your cheap runners. You unzipped your pants at the trees by the river. As you pissed, you looked to your left, up at the ruins of Menlo Castle. Had generations of kings once ruled from there? Had lords and ladies and all their servants resided in the castle by the river? Were they looking from afar at a nobody with a pot belly and a smile pissing two peach iced tea bottles' worth of piss on the land that they had once reigned from so proudly?

'To hell with it,' you thought, 'I'm the king here now.'

From your pissing spot, you could see the Corrib, and you saw it for the first time in what must be its true form: a seething creature of the night that churned and slithered and moved slowly through the darkness. How had it hidden from you for so long? You could see great big buildings plunged into blackness, you could see the black blanket sky filled with clouds and stars and moonlight, stretching on and on into forever, and you could see the place that you're standing at now, up on the bridge, looking out over that same creature who now lies dead and unmoving where once it slinked with all the power on this earth, and thinking about falling through nothingness forever and about the empty, invisible pockets of space that the confidence and contentedness that you had been filled with until only moments ago had fled to. You try and try to find them but there's nothing left in your mind. You are deserted and you are alone and you are…

…scared. So scared.

Suddenly, everything about this world is threatening. Alone on the bridge, the nature of the unfamiliarity of this familiar place that had intrigued you so much before now only serves to stir up fear within you. The stillness and quiet of the night leaves far too much to your jumpstarted imagination.

Somewhere in this world an engine revs, and you turn and watch as a car turns onto the dual carriageway a few hundred metres down the road and starts driving towards you far too slowly. It gets closer and closer, and you watch, horrified.

It's bleeding.

As it approaches, you can clearly see the thin rivulets of blood rolling downwards all over the car's surface. Crimson blood seeps from everywhere and nowhere. You don't know what this means.

As the car passes by you, you see through the windscreen a driver with no face. You don't think it's looking at you. Does it know you're here? Do you matter at all?

It whispers past you and continues into the night. No blood is left in its wake; each droplet that rolled down that perfect surface made its journey only to fall and dissipate into the night like a cigarette dropped into a black hole.

Maybe that's the fate that waits for you over the edge. There once was a breathing creature stalking the night, in the night, *of* the night, no doubt about it. But the flashes of scale and flesh, the heaving, writhing *mass* that you had seen had, unbeknownst to you, been far removed from the graceful, silent skulking of the creature's usual hunt; no, it had been nowhere near, and you had been a fool not to see those shaky steps and sluggish stumbles as the death throes that they were. And when the creature had heaved its last, raspy breath and finally collapsed as a corpse, the earth trembled and the stars shook and a mighty, silent black hole erupted to mark our death and consume the night, returning it home to the great big nothing.

Return unto me! And I will return unto you (the needlessness of my return).

Now you're standing at the edge. You're pressed against the banister and you're looking down into forever. You don't remember coming here. You don't remember a lot of things. The black hole is just there, only a few metres down, and you can feel its pull. It's gentle, and reassuring, and it makes promises that you know more than you've ever known anything in your entire microscopic life are true, and it would be so easy to just

take

the

plunge

and be happy again.

You stand here for a while, leaning, gazing, dreaming of the fall.

Wouldn't it be so nice to be thoughtless?

Wouldn't it be so nice to be weightless?

Wouldn't it be so nice to be held?

Soon, something makes you step away from the edge, and you turn to look down the road. A few hundred metres away, just at the junction where the carriageway crosses Newcastle Road, the gateway to hell hangs in the air. It flickers and twitches, a shadow hovering above the tarmac, just past the petrol station. It invites you, and instils in you a fear that tells you to keep on running. When all else falls through, that fear is the net that catches you. That fear of the unknown. Your only constant.

The gateway to hell doesn't move, it doesn't threaten, it doesn't spew forth a monster or a memory or a ghost. It just hangs there, silent, watching, waiting.



contributors



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Christine "Robin" C. Rivero-Guisinga (she/her) works for a humanitarian organization. She maintains an informal gallery of amateur photography and short poetry inspired by the haiku form on Instagram.



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

Amanda Weir-Gertzog (she/her) is a poet, gerontologist, and eater of too much milk chocolate. To compensate for her prodigious reading habits, she also writes book reviews. She lives in Durham, North Carolina, with her family and pets. Website



Samuel Samba (he/him) is a writer of poetry & other works of art. He has been previously published in *Australian Poetry Journal, Australian Access Poetry, Westerly, PRISM, Singapore Unbound Magazine, Swim meet lit Magazine, Hill Hoist Magazine* & elsewhere. He got an honorable mention in the recent 2022 Christopher Hewitt Award in Poetry.

Autumn Thomas (she/they) is a young writer from the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. She is now a working cowgirl in Death Valley, Arizona while they work on their first book. To read more of her work visit *Cleaver Magazine, Active Muse,* and *Belt Magazine*.

Tim Murphy (he/him) is a disabled poet from Portland, Oregon. His writing explores chronic illness, disability justice and the more-than-human world. Tim is bedbound with Long Covid and ME. His poetry appears in dozens of literary journals, including, *Louisiana Literature, Wordgathering, Gastropoda, Remington Review, Writers Resist,* and in the books, *The Long Covid Reader (2023) and Songs of Revolution* (2024). Instagram and Twitter.



Chey Dugan (she/her) is an emerging queer writer born and raised in the border city of El Paso, Texas. She is a 2024 SmokeLong Quarterly Fellow and will receive support from the Iowa Writers' Workshop summer 2024. Her work has appeared in The Amazine. Chey Dugan lives with her family in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Website



Hannah Katerina (she/her) is a writer and photographer based in Istanbul. Her works have featured in 212, Blueprint, Frontbench, JusteLit, Where Meadows Reside and Recesses. She is currently working on a collection of short stories. Website



Kathleen Hulser (she/her) is a writer, public historian, and activist. Currently she writes catalogs for amArtHouse Gallery in Bantam, CT and edits *ArTour*, a new culture magazine. She has been NY Transit Museum curator, New-York Historical Society public historian and has taught American History. She also creates public art projects such as *The War of 1812* augmented reality cell phone tour. Her original walking tours include *The Underground Railroad in New York*, *Lighted Signs of Times Square and Bad, Rad* and *Boho Women*. She worked on curatorial teams for Slavery in New York, Nueva York, and Revolutions: America, France, Haiti.



Casey Aimer (he/him) holds master's degrees in both poetry and publishing. He works for a non-profit publishing science research articles and is a founder of *Radon Journal*, an anarchist science fiction semiprozine. His poetry has been featured in *Space and Time Magazine*, *Apparition Lit*, *Star*Line*, *Heartlines Spec*, and many more. An SFPA and SFWA member, he has been nominated for both the Rhysling Award and Pushcart Prize, and can be found on Bluesky.



Zoe Grace Marquedant (she/her) is a queer writer. She earned her B.A. from Sarah Lawrence and her M.F.A. from Columbia University. Her work has been featured in *Olney Magazine*, *the Cool Rock Repository*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and the *School of Commons*. She is also a columnist for *Talk Vomit*.



Bill Wolak (he/him) is a poet, collage artist, and photographer who has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared recently in the 2022 Rochester Erotic Arts Festival, the 2020 International Festival of Erotic Arts (Chile), the 2020 Seattle Erotic Art Festival, the 2020 Dirty Show in Detroit, the 2018 Montreal Erotic Art Festival, and Naked in New Hope 2018. He was a featured artist in the book Best of Erotic Art (London, 2022).



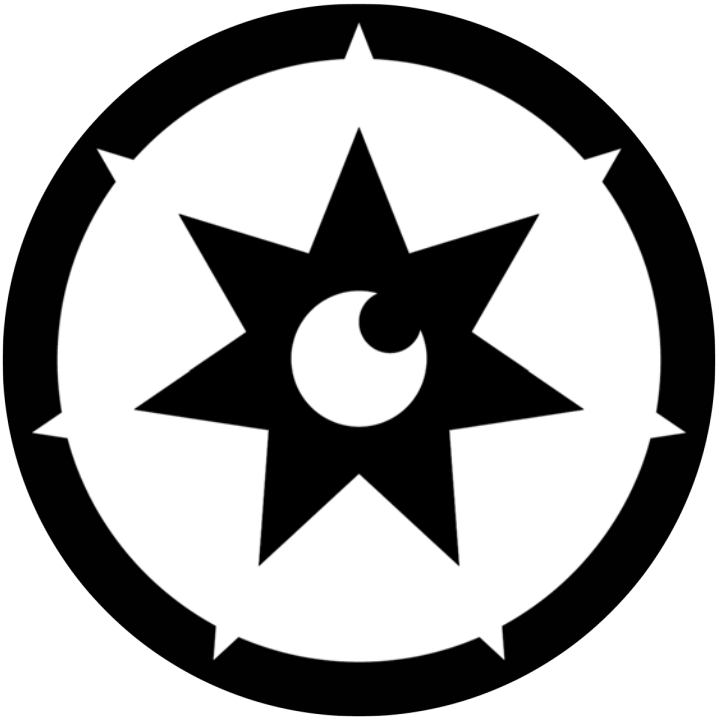
Kelly Piggott (she/her) is a lesbian writer and teacher based in Atlanta, and holds an MFA in Fiction from Georgia College and State University. Her writing has been published with *If There's Anyone Left*, *Dark Horses Magazine*, *Defunct*, *Eclectica Magazine*, and elsewhere. She can be found on Twitter and Instagram.



Dorothy Lune (she/her) is a Yorta Yorta poet, born in Australia & a best of the net 2024 nominee. Her poems have appeared in *Overland* journal, *Many Nice Donkeys* & more. She is looking to publish her manuscripts, & runs the substack "Ladybug Central".



Hugh Gately (he/him) is a writer from the West of Ireland. He writes scripts, stories, and songs, and studies Creative Writing at the University of Galway. He has previously been published in the UG Writer's Society publication, *The Dome*, and *Where The Meadows Reside* (the latter of which first published this story, 'The Gate'). His favourite animals are camels.



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