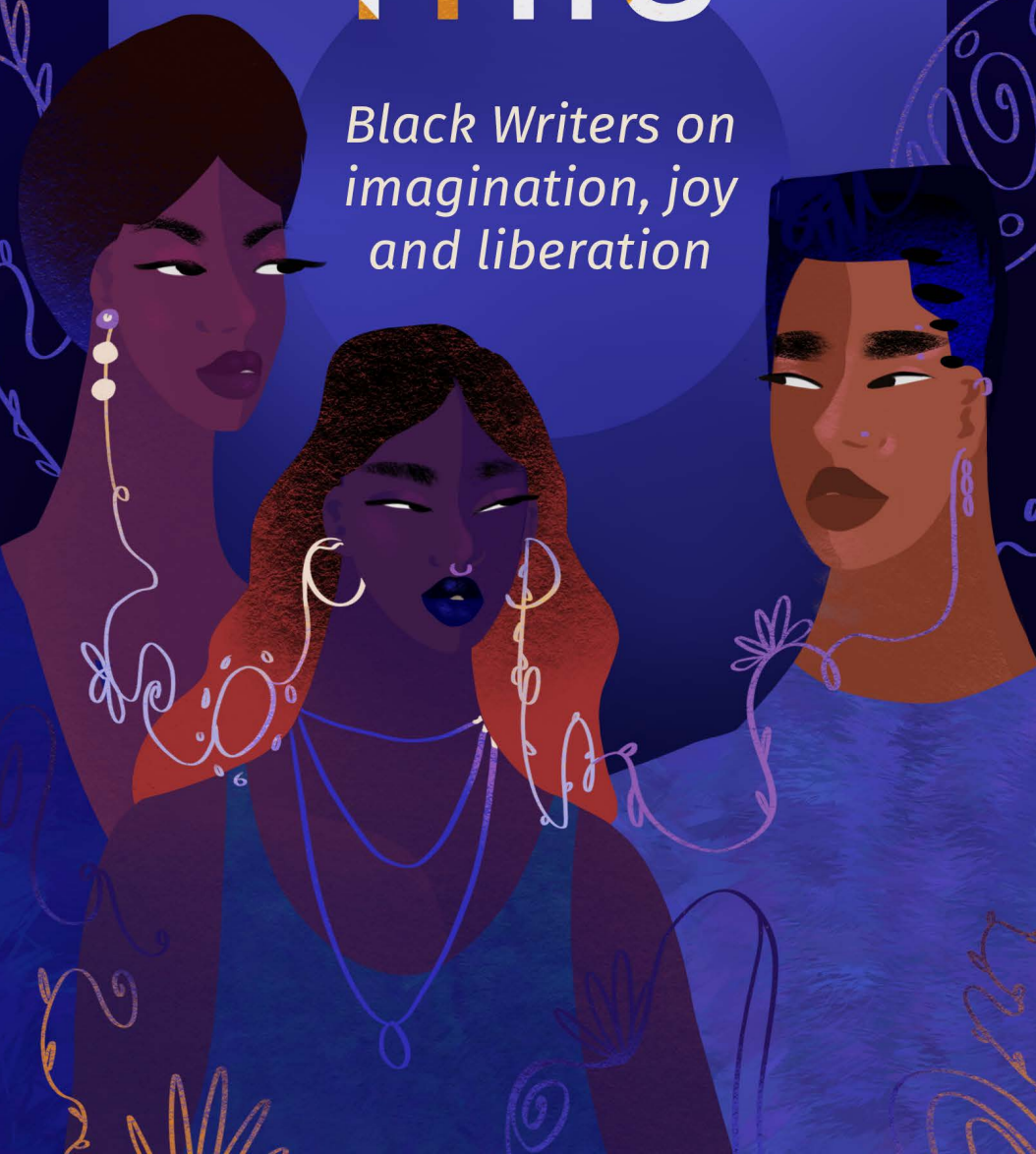
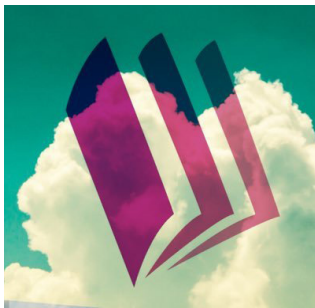


# WE GOT THIS

*Black Writers on  
imagination, joy  
and liberation*





OutWrite DC

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Dear Reader,

OutWrite LGBTQ Literary Festival is pleased to share with you the work of six talented Black writers from the LGBTQIA+ community. This special issue centers interconnected themes of Black imagination, Black joy, and Black liberation. As we work to create a world where Black people not only survive, but thrive, we must nurture our imaginations and foster joy along the way.

We asked these writers to give us works that are celebratory, works that make us dream, works that show us what freedom is. We asked them to write about the art that soothes their spirit. We invited them to write about a moment they laughed so hard their belly shook. We called on them to write to us about a world without prisons, jails, and detention centers. The authors included in this journal answered our call.

Enjoy!

Warmly,  
Tahirah Alexander Green  
Editor

## Dance

Cedric Brown

You are moving on a path through a field of bright sunflowers that are as tall as your BFF and, like him, look you boldly in the face. You are breathless from exertion and exhilaration. You haven't a care in the world other than celebrating this very moment, the second-by-second proof of your existence against the odds.

You're wearing gym shorts or short shorts or a tutu or nothing at all. Your body moves in a way that both expresses and produces joy, flinging itself in these surroundings to the tune of aliveness, an extended remix in your head. Ancestors smile from the cirrus clouds on high at your delight. Your sweat insists on bringing cooling relief to your ever-blackening, ever-glistening skin. You sing your favorite chorus of joyful noise; even its cracks are flawless operatic gospel, pitch perfect to the ears of the Universe. You swing arms upward in praise, the flair of your high kicks--at least in your mind they're high--rival a Cotton Club showgirl; you slam feet to stomp the Earth with the determination of a Zulu prince. You capoeira whirl, you dervish twirl, you two-step, you Smurf and Prep. Nobody is watching but everybody sees. You left fear and self-doubt back on the side of the road while on the way to your best self. You are your own showstopper.

Freed from the crippling yoke of machismo, your hips find new fluidity in rotation and your booty claps "Bravissimo!" You wine and grind, head sassily tossed to the side like a two-dolla ho itchin' for a ride after sundown. A not-unfamiliar tingle runs from tailbone to throat like when Chaka hits the highest note in "I'm Every Woman" and you think maybe she's singing 'bout you too. You play off a little stumble and misstep like it's the intricate footwork of an original B-boyyyyy, pausing to freeze in street pose: arms crossed chest in a protective vest with back hunched, head tilted, and lips curled-- yeh YEAH son!

You are a freewheeling freestyling freethinker, designed freehand by freedwomen and freemason forbears to be a freestanding and free-willed freelancer in the free-for-all that is life. You. Are. Loved.

You ease on down the sunflower field path, whose green and gold expanse gives way to a fine pebbled black sand beach sprinkled with tiny pink stones. The music in your head has stopped; a serenity fills the void. You close your eyes as the cooling sea air meets the sweat of your brow; the wind currents guide you to a spot at the edge of the surf where you fall

to your knees, whupped from the earlier exertion. You're surprised that the incoming waters are lukewarm enough to be refreshing and inviting; you embrace being splashed and anointed by Mother Yemanya. You lie there in the wet sand, awash in endorphins and the ebb and flow of the tide, watching wispy angels in the sky drift by in a cosmic Rorschach parade. Your pulse slows; your eyes grow heavy. You drift off into a comfortable sleep, safe.

## And Gawd Said: You Betta Whine It B\*tch

Faylita Hicks

Smoke spins out  
from my throat & now  
there are no more dogs  
chanting in my chest.

I have let them all escape  
in the aftermath. Unhinged  
my jaw & let the moon  
crawl out.

This was the seismic orgasm  
I was waiting for. Praise be  
to the god of Dancehall  
& Swivel Hips.

I am finally healed  
beneath the tantric neon  
& thrumming base kick  
of you.

You have severed me  
from my burden of banality  
& check this: I haven't stopped  
glowing since 4 am.

I am electric-love  
ribboned around the booty cheeks  
of brown gxrls w/ suicide drops  
that drag even jesus

out da bed & back into church.  
Gawd—you gave me a back  
like a Ford Truck. I be whinin'  
through red lights & headlights.  
Now, they know I got a fat tongue  
& a coochie w/ eight legs.  
Can't nobody keep me  
from dancin' how I got to—no more.  
O' Gawd of Dope Beats



& Sweat Blood—  
you have made me new.  
Cleansed me

in the Bump & Grind  
of the dance floor.  
You have saved me from  
myself—yet again.

Gawd, you was in your bag  
on this one. Gawd, you know  
I'm blessed & highly flavored.  
Gawd, I know I ain't yo main

but you in here every otha'weekend.  
No cap. Come thru w/ the blessings.  
Come thru. Eggplant emoji. Come thru  
& lemme #AsheSashay for you.

#Splash#WitchTock#NewMoon

## The Kraken To Their Spear

Faylita Hicks

There is only one pixelated capture of us—the wily tentacles of our fat octopus grins slipping quickly under the swishing wheels of the hungry vessel that took me. Our strange emergence of affection: a deuce-bodied monster capitated by a Greyhound leaving Baltimore.

You were angry with me—for not having had faith. I had hoped you were referring to my diet—to my need to fit more joy into my skin. I knew I could do it. I could prove it to you, my need to expand past the point of definition, to crest over & over & over—I have always had the faith.

I can see you shaking your head now. *We—we were never monsters.* Yes. I know. But love, I was. I cannot apologize for having never been easy; I have always been a fractal dissonance: my body a bowl of striated light beneath you. If I am not an octopus or a woman or you—what am I?

Our texting is a scattering of hieroglyphic reasons we could never be together—swimming in the basket of my back pocket, swishing through the radioactive air, sickling through the shadows of my small bedroom in the dark, circling my empty bed like the delicate bulbs slowly untethering themselves from my ceiling fan

with every spin. When I say *I love you*—I am saying I have always loved you. These legs have always had a way of moving in every direction. & if given time—I evolve. I am saying: I could've come back to you. I could see our return—you in a cloud of silver, me in a belly of red.

## When Another White Boy Comes For Your Sister

Faylita Hicks

Ask *Do you collect stuff?* He will reply with *Yep*.  
Smile and ask *What kind of stuff?* He will grunt *Who the fuck are you?*

Say *I collect knives*. He will roll his eyes *Whatever, man*.  
Say *This is one right here, I keep under my pillow*.

He will try to look past you into the house, say *I keep this one for white boys*.  
He will smile at this and ask *Oh yeah?*

Say *Sure. For white boys like you*.

Say *My house is my shelter, is mine*  
*& all who are here are mine*  
*& if I catch you banging on my door*  
*one more goddamn time*  
*I will not cut you.*  
*I will kill you.*

He will turn & strut off down the ruddy stairwell of the apartment building.  
Hold your breath & pray he isn't a fucking Republican.

Close the door. Lock it. Search for your sister.  
Find her in the bedroom closet with her Erykah Badu t-shirt ripped & crying.

Say *Who the fuck was that*. She will answer with a heave of her shoulders.  
Say *I told you not to bring that shit around here*. She will stare at the carpet.  
Say *That's how bitches die out here. Fucking around with this dumb ass white boys*.  
Say *Get out my closet & clean yourself up*. She will stare at the carpet.  
Say *Dammit*. She will stare at the carpet. Say *This is something we all learn the hard way*.  
Say  
Say  
Say *Shit. Now we gotta move*.

## A Good Pair of Glasses

Kim M. Reynolds

We are sitting by the fire, coming back into our bodies after a long day in the cold. It's winter here in Indiana, middle of January. It's been about two weeks since Christmas and everyone from the family has traveled back to their respective homes, including us. There's still some drama, speculation, and new family secrets to chew on. More and more memories to connect, outfits to rank, body language to read. Come February, our conversations will probably shift to how we hope winter will end early this year and how much we will always hate our white co-workers. The dust that was rattled will start to settle back into place.

My sister Gia and I have just finished talking about those family secrets, specifically Aunty Linda and her new born, adopted child. Aunty Linda is our mother's sister who has always been around, but for reasons no one told us growing up, was sidelined. She would come in from Atlanta and was really good with cameras, often doing the filming and photographing of the family. As a result, she was never in the pictures.

With every year of growing older, these family gatherings become more and more about cartography. We have been trying to map Aunty Linda's place in our lives and what she must think about us, about the constant dismissal from our family on account of her being lesbian. Gia and I didn't understand this until we had the language and time to look back at what in our childhood was embraced with big arms and what was said in hushed tones and raised eyebrows and the nudging of knees. In taking a microscope to the past, it was clear that Linda was kept at an arm's distance from us and her presence was limited to the whisper.

Gia and I both wish our eyes were more connected to our minds when we were younger so we could have performed more love for Linda, maybe we could have made it easier or more worthwhile to keep showing up to lukewarm love.

So, Gia thinks that maybe later in the year we should go visit Aunty Linda, stay with her and the newborn and her partner for a weekend. And I agree with her, knowing that this kind of family love is awkward and incremental, but at the same time, every moment counts and it all adds up. Plus the newborn is at those very sweet stages of being able to greet and smile and stumble around; her personality is peeking through.

Gia is the leader on these kinds of things, family things. She's quite good like this. She is able to insert herself in the narrative and become a part of others' without much inhibition. She says things like *"everybody has their story Khy, and some people only get to think about their choices after they've been made."* I don't know when it was, but somewhere along the line, Gia got really wise, which also means that she got really simple. She didn't fuss about imposition or asking a bunch of "what-ifs." She just followed others' consent and her own intuition.

Gia's actually met Auntie Linda's partner once before and says they're real smart and kind. That they seem to be a really great and full person. "Seems like they have filled in each other's gaps and that they really do love each other. And the baby, I think that helps too", she says.

I smile, but I also furrow my eyebrows.

"But Gia, what does it mean to build love so far outside of what you were told love once was? How is it that Linda's and ma's parents loved and raised children who became strangers to each other and to them, and in the same ways, we are the same strangers to our parents?"

The silence in our lives has been so profoundly noisy lately. Unlike Gia, I feel less equipped to pick up the pieces and make it all make sense. I am interested in how it broke, and why. Why has Auntie Linda had to make her own castle? And what tools did she use to build that love considering that first place of love didn't fill her cup, and at times, denied it even existed.

"I mean, Gia, why are we always making things up and not sharing notes with each other? It's like we start over every time we are born, expected to just figure out how to look at people and see them as who they are, and practice love around that. Mom and Dad loved us in our infancy and then couldn't grapple with the love I wanted for myself, the same love Linda wanted, the love I had to fumble around in the dark for, the one I almost died under the weight of not finding. And then we just keep having kids to relieve ourselves, to love something so dearly because it loves us, and then not being able to deal with how that love very well may change."

She looks at me and looks at the fire with the taste of my ramblings on her tongue. She picks up her nearly empty teacup with two hands. "I don't know, you know Khy. Sometimes we are each other's relief, even if it's just a couple of years or a long enough lasting idea."

"Is love possible like that? Piecemeal or projected?"

Silence.

I get up to go make us a second round of tea to help with the thawing. As I reached for her mug, Gia asked me, "Khy, do you think you have been loved all the way through?"

We are at an age now where we have a mouthful of memories and bruises to remember the taste of. We have been away from home and had our own fun and our own fuck ups. We have had our own chances to deal

with the love we've been dealt and the love that has transformed. And the love that was disappeared.

I sigh. I look at her. I say, "Well, that depends, doesn't it? Perhaps I have been loved all the way through- completely and wholly, to the bone, to the moon and back, till death do they part. To the crevices of me I've never explored myself. And maybe I've just never noticed, or never wanted to notice. But if I am to play show and tell, or to cross some line in a dare? Well no, I haven't felt as though I've been loved all the way through. But, I don't think I've been loved all the way through by someone I wanted to do that to me."

She looked at me and waited for me to go on. She knew that she was conjuring. I finish pouring the tea and return to the cushions on the floor by the fire.

I go on.

"You know, I feel as though, like, I've picked out the best glasses with which to view myself." I smile and smirk. "I've browsed and tried on several pairs, trying to see which view lets in the right amount of light and dark. I stayed away from ones with a high magnification and rather went for ones that help with farsightedness. I paid for them with cash and wrapped them up real nice. Even put them in the most expensive bag from the gift store.

I've presented those glasses to lovers and sometimes even our family and begged them silently to love their gift. To put them on! To look in the mirror and admire the reflection!

But it hasn't happened, I've never revelled in that kind of reception, in that kind of reflection. Instead, I've watched my own smile fade at its corners slowly and over time. Even at this age, I still get that unshakable, immediate disappointment, like the one you get on a poor Christmas morning when there isn't as much love as you wanted to see in front of you."

I look at her, and continue.

"But Gia, I also haven't essentialized this sadness or that despair. I know there is so much to this life, and so much to do. But. It's still quite sad on some days and so viscerally death-like on others, to be so undone and confused about the potentials of loving another.

It's tiring, to keep misplacing glasses."

Silence again.

I grow uncomfortable because I have gotten cold even with the tea and the fire.

And now, I start to think about all the ways this could just amount to selfishness.

Perhaps I have been selfish that was nurtured by an immaturity and an inability to know tenderness like I know it now.

I could have been selfish for simply casting off love that intimidat-

ed me or I convinced myself I didn't want. Selfish for wrapping my arms around someone else in the meantime, daydreaming about a girl who I don't refer to as "someone else". Selfish for throwing myself completely and blindly into wanting to be loved and seen by someones who I think I love, who *I think I know*. Exhausting myself in this pursuit that only suits me.

Gia brings me out of my thoughts and says, "Khy, I think Aunty Linda even in her absence, taught you something about the trick of seeing. You can't make it all work, but what you do have to do is choose the biggest lens that gives you the biggest peace, and the amount of understanding you can love through."

I smirk at Gia's gentleness, and I come to the conclusion, "You know, sometimes I feel like I need a pair of damn glasses. Because I think...maybe... or no... most likely... I've missed it. I've missed some of the love by looking directly at it, demanding it look like something else."

## Forbearance: an ode to Shanel

Osimiri Sprowal

I am still  
learning to debone  
the laundry woman's hands

To be a wet  
heavy  
dangling

airborne cotton  
mocking sky

watering jasmine  
with dredges  
of another mans  
luxury

I am learning not  
to clean my house

to spin the clothesline  
thrice  
around my fingertips

call all my limbs  
dance

I beg to forget  
every work day  
that came before me

I don't want the coronation  
Of polished silverware  
I don't want the floorwax gown



Promise me this day, unvarnished  
Ligaments without upholstery  
A slow song winding  
down a staircase  
left unswept

Please God,  
give me day off kilter  
Give me sky's laugh  
I want meadow  
Just once  
I want sound to stop  
me alive  
I want sun to set  
And body  
doesn't shriek busy  
I want the day I tell  
man wait  
and spine doesn't  
grit teeth  
I want loved enough  
to say no  
and not hear  
a nameless mother  
ask me why  
I've forgotten  
all she taught me  
I want to be  
still  
long enough  
to cry  
and feel  
grateful  
that I can still  
come undone

I don't want my mother's hands  
I just want to hold them  
let the knuckles elongate  
into a feeling we cannot name  
I want to sleep  
on a bed where I know  
the difference between  
plucked suffering  
and my own soft

I just, want  
an unshackled joy  
a promise  
to land on  
I want  
to take  
the day off  
and not  
owe my name  
in return

I want  
the silence  
that comes  
after everything  
I should not  
have to write  
I want eulogy  
to be a word  
I can't remember  
the sound of  
a language  
made of  
foremothers  
laugh  
to rest  
long enough  
to know mine  
and hold whatever  
we were searching for  
I want dusk  
to know she  
just silence  
coming after  
this declaration  
of love

## Osumare

Osimiri Sprowal

*Orisha*  
of Rainbow  
a snake

A dragged  
body,  
A stomach pressed  
low to ground

Folks  
argue  
bout  
they  
gender

And they don't  
say nothing  
back  
Just chuckle  
into a different color  
Everytime

The first time  
I caught  
one of my ancestors  
I asked her my name

And she looked  
like how  
Black women look  
when you ask  
foolish questions  
Clicked her teeth

and said  
"snake charmer"

The first riot  
was a dragged body  
A memorium of stomachs  
forced low to ground

The first rainbow  
queer was big enough  
to hold  
was us

They say another man's god  
flooded the whole world  
and put us in the sky  
as an apology  
as a gift

All my ancestors  
know the divinity  
of a shapeshifter  
of colors that  
don't know  
how not to change  
they name

I ask the rainbow  
for my real one  
And she say son  
And he say daughter

And they say,  
childe  
we everything

Everything  
that comes after  
a storm

## Sleepyhead

Malik Welton

“It’s time to wake up.” I hear in the distance.

When I open my eyes, I’m laying on a white sand beach. My caramel and nutmeg skin glitters in the sunlight as I begin to stretch awake. The beach waves behind me crash gently across the shore one by one, like a marching band. But, I don’t remember how I got here at all.

I begin to look at my surroundings. To my sides, there is nothing but the beach, covered in glass and seashells, as far as I can see. To my front, a rainforest of tall trees. I hear birds singing sweet melodies. As I struggle to stand up, my clean white swimming trunks tug at me.

Facing the rainforest, I notice there is a big sign saying “ENTER.” I brush my curly hair out of my face. “*Is this death?*” I think to myself. I press my finger to my neck, feel a pulse. I turn around to the beach waves. They continue to crash gently across the white sand, shells and seaweed surround my feet. Seagulls walk along the empty beach.

I decide to do what the sign says, I enter. The forest green surrounds me fully, but a clear beaten path lets me know where to go. After a couple more steps, I come across another sign stating “THIS IS FOR YOU”.

An old box TV flickers at me. Trying to gain a connection, I play with the antenna ears to try to catch the signal. It immediately clicks on.

“Well well well.” I hear a voice say. I squint at the TV, not recognizing the face that appears.

“It’s time for your math test,” says the person, shuffling through papers.

“I hate math,” I say. The man on the TV chuckles.

“Can’t you see though? A dime like you is reduced to a nickel if you don’t use that brain of yours.”

I begin to walk away. I’m not taking a math test, I need to figure out how I got home and how I got here.

“It would benefit you to take this test,” the TV man says.

“How can I get out of here?”

“Sit down sir.”

A desk appears in front of me. I sit down and cross my hands. Two pencils and a calculator appear on the corner of the desk. My surroundings have not changed, wide leaves and tall trees still stare back at me. The

man from the TV appears in front of me and presents my test. He is my height, slender with soft coffee colored skin. He smiles at me while he places the test on my desk.

“Good luck,” he smiles.

I look down at the test. The first thing I notice is there are no numbers on this so-called math test. Only one question is on the paper. “Are you proud of yourself?”

“How is this math? There’s not a single equation on the paper.”

The TV man chuckles. “Equations equal math huh?”

I eye the paper. “I am proud of myself.”

“Why are you?”

“I’ve done what I’ve needed to do. I’ve made my family proud. I’ve created a legacy.”

The TV immediately clicks back on. A nightly news program begins to start. “Tonight’s world news begins with a positive story for once...” starts the news anchor. “James West graduated today from college. His family is very proud of him, we’re all proud of you James, congratulations. Congrats on your new job and happy belated birthday as well.” The TV cuts off after this.

I sit and stare at the static screen.

“You know, you don’t have to be so hard on yourself,” says the TV man.

“I never celebrated those events. I thought no one would care. I needed to make a change. I needed to make the world a better place for people with my skin color. There’s no days off from that.”

“Rest and reflection is half the battle, James.”

As soon as those words slipped through my lips different friends and family members appeared from the trees. Offering congratulations, bringing gifts, and saying I love you’s. I start to back away in shock at all the familiar faces. My family, old teachers, childhood friends, acquaintances even.

My husband, Marcus, and our two children appear out of the greenery of the maze. Their black hair glitters in the sunlight. “You can rest now, baby,” my husband says as he holds our children.

“Marcus, I love...” I begin.

I look up to find a merry go round in front of me. Different people crowd and dance around the park ride. R&B and reggaeton blasts out from speakers. Grilled food begins to cook. People cheer and congratulate me on things I haven’t even accomplished yet. So many tell me they’re proud of me. We ride the merry go round over and over again. Pies and cake are everywhere. Then, everything goes black.

I run. I begin to run faster than I ever have before. Faster than anything that’s ever loved or hated me. Faster than my intuition. Faster than my pure intentions. Faster than my common sense. I trip over a branch and fall onto my hands and knees.

“It’s okay to take a break ya know?” says the TV man. I recognize him now, he is a reflection of myself. “We love you, we’re proud of you.

Abruptly, I wake up. I’m in my own bed, Marcus sleeps next to me. A laptop flickers back on, still sitting in my lap. I think I’m going to call out of work today.

It’s time to celebrate.

## Contributor Biographies

**Cedric Brown** is a philanthropy professional and creative artist. He is the founder of the Jacobs/Jones African American Literary Prize, sponsored by the NC Writers Network, and the Randall Kenan Prize for Black LGBTQ Fiction, sponsored by Lambda Literary. Cedric has published three books-- find out more at [cedbrownsaid.blog](http://cedbrownsaid.blog).

**Faylita Hicks** (she/they) is a queer Afro-Latinx activist, writer, and interdisciplinary artist. They are the author of *HoodWitch* (Acre Books, 2019), a finalist for the 2020 Lambda Literary Award for Bisexual Poetry, a 2021 Shearing Fellow with Black Mountain Institute, and currently serves as the 2021 Poet-in-Residence with Civil Rights Corps. They have been award-ed fellowships and residencies from the Broadway Advocacy Coalition, The Dots Between, Jack Jones Literary Arts, Lambda Literary, Tin House, and the Right of Return USA. Their work is featured or forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, the *Cincinnati Review*, *Ecotone*, *Longreads*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Slate*, *Texas Observer*, *Yale Review*, and others. Visit their website at [www.FaylitaHicks.com](http://www.FaylitaHicks.com). @FaylitaHicks

**Kim M Reynolds** (she/they) is a Black + queer, critical media scholar, writer, artist, educator, and poet based in Cape Town originally from Ohio. Kim focuses greatly on how oppression is reproduced through discourse and media, and the generative and expansive potentials (and pathways) imagination and expression hold for Black people. She is currently part of the research and organizing collective *Our Data Bodies*, which through storytelling as research, looks at how big data, tech and surveillance function as arms of white supremacy.

**Osimiri Sprowal** is Afro-Indigenous, Two Spirit, Disabled poet, sibling, and LGBT+ homeless rights activist. They are an international slam champ (FEMS 2019), and teach poetry workshops at universities around the country. They were a Shockwire 2018 Micro- Chapbook Contest winner for their book *Gemini:Duality of Self*, (Head and Hand 2018) which chronicles their experiences as a black non-binary human.

**Malik Welton** is a writer and artist from Virginia. His love of traveling, music, and art is encompassed in his writing, as he envisions his stories from personal experiences coupled with his imagination. He can be found on social media @MalikWelton.



**Tahirah Alexander Green** is a literary artist living in their hometown of Washington, D.C. They are committed to creating art that nourishes, heals, or disrupts. As a writer, they're passionate about celebrating Black queer weirdos in their work. Tahirah is a firm believer in the power of art for social change—stories matter, and sharing our stories to effect change is a crucial component of movement work. Tahirah is represented by Patrice Caldwell at New Leaf Literary.

**Marlena Chertock** has two books of poetry, *Crumb-sized: Poems* (Unnamed Press) and *On that one-way trip to Mars* (Bottlecap Press). She uses her skeletal dysplasia as a bridge to scientific poetry. She is queer, disabled, and a 2020 Pushcart Prize nominee. Marlena serves as Co-Chair of OutWrite and on the Board of Split This Rock, a nonprofit that cultivates poetry that bears witness to injustice and provokes social change. Her poetry and prose has appeared in AWP's *The Writer's Notebook*, *The Deaf Poets Society*, *Lambda Literary Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Neon Hemlock Press*, *Noble/Gas Quarterly*, *Paper Darts*, *Paranoid Tree*, *Washington Independent Review of Books*, *WMN Zine*, *Wordgathering*, and more. Find her at [marlenachertock.com](http://marlenachertock.com) and [@mchertock](https://twitter.com/mchertock).

**Malik Thompson** is a Black queer man proud to be from D.C. A bookseller, anime fanatic, and workshop facilitator. Malik has worked with Split This Rock, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Moonlit DC as a workshop facilitator. He also organized the Poets In Protest poetry series at the Black queer owned bookstore Loyalty Bookstores. Malik's work can be found inside of Split This Rock's Poetry Database as well as the mixed media journal *Voicemail Poems*. You can find Malik's thoughts on literature via his Instagram account [@negroliterati](https://www.instagram.com/negroliterati).

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