

TRANS SURVIVORS

Rage and Soft Desire: Disability & Health



Cover art:

The Trauma in Healing by Noah Stang-Osborne

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About the Issue

Telling stories about physical pain and illness is something that many trans and nonbinary folks become well-practiced in: convincing the doctor we are “trans enough” to prescribe HRT, or “sick enough” to warrant that follow-up test. We adapt these stories depending on the audience. It isn’t surprising that these personal narratives are often heavily intertwined with our communities’ need for justice, and changes to the systems that ask us to be experts about our bodies, *and* subjects to authority. Danny McLaren’s “where rage and soft desire touch” captures this dynamic: **“bodies crave justice / as surely as they hunger.”**

Many of the pieces in this issue are emotionally challenging to read, and might bring up our own memories around ways we have been dehumanized by healthcare systems in the past. Sharing the difficult moments allows us to connect across isolation. Other pieces offer hope, resilience, and tenderness. We think this is exactly the right place for emotional challenge and hope. Please care for your body and mind while you read/experience the art shared by these talented contributors. We are deeply grateful for their vulnerability, creativity, and care.

Caleb Weinhardt

Communications Coordinator, FORGE

Editor

& the FORGE staff

What the Waiting Room Knows About Us by Joely Williams

We arrive already translated-
our symptoms rendered into the clean language
they prefer, stripped of the words we actually use,
the words that hold the texture of the thing,
the words that say it hurts the way a color hurts,
persistently and without explaining itself.

We have practiced our answers
on the walk from the car.
We have rehearsed the chronology,
anticipating the interruption,
the clipboard lowering like a verdict,
the nod that means I have already decided
before you finish the sentence.

We have already done the math-
the copay against the grocery bill,
the hours lost against the hours needed,
the cost of knowing against the cost
of not knowing, which we have been doing for years,
which our bodies have stopped forgiving us for.

The waiting room knows all of this.
The fluorescent light has witnessed everything.
The chairs have held so many of us

being unbelieved, being translated,
being told it's probably stress,
being handed a pamphlet for what we had already
survived.

We are the experts in here.
We are the ones who live inside these bodies
every hour of every year,
fluent in their particular, persistent grammar,
waiting-
still waiting-
to be believed.

I have been looking for evidence of soft gestures by Luz Blumenfeld

I have been looking for evidence of soft gestures
to remind myself there is tenderness here too,
beyond the gaze returned
by encountering my body in public.

I take note of places that have been tended to.
To tend to is an act of care.
To protect, to preserve,
to return to.

I take note of mugwort and fig trees growing out of
concrete.

I find places where the light touches.

I think about what a system that prioritizes care might
look like.

I look for a place to sit down.

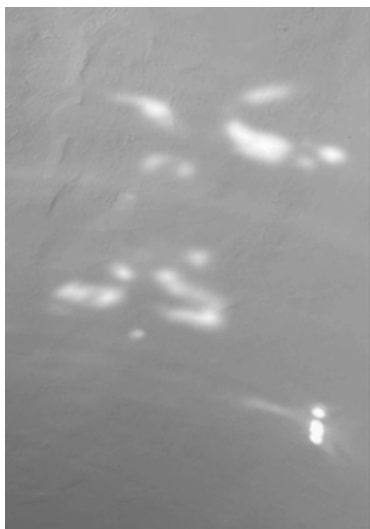
I put ointment on my blisters,
I rest my body,
I stop and fall behind.

I bring my body to [other] bodies [of water]
I play with the light reflecting onto my skin.

I watch the swifts,

I take note of softness.

I think about my body.



"I made this piece in response to my experience navigating the city of Florence, Italy in the summer of 2024. My experience was deeply enmeshed with my trans and disabled body and the ways it was perceived and received in the city."

ALIEN by Gemma Bastian

i had always felt that i was swapped at the hospital at birth. no, that's not right. i feel like my parents' child was abducted by an alien spaceship and i was dropped off in its stead. why else would i feel so poorly adjusted for this world? the water from the cool, babbling brook makes me break out in hives, the gentle breeze gives me a throbbing migraine, the joyous sunshine cruelly laughs while my eyes water and burn. surely i am from a planet where a dark midday sky glistens in fairy lights, where the atmospheric pressure remains constant and my body could learn what it feels like to be at ease.

the people from this strange planet saw a soft, gentle, sensitive creature and grouped it with the children they expect to wrestle and tumble through the dirt, to push boundaries, to violate the soft creatures and never get in trouble for it. all because of one body part. i wonder if there are boys and girls on my home planet. or gender at all. i wonder if i really was abandoned on this rocky blue marble, and if so, why. maybe i am from a clan of alien warriors who determined through a vote from the council of elders that intergalactic exile was my only chance of survival as a mild and meek creature. that the instinctual resilience embedded in my dna would save me against all odds.

so here i am. an alien from halfway across the galaxy doing my best to approximate a human corporeal form, human social norms, human small talk about the weather that makes my skin crawl and my mind melt. an alien who has a list of diagnoses to remind her that she is here on earth but not welcome. all the while i search for pieces of my actual heritage, or for others who were sent to exile just like i must have been. until then, all i have are the narratives that feel more like truth than my reality.

Novocaine by Lillian Hochwender

"The doctor is expecting you,"
the nurse smiles,
smiles like vanilla ice-cream
laced with novocaine.
Maybe she smiles
because my name
tickles her numb tongue
and numb white teeth or
maybe she laughs for lack
of sleep. Her coat is crisp.
The walls are even whiter.

The doctor is expecting me
to smile when he tells me
medicine may better me.
But he only ever knows
the pills with long and sterile names
that knot tongues
and clot blood
like a sick and
scientific trick.

The doctor is expecting me
to meet his expectations,
but he hasn't seen the way
I wretch into the porcelain
or crumble like feta
on the cold and placid tile
of every bathroom floor.

Bad Doctors by Theo Leviathan

The first neurologist asks, “Are you sure it’s not the testosterone? Hormonal changes can cause migraines. Maybe if you stop—”

I shake my head, “It’s made it better. My hormonal cycle is regulated, more even. So, I don’t get menstrual headaches anymore.”

“Ok, if you say so.” He looks away from my chart for the first time in 3 minutes. In this office, his medical degree is heavier than my body. I have no gravity. My 2 months on HRT, freshly cropped hair, still high voice, sweet face, cannot play in his weight class.

The second neurologist repeats the question, a year later.

I repeat my answer.

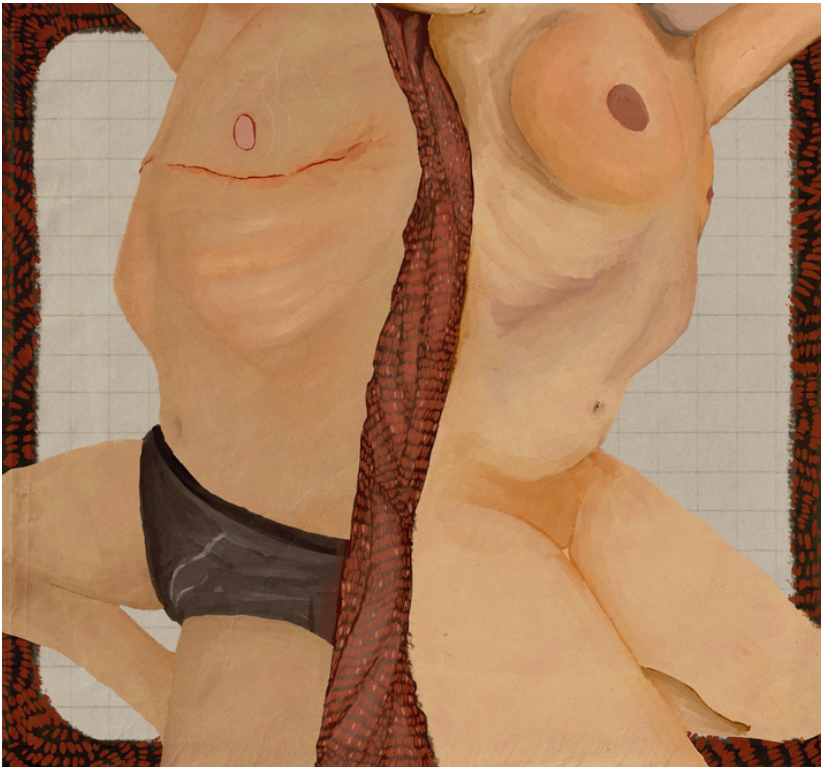
She nods. “That makes sense, I mostly see people transitioning from male to female. The estrogen can cause migraines in some people.”

I’ve gone up a weight class. Maybe.

The gynecologist asks, “Are you looking to transition further?” Then waits, while I close my legs and wrap myself in a thin paper sheet.

“I’m interested in getting a hysterectomy.” I use my flat chest, the coarse hair on my legs, the timbre in my throat, to tie myself to her exam table.

“You’re too young for that. You should really think about whether or not you want children first.” She cuts my strings.



In Between Skin
by Leo Arcelay-Christiano

I am floating, weightless, a foot below hospital ceiling tiles. My pants and boxers still folded in the chair by the door.

She calls up to me, “Besides, it’s not healthy in someone so young to remove your ovaries.”

My nose bumps into a fluorescent light.

The endocrinologist says, “The testosterone could be making the chronic pain worse.”

“It’s made it better. It increases my muscle mass, so I have more capacity to move on high pain days.” I try to force gravity, willing myself to stay heavy.

Her eyebrow raises, “Well, we could put you on Ozempic. Less weight on your joints could be good for you.”

My feet can’t quite touch the floor. I grip my seat with my fingers, keeping myself pressed into it. “I’ll think about it.”

There are **good doctors**, too.

A Planned Parenthood provider has a 30 minute conversation with me over telehealth. “Can you tell me why you want to take testosterone?”

“I knew I wasn’t a girl when I was 16, but I was raised in a conservative family so I had to wait...” She listens, checks her boxes, sends me a “What to expect when you take HRT” doc, and faxes in a prescription.

I inject T for the first time and I am rooted. My dendrites extend deep into the prairie, I am one with the land. The swirling thoughts that lift me away drain into the underground water reservoir. The Bible belt loosens a notch.

A second gynecologist meets me for a hysterectomy consult. I walk into her office vapor, sealed in a body, ready to offgas. I ask, “Do you need to see my letters?”

She shakes her head, “No, you’ve had top surgery and have been on hormones for years. I don’t think you’re going to regret this. I’m confident this is the right decision for you.”

I solidify, smooth and heavy.

And **I’m lucky**.

I work in a community health center now, one that provides free care to uninsured patients. I have clients who tell me they’ve never taken HRT through a doctor, but “get it from their sisters.” Patients who are prescribed HRT but miss appointments, so they run out of medication multiple times a year. They can’t come in because they are homeless, or have an unmanaged mental illness, or lost their job and can’t pay the co-pay.

My hormones come in a bottle from the pharmacy. My lab tests are done every year. My surgeries are completed and recovered from.

And **the doctors still think my HRT is hurting me**.

I’ve started to forget my injection day recently. My shot gets done on Sunday, or Monday, or Tuesday now, instead of the strict regiment my baby trans self kept. They were desperate for change. The shot promised growth. The grounded feeling doesn’t come from the vial anymore.

It’s for maintenance. The roots sprout from me. I’ve grown myself strong, heavy, solid. I’ve become unshakeable.

where rage and soft desire touch
by Danny McLaren

no one but me has touched my body in months.
this is the way to keep safe
myself, my lovers, my beloveds.
if I want the community I'm so desperate for
to survive.

touch is poison, is disease, is violence,
but so is isolation.
a zoom call is not comparable to a
kiss, a text can't fuck me or
god forbid, touch me in some gentle way.

bodies fall apart in the wake of violence and
virus, of disconnect
and distance.
the weather is getting colder;
how much longer before
the chill settles in your bones?

relationships end over the phone.
i am not the only one to have lost the hands that
held me sweetly,
some more permanently than others.

bodies crave justice
as surely as they hunger.
what is it like to only leave the house to march?

i lie awake in a cold sweat
after a nightmare about my grandpa's dementia
by Lucía Manzanares Prado

*after Ryo Fukui's "Nobody Knows the Trouble
I've Seen" and Trio Matamoros*

I nail a toe
to the wooden deck,
I nail toe after toe,
freshly-squeezed as they are;
And as I nail, lifeless, gray and wet,
They turn to fish
gutted and slick;
soon as I wake
I let out a sigh,
not for the fish, not for the toes,
just 'cuz you're not around.
one silly and goofy and childishest voice says
"The funk shall be within only you, former self,
for grass-mass-asking so long-ly and kindly" but
Yerba que el chivo no masca
Soy yo, sin embargo y con-trol
Pero si es la luz del sol,
sigue los pies de ayahuasca
—que diga, los tuyos. Rasca
me aquel cuyo nombre nombré
No lo rasques, tengo sed,
sé que tú agua no eres,
No se llora por querer,es,
Ni por las horas que hablé—

Claras de huevo batidas
 Sin mixer—sin drogas no,
 Sin marijuana no hay flow,
 Al menos mientras salidas
 no hayan de las partidas
 eternas de imperio; “Macho
 eres tu, no llores,” dijo
 mi abuela sin compasión,
 Pero su esposo llorón
 y cabrón me entendió: “Hijo

no le hagas caso a la gente
 Siente lo que has de sentir,
 No te dejes convertir;
 tú tienes dos dedos de frente.”
 Como lo guardo en mi mente
 Lo que aquel viejo me dió,
 Aunque mi padre miró
 con rencor a mis lágrimas,
 drogas, amores, lástimas
 Nada me importa, soy yo.

[the last thirty lines above are in décima form and
 roughly translate to the following with the following
 rhyme scheme:]

A Grass that the goat doesn't chew
 B am I, nevertheless and with(/out) control
 B But if it's the light of day,
 A it follows the footsteps of ayahwasca
 A —I mean, yours. Scratch
 C for me that whose name I named
 C Don't scratch it, I'm thirsty,

D I know you're not water,
 D No crying over wants,
 C Nor for the hours I spoke—

E Egg whites beaten
 F without a mixer—not without drugs
 F Without marijuana there's no flow
 E At least while exits
 E there are none from the matches,
 G eternal, of empire; “Male
 G are you, don't cry,” said
 H My grandma without compassion,
 H But her husband, crybaby
 G and bastard*, understood me: “Son,
 *[The word “cabrón”, translated as “bastard,” can
 connote resilience or stubbornness, and also means
 “he-goat.”]

I don't pay them any attention,
 J Feel what you've got to feel,
 J Don't let yourself be converted,
 I You've got two fingers of forehead.” [an idiom
 meaning “you're not stupid”]
 I Oh, how I hold in my mind
 F what that old man gave me,
 F Though my father would look
 K with resentment upon my tears,
 K drugs, loves, and regrets,
 F None of it matters to me, I'm me.



chronic

by michelle

Doxycycline
by Vera McLaughlin

I am sweat stains and perfect pussy. I am dancing in the rain and drenched in the downpour. I do not know what my face looks like, but I know something about being alive. I know about heartbreak and the desire to fuck it away. I know my name was once six syllables and now it's still six syllables, though the letters have all been scrambled.

I get up in the morning to pick my scabs. An open wound yawning. I am gooey, sobbing, tender. I am weepy, painful, hot. I think I have an infection again. Doxycycline. 7 days. I cycle from bedroom floor to bathroom floor to kitchen floor. I puke. I vomit. I hurl.

I am always ill. Achy on my best days. Cat curled up after biting hand – unaware of the consequences.

I am clammy feet and perky tits. I am humming in the shower and crying down the drain. I do not understand my own gender, but I understand I am seen as woman. I know about misogyny and the desire to fuck it away. I know my name once belonged to a man who did not see me as a person and now it belongs to me. I sometimes lend it to others, but it is mine.

I sometimes lend myself to others, but I am mine.

I get up in the morning to look at my chest in the mirror. A fucked up prank. I am heavy, thick, soft. I am angry, anguished, desired. I pluck a hair from my chin. Not because I care it's there, but for the ritual punishment of existing. I cycle from bed, toilet, couch. I stab. I pierce. I jab.

I have made a habit of hacking away at myself. It started when I was around two. They wheeled me into a hospital room – they slashed out my tonsils. This is when I learned my own body could make me sick. This is when I learned I could do something about it.

I am all stretched out. Gurney. I am forgotten and misunderstood. If I carve my breasts like ham, then will I remember my own face? Will I still be wanted enough to fuck it away? Does it really matter?

I am mine. I am mine. I am mine. I change my name. I take the doxy. I fight the infection. I chop and chip and sculpt myself anew.

a note from a friend who said
"i love you"

by Jon-Delia

I spent most of summer, 2021, in bed. Three important things happened that summer: I watched the Dark Crystal (the one with the muppets), finished Breaking Bad (the one with the meth cook) and found an old Remington typewriter. I had always wanted a typewriter, and this one was beautiful: rusty, missing the "1" key. It weighed about 40 pounds.

I was bedridden because I suffer from a disease called Hashimoto's Hypothyroidism. You may have heard of it. Anyway, I've had flare ups since the diagnosis, but this one had me sincerely doubting whether or not I wanted to be alive.

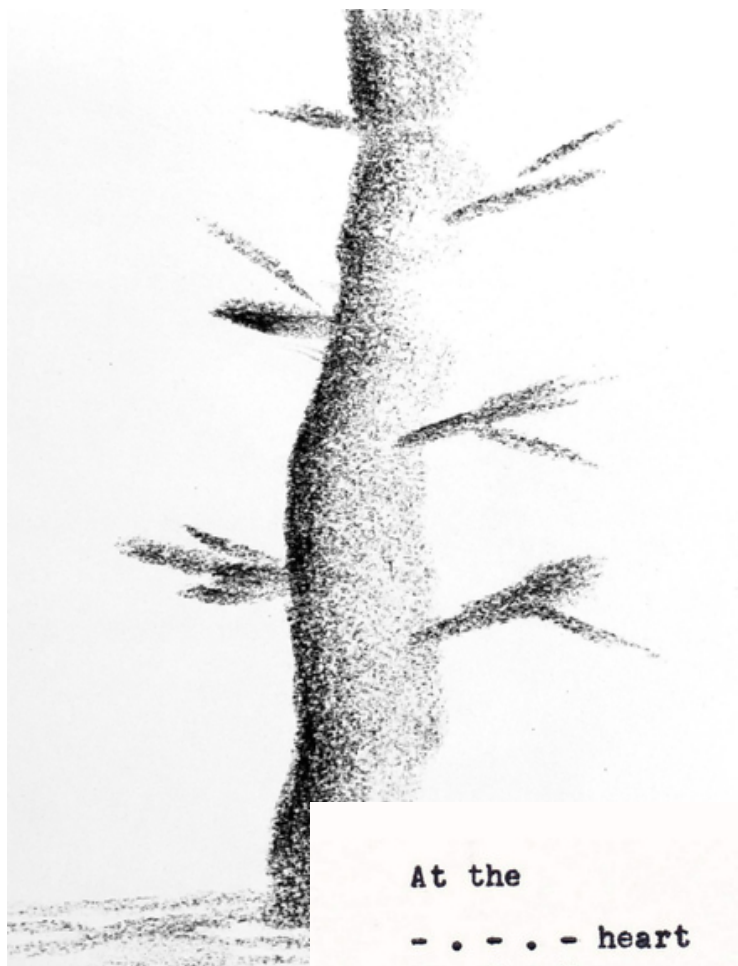
When I could physically drag myself to the typewriter, I did. No part of me wanted to write about disease. It is ugly to live with and doesn't make for flowery poetry. But writing about it made me cry. I don't know why. Maybe my illness just wanted to be seen, to be touched and loved. Maybe we are not so different.

I am grateful to share
this Earth, and these poems,
with you.

May she heal you as she heals me.

Love,

Doctor Delia



At the
 - . - . - heart
 - . - . - of
 every (- * -)
 sickness :::_:::
 is a song.

a note from a friend who said "i love you"

if i could
 write my way out of disease,
 i would.

i would reach up kindly
 and put the
 stars
 back in the sky.

i would lie at the thick
 tree trunks

and sing,
 sing,

tugging at the woven grass
 like a child at their
 mother's hair.

And all would be well,
 as it has always been
 in the stories,
 at least,
 in the stories
 where even dreams come true.

by Jon-Delia

Genderqueer magic, as an art.
by Emmin Bickford

I looked up to you,
You and your gender confidence.
You knew what it was like to exist in the margins.
You knew how to transmute pain into magic,
Genderqueer punk magic.
You taught me to let it loose
That I'm not less masc
If I don't bind my chest.
You taught me how to feel safe in my body
After it was infected with almost cancer.

We took our nonbinary bodies almost dying,
Actively being treated for the sickness
And we made beautiful art
Until we felt alive again.
I fell in love with the magic.
In you, I found a mentor
For love and life and sickness
And magic.

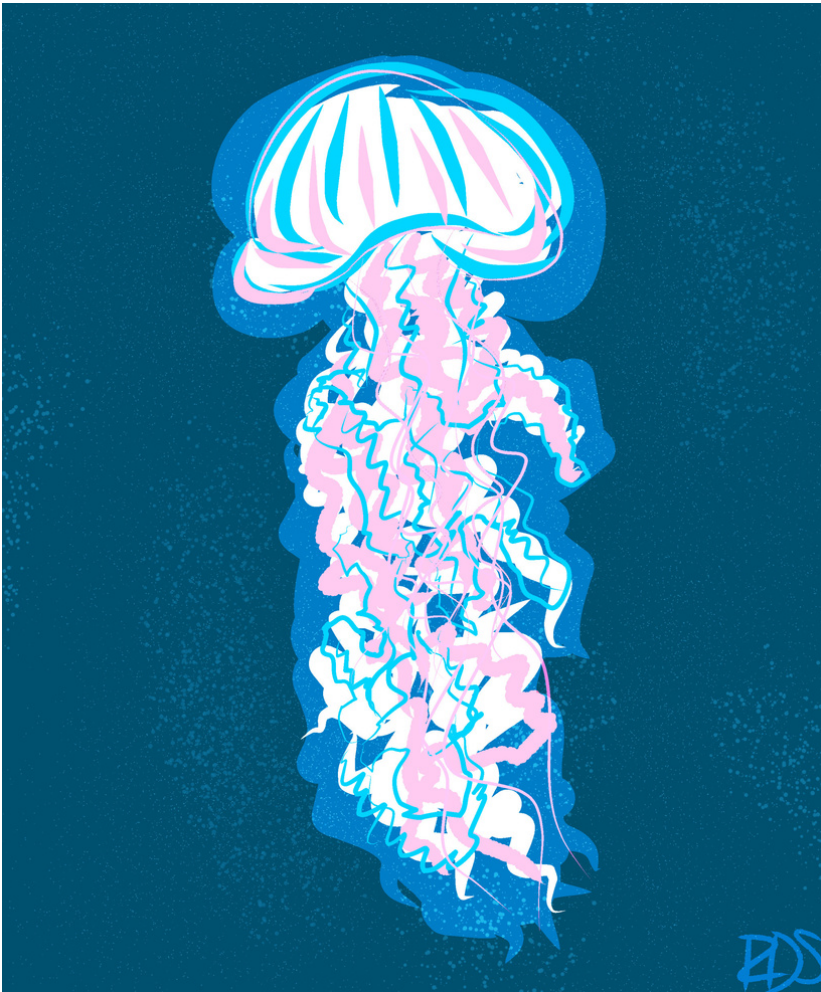
You knew I loved you.
The sickness started spreading to your brain.
You were the genderqueer elder sibling
I always wanted
And you knew.

One day you asked me for my body.
I was so afraid to lose the magic that had kept me alive

That I was too scared to say no.
So, I gave you my body,
And we both got sicker.
The sickness started to eat you whole.
I tried to ask for my body back.
And you sang the song the older men sing.
Suddenly I owed you.
All the magic was debt
And I signed a deal with you.
When your brain became infested by the sickness,
I tried to run away.

But pen ink turned blood and my wrists ran dry.
Blood drops from your tongue as you tell me
The last to refuse you
Never worked again.

Your gender magic turned
Gender hellhole.
But, I refuse to let you take it all.
Leaving is the most dangerous time,
But I refuse to lose my genderqueer magic.
So, I make my own art now.
And I feel alive.



Mutable by Right
by Riley Declan Shepard

"I've had a fascination with jellyfish since I was little, specifically the immortal jellyfish, which is a tiny jellyfish that can revert to its polyp form at any time, making it quite literally immortal. I like the bodily autonomy it gives the jellyfish — reminds me that I can make changes to myself to make my body more comfortable to live in."

The Naysayers
by jaci penelope

Years and years ago
In another life

Someone told me they had gone to explore the caves
In the forest on the outskirts of town
And as soon as they went through the damp rock's mouth

The spiders swarmed their arms,
and when the sunlight shone through
They saw there were millions of them,
Everywhere

Even before that,
When I was a child
I once entered a different cave,
Elsewhere

My fellow explorers and I
We chewed spearmint and watched the green sparks
Escape each other's mouths in the darkness

Somehow, yet still,
There are those
Who would spite a butterfly
For having been a caterpillar

**An Awakening / At the High-Risk
Breast Cancer Clinic
by Kris Lewis**

*I think I would have been nonbinary
if it had been an option when I was a kid.*
I named that truth years ago.

My mind doesn't hold tightly to regrets,
I can't actually imagine growing up any other way,
but sometimes I wonder,
would I hold more memory
if I had been allowed to be the child I was?

The first time my sister cut my hair short,
I felt like I could fly.

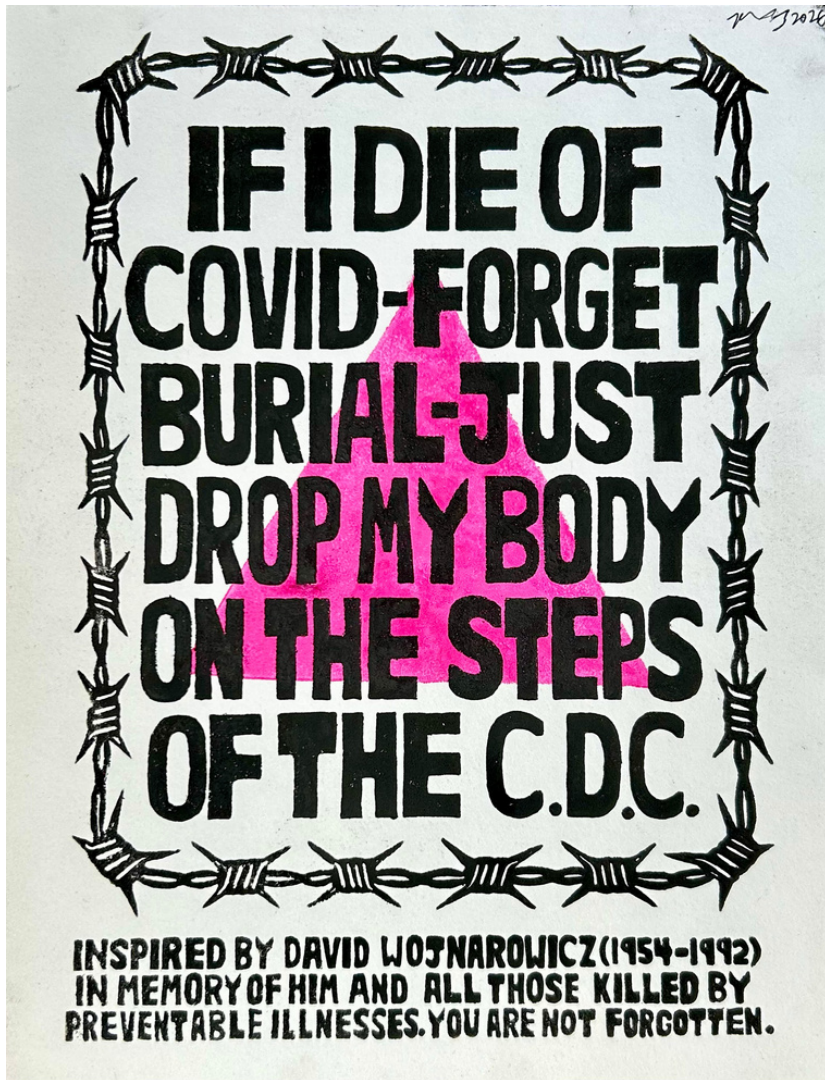
At the high-risk breast cancer clinic,
when I scheduled my mastectomy,
everything is pink.
I asked for a flat chest
in a white room surrounded by silicone breasts.
I dreamed of androgyny, neutrality,
neither, nor.

I read about menopause
even though I was young,
and not a woman.
A body needs hormones,
bones and heart and brain.

I try both,
but I learn,
this body cannot tolerate estrogen.
My surgeon will not discuss testosterone,
and the first time I ask my doctor,
he questions the order of my transition.

I don't know if gender lives in my genes,
alongside,
intertwined with
my cancer risk,
but somehow,
this body holds both.

There were no trans stories
at the high-risk breast cancer clinic,
but maybe that is where I opened a door
into truths my child-self did not have.



Act Up CDC
by Kiera Toews

"Inspired by David Wojnarowicz' infamous 'act up' jacket and the many similarities between long covid and AIDS, the act up + clean air movements, government downplaying and leaving the most vulnerable communities feeling the heaviest impacts to fend for themselves, (lack of) government + mainstream + community response + action, and the social stigma, isolation, and medical neglect that comes with advocating for clean air + living with long covid.

Mourn the dead and fight like hell for the survivors. This piece is dedicated to everyone covid killed and disabled.

This piece took me almost three years to finish, I went from moderate to severe to moderate myalgic encephalomyelitis over the course of working on it, and for a while thought I wouldn't live to finish it and am so grateful I did. Thousands of carve strokes went into this linoprint, each one in honour of someone killed or disabled by covid. "

Infectious Diseases

by Sunny Hill

Before the physical exam, the doctor asks me questions, questions like “Do you have a vagina?” and “How long were you in the mental hospital?” I answer them, mouth open and wide for minutes on end. Then his feet echo down the linoleum floor, and I stumble into the gown. I lay down on the table, thighs hugging the hundred cotton polka dots. They don’t measure up to the polka dots I already have between blubber. The doctor comes back and lifts my bralette, slipping his hand underneath. The stethoscope feels like a meat tenderizer. He says, “Breathe deeper,” and presses six more times. So much oxygen wasted. The carbon dioxide sits on the chair beside me and I count its eyes. The doctor lifts the gown again and looks into my underwear for too long. He stares at something I’ve been hiding under my clothes. I count the seconds and then immediately forget them. He is pressing into my hips, those tender bones, and my ankles tantrum, a toddler crying for something they cannot name. He murmurs something about cloning, says it six times, says they are going to “clone us,” and I hope nobody ever clones me. What a tragedy for the human race. To live lives we weren’t meant to. The great fascination of life is never knowing. Of course, we chase the answers, and that’s why I came to the doctor in the first place. He stares out at the window because he doesn’t know what questions to ask. He looks at the tree for wisdom. “Any suicide attempts?” I recall a couple and relay them.

I wonder what counts and what the score would be at this point. “Abuse as a child?” I think of preschool and learning the value of numbers. Addition and subtraction in...kindergarten, maybe. Bringing something together to take it away. I could tell him stories, but he wants a yes or no, so I go with “no.” It’s not a lie, but my chest constricts when I say it, and my eyes dart away. After he runs out of questions, he nods and says he’ll try to help me, and it’s the most any doctor has done for me in a while. I award him a long carbon dioxide bubble. He furrows his eyebrows, diagnoses me as a “handful,” then tells me about the blood work. I schedule with the lab on the walk back to the car, eager to open my veins up to another stranger and eager to get my negative results printed. Another referral, another specialist, another month before I get an appointment. I press on and stumble forward, grabbing onto the nearest countertop to keep my legs from giving out. From here I see so many questions. I count them.

Earth's Embrace
by Devin Ambrosia

I'm grateful for my mask for a new reason today
The smell of formaldehyde doesn't reach me
No sensory memories of dissection and death
Just new possibilities and life

I part the fertile earth and it slides open easily
Like a wet pussy
Like my mouth around a prayer
Is this where my body belongs?

My chest tissues fall out of the biohazard bag
and into the welcoming embrace
Cradled by the mycelial network
Once again a part of all that is

Names for moths
by Diem Okoye

Because she would not cry, I cried harder
to make up for the silence, for everything
like the blankets I tucked around her aching knees
to feel handmade and not hospital-issue,
that the stair rails would lean toward her trembling
hands
scarred and swollen for her palms to hold,
that the bruises formed as a result of her cancer
would not hurt if anyone were to touch them,
and of course I cried for each long night she endured,
to the long hours a day broken with pain,
and for the red chair we sit upon a late autumn
evening when the moths
return with their beautiful wings folded,
the ones I catch her watching in the way we all do,
that no amount of staring at their bodies can wholly
convince us
that this is normal, that a living thing flying carries this
kind of grief,
like the darkened sky had dropped shadows to eye
level and given them motion;
and I did not want to say anything because everything
about suffering
has already been said, but when she would not break
her silent gaze, I said
you know, in some species, the male sings without rest,
can you imagine the boy calling out for a
hidden mate,

a signal, giving a literal tremor to fall in love with?
and she exhaled through her nose in soft amusement,
and I cried for the names she repeated over and over
again with the force
of her arm in a little movement, until she caught one
in a loosely-closed fist, which she slowly undid to reveal
the captured moth unharmed, that she then set on
concrete,
crouched with it, and in the few seconds before it flew
away,
she looked left and right in the nearby shrub
like a hopeful companion, waiting; I had thought that
someone
must have been cutting onions nearby.



The Trauma in Healing by Noah Stang-Osborne

“The Trauma in Healing is about my experiences with a medical system that has both saved my life and been extremely traumatic. It is hard to rely on something like that to keep you alive, but as a chronically ill person, I don’t have a choice. Like the plants in the medicine bottles, I grow and change from these experiences.”

The time cuddling didn't hurt **by Art Stardust**

I don't remember exactly how many days it lasted. But here is what I remember about it.

We held each other. You reached for me just to wrap yourself around me, and I reached for you just to wrap myself around you.

This was abnormal for us, although we longed for each other, always.

The problem was that you were in too much pain all the time to do it before.

It was a medication to help with the pain. We were amazed at the results. You were noticeably in less pain, less exhausted.

We cuddled so much while it lasted. Unfortunately, the medication caused serious side effects. You had to stop taking it so soon.

We were so present with each other then. We still are.

Yesterday, you were recovering from your third brain surgery. I was so grateful we live close enough to the hospital for me to walk. I sat with you for three hours, just hanging out. We occasionally squeezed each other's hands, saying, "I'm gay for you."

We are so grateful he's recovering, I text updates to friends. This is the first time you've ever had your entire

care team respect your pronouns. There's genuine care.

You are being treated with dignity. You always deserved this level of care. I am relieved to see them work with various machines to monitor you and help administer medications.

Today we squeezed each other's hands. We said *I love you, I'm so grateful.*

I hope someday they find another way to treat your severe pain, and it works. I miss holding you. I will always treasure those days that you had relief from every touch causing pain.

You often say that clothes hurt your skin. Some mornings I wake up and offer a gentle touch on your arm or back, and you wince, saying, "no touches." It hurts too much.

I have chronic pain, too, but mine is different from yours. Many people don't understand. I once had someone say they "couldn't imagine" the kind of pain I was experiencing. I described it like aches and pains from being sick with the flu. It's like that, but every day. Your mileage may vary depending on what can be done, and often the weather forecast.

People with chronic illnesses are often depicted as overdramatic. But most of us actually put up with far worse than the rest of you can imagine when it comes to pain. We mask it well.

We laugh about how little sex we have, and the laughter is better than sex could ever be.

Contributor Bios

Art Stardust: Art Stardust is non-binary, pansexual, and disabled. For over a decade, they have written openly about unpacking a fundamentalist upbringing, coming out as queer, navigating poverty and mental illness, and informing themselves about social justice.

Danny McLaren: Danny McLaren is a fat, queer, trans, non-binary, Jewish, and neurodivergent writer living in Tkaronto, colonially known as Toronto, Canada. They are a poet, an essayist, a video game lover, and a zine-maker. They can be found at @dannymclrn on instagram.

Devin Ambrosia: Devin Ambrosia (they/them) loves to dance, read fantasy and sci fi, eat, and be a feral foraging forest freak on the shores of Gitchigammi. They write visionary fiction erotica for Shousetsu Bang*Bang, a free 18+ queer webzine of art and literature, and also dabble in poetry, painting, and collage. They've been published in A Catalog of Small Machines. Website: bit.ly/DJAmbrosia

Diem Okoye: Diem Okoye is a writer and teacher who was highly commended for the erbacce-prize 2026. Her work has appeared in The Gay and Lesbian Review, Reckoning, Friends Journal and other literary journals. She was awarded second place in the Blue Mesa Review

Spring 2025 Contest Issue and was nominated for the 2024 Dwarf Stars Award for speculative poetry. In addition to her writing, she works as a copy editor and is a reader at The Good Life Review. She lives with two German Shepherds and two neurotic cats.

Emmin Bickford: I am a genderqueer and disabled human, therapist, professor, and survivor. I am guided by transformative justice in my life and work. I previously experienced a cancer scare that led to a long and complicated relationship with the medical system.

Gemma Bastian: Gemma Bastian (she/her) is a trans, AuDHD university professor and amateur poet who explores themes of femininity, transition, and trauma in her work. She lives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota with her partner and naughty little cat. Gemma posts more poetry on Instagram @poetrybygemma when she remembers to upload.

jaci penelope: trans woman in her mid 30s living in her hometown in vermont. grew up in arizona, raised on grateful dead concerts and hardcore punk. my art & writing uses found or recycled materials to explore nature & spirituality through a queer, trans & neurodivergent gaze. she can be found on instagram @jacipenelope.

Joely Williams: Joely Williams is an Afro-Boricua poet, teaching artist, and letter maker from the South Bronx,

now writing from South Carolina. Her speculative and literary work appears in *Abyss & Apex*, *Penumbric*, *Inner Worlds*, *Zoetic Press*, *Dipity Lit Mag*, and *SISTORIES: Fluid By Nature*. She is the author of two collections and is working on her first autofiction. She is also the founder of the Poetry Letter Club, mailing handwritten letters and poems to strangers. Find her at @poems_neverdie.

Jon-Delia: Jon-Delia is a mushroom forager, natural dyer, musician and craftsperson living in Appalachia. Their focus is on bringing together community with ritual and shared space, as well as telling stories of the land through songs and art.

Kiera Toews: Kiera Toews (they/them/he/she) is a mad queercrip artist with lifelong chronic illnesses, whose Myalgic Encephalomyelitis went from mild to severe after a covid infection. Since improving to moderate they've been able to create again, making art in their bed inspired from what they observe through the lens of chronically ill queer grief and joy and honouring what they've experienced around them while knowing they'll return to the dirt themselves eventually. With a focus on flora and fauna and how connection and community is magical, exploring themes of queer divinity and blasphemy, new life out of decay, living and dying queerly, always with a true love and appreciation for the dirt and all that grows from it at the heart of their craft.

Kris Lewis: Kris Lewis (ze/they) is a transmasculine nonbinary person living in central Illinois. Professionally, ze teaches applied linguistics and researches how people story ourselves and others through language, art, and interaction. Ze writes poetry as a form of autoethnographic sense-making of personal life experience.

Leo Arcelay-Christiano: Leo Arcelay-Christiano is a designer and illustrator from Baltimore, Maryland. As a trans man who has been out since the age of 13, his work often explores identity, the body, vulnerability, and transformation through layered visual storytelling. He recently graduated from Loyola University Maryland with a B.A. in Communications and hopes to pursue an MFA in the coming years.

Lillian Hochwender: Lillian Hochwender is a disabled genderfluid writer and visual artist living in the American Midwest. Their work spans numerous genres and frequently explores embodiment, mortality, and identity. Their poetry has been published by the likes of *Doll Hospital Journal*, *FLARE Magazine*, and *The Southwest Review*.

Lucía Manzanares Prado: Lucía Manzanares Prado (they/she) is a 25-year-old non-binary white Cuban-American poet and translator with a deep love for all things nature, neurodivergence, and disability justice. They currently live on the unceded lands of the

Piscataway and Nacotchtank peoples (the Baltimore-DC metro area). Lucía has ADHD and loves writing at the intersection of anticolonial, ecological, and abolitionist frameworks. When they're not reading or writing you can find them listening to live jazz, fighting for a safe and just future with their friends, or befriending animals both wild and domesticated. Follow them on Instagram @luciamanzanaresprado for more of their work!

Luz Blumenfeld: I am an interdisciplinary artist, writer, teacher, and deep listener. Third generation Chicane from Oakland, CA, I currently live and work in Portland, OR. My practice is sincerely grounded in the expansive methodologies of research, relationship to site, and collection and curation.

michelle: michelle (any/all) is a genderfluid, intersex, multiply disabled person with DID, AuDHD, and chronic pain. they are a proud cane user and have been working on embracing being an ambulatory wheelchair user, too. they are a grief doula who calls durham north carolina home.

Noah Stang-Osborne: Noah is a Massachusetts based multimedia artist, who uses painting, collage, photography, and fiber arts to create pieces on grief, survival, love and community. Xe received xyr bachelors in art therapy at Lesley University and runs art groups for queer and trans kids. Xyr art draws

inspiration from the natural world and his experiences as an Afro indigenous, chronically ill, nonbinary butch lesbian.

Riley Declan Shepard: I'm a disabled transmasculine from the Midwest who dabbles in art and spends most of his time writing poetry and working on fiction manuscripts for future novels. Mental illness/trauma, trans identity, and medical transition are the common themes of my works.

Sunny Hill: Sunny Hill (they/he/she/xe) writes poetry and plays with tarot cards on Instagram @fromsunnyhill. They were nominated for Best of the Net 2026 by Grey Coven Publishing. In 2026, they have consumed far more Sour Patch Kids and listened to far more Noah Kahan than can really be considered healthy, but hey, we all have our ways of coping.

Theo Leviathan: Theo Leviathan is a NYC based writer who thinks too much about lesbianism, disability, transsexuality, kinky sex, and politics. They are a white transmasculine butch, who is bad at being bisexual and practiced at being a dyke. They have been in two cults.

Vera McLaughlin: Vera McLaughlin is a disabled trans artist and writer living in Seattle, Washington.

TRANS SURVIVORS

Zine: with art and writing by

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Devin Ambrosia

Diem Okoye

Emmin Bickford

Gemma Bastian

jaci penelope

Joely Williams

Jon-Delia

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FORGE is a national trans anti-violence organization supporting trans survivors/communities and providing training to service providers. Trauma-informed. Empowerment-based. Culturally-responsive.



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