



Imagine our world anew

And fight for it

OUTWRITE DC

PANDEMIC AS PORTAL

LGBTQ
LITERARY FESTIVAL



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Dear Reader,

Our theme this year is “Pandemic as Portal”, as inspired by Arundhati Roy. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many injustices: violence against trans, disabled, Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized folks. Not only is COVID-19 an ever-present reality, but so is the climate crisis, war, with refugees from both. These are all interrelated.

We want this journal to serve as a space to document and process this pain. Each piece a portal, to relationship or revelation or a moment of terror, desire, an end or a possibility, or all of those together. Family and lovers and confrontations with ourselves and strangers. Harm in the world, very real harm and the threat of harm that hasn't yet arrived, the harm we sometimes cause ourselves. The cognitive dissonance of being told to continue on as normal, as we try to survive and keep each other alive through. Thank you for intertwining our lives and reminding us that we are not alone.

Rasha and Dorilyn

Grieving in Translation

Chris/tine Deng

At the only available funeral home in the city, the lady on staff takes three days to respond. I send four follow-up emails. It's May of 2020. The hospital loses my grandma's belongings. I put on my best English. I spend two weeks arguing with the Patient Care team. I ask for the names of everyone I speak to. I open up WeChat to tell my grandma's siblings that she is dead. They send crying emojis to our group chat. *I need money for the cremation, I say, this is the link to the GoFundMe.* They don't reply.

--

Three weeks earlier, a 917 number calls. I set myself to *Busy* on Microsoft Teams.

It's a doctor from Montefiore, where an ambulance took my grandma a few days ago. She'd been suffering from sudden fatigue and a persistent fever.

"Your grandmother's oxygen levels are stable, but we're going to do some chest scans today. It says here that you're her guardian. We need your consent for a few emergency procedures. Is now a good time?"

--

During my lunch break, I pace anxiously back and forth between the living room and my bedroom. I immediately head to our TV cabinet. Tucked away in the bottom drawer is a collection of family photo albums my dad once meticulously printed and labeled. There is one photo I reach for: my family at a dinner in Flushing. I am 5? 6? wrapped around my paternal grandma's neck.

I run my fingers over the matte texture, like prayer beads, like I would reach instinctively for a partner's hand, as proof that my family existed together in one, singular moment of time.

--

A different doctor calls me. I head into the bathroom, where there's better reception.

"Would you like to FaceTime with your grandmother? She's awake for the first time in days."

The iPad screen shifts around the dimly lit hospital room until it lands on an IV drip, a metal bed frame and then finally, a familiar face. My grandma mouths something at me but it comes out inaudible. She smiles weakly. I take a screenshot, now knowing this will be our last photo together.

--

When I was a teenager, I studied these photo albums whenever I missed my dad, snapshots showing my newly immigrated parents, stunning in their '90s fits. Now, between hospital calls, I study this one photo each time I speak with a doctor to provide myself with a reference point for our age difference, to remind myself what's at stake.

My grandma sits upright, dignified and composed, my small arm wrapped around her. My parents stare blankly at the camera. The flash is on. I'm missing a tooth in my smile.

--

The third doctor asks, "Would you want her to be resuscitated if her heart stops? Would you want her to be intubated? 80% of people her age die during this stage.

We're not allowing visitors now but we can make exceptions for extreme cases. We'll try to get you the proper P.P.E. Would you be able to come tomorrow?"

I think about my mom, who's still commuting by subway one hour each way to a public hospital in Lower Manhattan. My two siblings are moving their school year online because we're all in lockdown.

I think about my grandma, her dignity and the narrative that she's maintained so carefully and thoughtfully over the decades.

My mom asks, "Is this the last memory you want of 嬷嬷? She wouldn't even be conscious.

Would you want to see her like this?

Would *she* want you to see her like this?"

I think about who the visit would be for.

--

Twelve hours later, the head surgeon reports another drop in my grandma's oxygen levels. The antibody therapy isn't working. Her left lung has collapsed and the right one is giving way. Do I want them to insert a bigger tube in her chest?

"There is so much we don't know about this virus. If she were my grandmother, I would skip this surgery and increase the medicine. I would make sure she was comfortable. I would let her go in peace."

I wonder if he's allowed to tell me what he would do. Did it accidentally spill out? Does he offer a personal hypothetical to everyone on the brink of a decision? I can't help but picture him on the other end; his unit inundated with a litany of dying patients and ventilator shortages, each moment bringing a cacophony of rotating doctors, flatlining heart monitors, and calls to make. I try not to give it too much weight.

--

The picture has begun to crinkle at the corners. A piece of tangible evidence that my dad, my grandma and I were once alive and breathing in the same space.

Here, she was three times married and one time widowed. I was fresh out of preschool. She was a teacher and a poet and a dancer. I had just lost my first baby tooth. She had authored two books of prose and poetry. I had no language for immigration or borders or survival. I did not know about my dad's looming colon cancer diagnosis or that my mom's relationship with grandma would sour soon after his death. I did not know that once he was gone, once I was 18, the responsibility for my grandma would quietly pass onto me.

All three generations stare back at me, waiting for a decision.

I take my grief to Facebook. I make it pretty for Instagram. *Any financial assistance would be tremendously helpful*, I type. I consider deleting the entire caption. Instead, I post it. It's still May of 2020. I scroll through my feed, through rising cases, death counts, and other GoFundMes sandwiched between pictures of wedding proposals and birthday brunches. I feel a quiet, creeping insanity as I swipe from one reality to the next, suddenly aware that we are not all living the same version of "pandemic". A notification jolts me out of my digital haze: a college friend donates to the fundraiser. Then, a high school ex. Then an old church acquaintance messages me. I sob in front of my laptop screen.

I sign cremation papers from my iPad.

the last good fall

Julie Vitto

at the end of the last good fall
there was a great crash—
in the year that followed
remnants glanced off of each other
before moving apart again

one might think that would be the end of it
but no—
yes and—
the torch song on repeat
plays its scorched earth slow burn out in the street

where we're all balancing beams of light
with blackout curtains drawn
to unconsciously subvert
the ruling classroom scenes
of abject misunderstandings

blown away by exhaust
in the wind
while clouds promise nothing
essential
but changing conditions

abandoned structures

Julie Vitto

abandoned structures
just need refitting with flexible bounds
before bearing that eternal lightness of
possible futures

When I'm Alone

Brandon Blue

A burning haibun

I have this problem where I'm always imagining what is not, like how any two people walking next to each other have just stopped holding hands or how when the clasp of my necklace finds it's way between my clavicles, it is you thinking of me and not my mother. You tell me about space-time and relative motion and how in order for two people's experiences to be true as observers, not moving, while observing the other moving quickly, they must both be moving independently, together. When we lose track of time holding each other, half the day gone, I know you feel more of the light gone, now harder to see my eyes, and I begin to imagine Jupiter and it's big red eye bulging into space-time the giant cyclops mustering up clouds and lightning to ionize it's tears into ecstatic gas, so when I'm on my apartment couch, imagining how I will apologize to you for something I haven't done yet, I can only think about my first time calling 911 when I had trouble releasing gas after dinner the gas unable to escape. My heartbeat accelerating to prompt me to move, my nervous system humming. Tonight on that couch, I can only think of our bodies sweating and heavy, igniting into an ecstatic gas of serotonin and musk, clinging to one another until we are plasmatic, burning and leaving nothing, but space and humming collapsing in.

//

I have [redacted] always imagin[redacted]
[redacted] walking next to each other [redacted] holding hands [redacted]
the clasp [redacted] you [redacted]
[redacted] and [redacted] me [redacted]
how [redacted] two people [redacted] moving [redacted]
[redacted] quickly [redacted] together
[redacted] lose track of [redacted] holding each other, half the day [redacted]
[redacted] gone, now harder to [redacted] imagine [redacted]
[redacted] space-time the [redacted]
[redacted] clouds and lightning [redacted] ecstatic gas [redacted]
[redacted] apologiz[redacted] ing [redacted]
[redacted] I can only think about [redacted]
[redacted] my heartbeat
accelerating [redacted] my nerv[redacted] humming tonight [redacted]
[redacted] our bodies sweating [redacted] igniting [redacted]
serotonin and musk, clinging to [redacted] plasma [redacted] burning [redacted]
leaving nothing [redacted] humming [redacted]

//

I [redacted] holding [redacted] you [redacted] lose [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] track of [redacted] space-time [redacted] ecstatic [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] humming [redacted] musk [redacted] nothing [redacted]

How to Come Out as Nonbinary During a Global Pandemic

Z. Hanna Mahon

1. Spend fifteen years repressing all of the gender trauma of puberty. Pretend the words “period” and “bra” feel normal coming out your mouth, normal words that feel just like other words, definitely not words that, at twelve years old in your basketball shorts and random sporty shirts, made you shiver, made you shiver and cry and led you to tell your mom you got your period by Googling, *How to tell your mom you got your period*, copying the link to a Yahoo Answers page in which some other angsty and anonymous preteen posed the same Q, and then pasting it in an email to your mom with the subject *I’m having a similar problem*.
2. Spend ten of those fifteen years surrounding yourself with queer and trans people living GORGEOUS lives, their existence chipping away at the crusty shell you’ve unwittingly grown (we’ve all unwittingly grown) around these sorts of ordinary and brutal traumas.
3. When the stay at home orders begin, knock on doors in your building to see if everyone has what they need (it’s a global pandemic, no one has what they need) and find yourself a quarantine neighborboo who is genderfluid and wears incredible crop tops. Meet on the roof of your building in masks. Touch her legs and let him touch yours.
4. Do the whole queer undercut thing and then immediately hate it. Google *bisexual bob* and try to cut it like that instead. Pretend that the bob plus growing out undercut sideburn fluff doesn’t look like a mousy mullet.

5. Move across the country. Find a room in a cheap group house that hasn't been cleaned since a notable and crusty punk band lived there in the mid 90s and don't ask that many questions about COVID protocols because you're scared to know the answer and come on it's just so cheap!
6. When one of the strangers who has, through the magic of the pandemic, become your new housemate and also one of only three people in the world whose faces you're allowed to see, accidentally goes on two dates with a Trump supporter and comes down with a fever and chills, pack up all the things you just unpacked, wait in line for an hour on a hot autumn day until you reach the plastic-shrouded stranger who swirls your snot around, and go stay in your parents' basement, the basement where, during puberty, as your body betrayed you, boys would grab at your boobs under bunched up sheets.
7. Make sure that you also wake up with pink eye this day and that you use your time in line for your nasal scrape to research *pink eye COVID symptom*, and that you send your twin sister a photo of your bloody eye along with a link to an article about an elderly Canadian woman whose first COVID symptom was pink eye (she died, of course), and, when your sister calls you to tell you that her "twin gut sense" (not a thing) is that you have COVID because it would be "so like you" to have the one weird symptom nobody else gets, tell her she's the worst (she's not) and hang up the phone.
8. Once in your parents' basement, take a shower, pet the cat, reschedule your work calls ("COVID scare, might have symptoms, hope you understand"), lay on the damp floor trying not to touch your seeping eye, notice the family photo albums on the wall, decide this might be a good distraction, and pull them off the shelf. Look at the photos of a little you in your mesh shorts and short hair and blue bucket hats and WEEP. Flip to the photos of a puberty-

aged you, after the bullying, when you've hidden yourself in heavy earrings and short skirts and those weird pleasant blouses that were kind of in but also not really in and WEEP SOME MORE.

9. DO NOT SKIP STEP 8. IT IS A VERY IMPORTANT STEP. WEEP FOR EVERYTHING THAT YOU'VE LOST. YOU HAVE LOST SO MUCH. WE HAVE ALL LOST SO MUCH.
10. Pet the cat again. She's the only one who gets it. Tell her how lucky she is to be an animal unencumbered by the weight of the gender binary. "Unencumbered" sounds like "cucumber"—time to eat a snack.
11. Send sad texts to your best friend and make sure they know you are processing some Big Gender Feelings so that, when they get a discount for a free prerecorded tarot reading, they give the discount to you. In the sign-up form where it says "Please share your one question for the reading," write out a series of questions about your gender, sexuality, Saturn return, peasant blouses, etc.
12. When the video arrives in your email, save it for after therapy, watch it and—no surprise here—WEEP. Take notes on all the things she says about King of Cups and the Knight of Pentacles, about the cards wanting you to know that this is a both/and, that you want to pick a side but you can't, you're a Gemini (you are, in fact, a Gemini), you will always be both, you've never not been both.
13. Text a nonbinary person you don't know that well but kinda know because all of your friends in college were in love with them and ask if you can talk about some stuff. Tell them you're not sure why it's hard to talk to the nonbinary

people in your life, there are many and they are great. Listen when they say that they get it, sometimes it's easier to process scary things with someone who you could easily never talk to again. (*I would never want to not talk to you again*, you think, now also in love with them.)

14. Tell them all your fears – people thinking you look young, people thinking you look messy, people misgendering you for the rest of your life (the rest of your life!), people being weird around you, people *not wanting you*. Pretend that you're not on the verge of tears and pretend that they don't notice you are on the verge of tears. (Why did you pick FaceTime? The audio is way too crisp.) Pace around excitedly as they tell you about binders and finding that one shirt in the men's section that fits just right. Talk about whiteness and class and how, yeah, they get misgendered a lot, but they almost always feel safe, wrapped up, as they are, in privilege, and you will likely get to feel this, too, and how this isn't true for trans BIPOC folks, especially femmes. Tell them, "The world is fucked," and start to weep in a different way, and let that feeling sink in because it's also real and true.
15. Ask your long-distance boo if, for your upcoming virtual craft night, you can make art about your genders. Send him a kissy face emoji when she says YES YES YES. Instead of making art, spend the entire call talking about your gender trauma because what's a queer date night without a little gender trauma? When you start to get sleepy, look at the blank google doc he made that was supposed to be for your shared gender collage. Tell her, "Oh no, we failed at craft night." Watch his cute face as she puts his thinking cap on and then asks, 'Isn't white light a combination of all the colors?' Laugh and tell her, 'Yes! Yes! All colors and no colors! All genders and no genders! Our work here is done.'

untitled

J. Lamoureux

patron saint of old religions
god is dead now
make me chicken
no brave sight-sets, no goals, no mortar
no muscle memory of right or order
is the sense in sensing over?

what was lost to family thought
made a monument of value
grab bag magic hat-
put hand in,
pull out a dove
if I start with nothing where am I?
there's no mark on the road

what was once jubilation,
the prospect and smile of potential in freedom,
is now an empty circuit
nurturing a light left on
what was that feeling in the thought-
the thought before thought,
the sweet smell of something becoming,
the oven goods telling you
they're done when you'd forgotten

old times passing down the news
they chose their beliefs, now yours-

choose yours and mirror to mirror reflected
you hold the glass and ask it
you lift the lens
expose crud, little green lines
algae living off your sweat
and then you see
the more you look
there are no gods, no gods.

where did the power go that you discovered,
finding no ceiling
when you first, finally, looked up?
imagine:
raw potential
pulsing and yielding
to the faintest graze of our fingertips
the molding of an impossible world
into reality,
quickly, startlingly
it comes at us,
as we make it so.

it feels the clay is rotten
broke somehow
dried out, refuses our shape,
pressed too deeply
with wars and faithlessness in magic
faithlessness in each other,
in a new dawn, even locally

is it in me that I feel the death gathering?
each absurd art or scene
making my soul wince

an irreversible accumulation of grief-
the greater grief for the lack,
lack of funerals memorials
no healing, no nod to the passing
to the passing of chances to be human,
to think of the Other,
this we mourn.

akash recites the dua

Nuha Fariha

akash recites the dua
between the bodies
tongue traces an alif
along an inner thigh
swallows his holy response
“boy” can change like a name

when you are eleven
you will kiss a girl and
wonder if she loves you
you don't know yet
that there are things
beyond love and desire

like devotion
sweat collects
in the space
between bodies
on bared bone
prayer exists only here

We are No Longer at the Threshold

Ugochukwu Damian Okpara

it's either we're in, or one of us is out.
father & son, the door shut

against any kind of escape.
we begin again, the work of archival.

& yet, i am lost in this history.
this erasure sits on my tongue like a sore,

turning solace into debris yearning
yet again for the wholeness of exile.

i want him to hold me still
& not demand of hiding.

father & son, digging into each other's name
to know how long we've been deserting

our home, only to be left with the stillness
of desire. he sits across me & our love eludes

each other, for we are everything
we do not desire. i fold this part

of me akin to hiding,
& lean right into his shadow—

the most that i could get out
of this shared history.

Some people like rainbows

Michael Brown

Train is full. Lots of laughing.
Can barely hear my own thoughts.
Everyone headed out, but I'm headed home.
A voice from the opposite side
interrupts my day dream.

"Hey. What's that on your wrist?"
I fidget with the rainbow pride band
Confusion on his face and poison on his tongue.
"You some kind of faggot?"

The train is full. No laughs.
Can hear a fucking pin drop.
Commuters sit silent as a barrage of insults
spray from his mouth like machine gun shells.

Hatred and ignorance drown me in the tears
that I'm forcing back.

Alone I stand.
Eye contact can't be made from fellow passengers.
Conversations have begun to come to life
hopeful to block out this assault on my identity.
This assault on my existence.

Alone I stand on the train.
I want to get off but I'm far from my stop.

I could get off but what if he follows me.

I'm running out of options. I'm running out of patience.
Sweat drips down my furious brow.
Jaw clenched so hard I could make diamonds.

With all my might I don't raise a fist.
Even though my nails are digging into my palms.
My skin is about to break. I'm about to break.

Another voice joins in. The voice of a hero
in a do-rag and camouflage cargo shorts.
The remark he makes shocks the train back to silence.

"Can't a nigga just like rainbows?
You ever had skittles?
Some people just like the colors!"
The deepest gut busting laughter escapes me.

I can't help but feel something wonderful-
an overwhelming sense of love from this person.
This stranger. This fellow human being.

Awkward laughs echo from piece of shit people
Fuck them! And fuck that other guy.
The train pulls up to my station.
I laugh all the way home.

Miscarriage Songs - Grief Part 2 (Anger)

Jessica Genia Simon

Baggage and bullshit
I bring to the table, how inadequate a word.
Miscarriage - I don't 'miss' the 'carriage,' but cry at OPB
'Other people's babies.' HR asked me today
if I have children, if I want them, to carry them.
Are you fucking kidding me? I said, I guess not
not knowing what else to say. She then asks, "are you sure?"
In my hip bones, I have no answers
as you aim questions at my cunt---
Do I want or not? Will I have or not? Can I or not?

Cocks or clots, seed and sadness, blood and bloated
news on a piss stained stick.
Ovulation, fallopian ASH and HCG
obscure hormone names you've never heard of.
A poet's lament about bags empty of beating hearts
or full of hearts once beating, now stopped.
A fuck you to God thumping anti-abortion 'life'
advocates. Your beliefs and choices are fucking
each other at the expense of women's brains and bodies.
Your own baggage and bullshit is all over me.

You did not even stain a shirt as your vote was cast.
Your judgements are broken, liquid drips down torn vagina walls
stomachs ripped from still or already birthed,
you think God orchestrates these hurts?
What about prenatal care? That God's work too?

Did your wives have all your babies in the woods with only God to help
them? Last time I checked, your woman gave birth in a hospital,
relied on the mercy of near strangers to guide her through the tunnel of pain
You ain't no messenger from God, no archangel Gabriel,
get off your high horse, you ride none,
preaching to your audience of one.
You talk of a God of unconditional love, but who are you
to sort into greater or less than, a fetus, mother, the edge
of her life or death.
Either way, it does not include you.

Dispatches from the [social] distance

keondra bills freemyn

Against the reality of loss and isolation of a global pandemic, the concept of sending handwritten notes whirling through a web of sorting machines, white trucks, and dusty canvas bags felt more majestic than archaic. Checking the mail became a grounding ritual and a gateway to a new form of communion. Some days brought monogrammed envelopes announcing postponed nuptials or boxes of used books bought during late-night bouts of anxiety-induced insomnia. Other days, the absence of mail delivery stoked fears that the COVID-19 virus had breached the borders of our neighborhood, and that the postal staff had fallen ill. I spent early evenings watching for first sign of our mail carrier toting greetings from new acquaintances, old friends, and chosen family seeking connections beyond a chorus of disembodied voices and Zoom calls.

The isolation and slower pace of the early days of the pandemic expanded the possibility of remembrance and ritual. While my wife and I waited for vaccines to become available, we stayed home to protect the most vulnerable among us from illness. I began writing postcards and letters as an alternative to digital platforms to stay connected. I wrote letters to remember and honor my tenderness—the parts of me that are most vulnerable, yet least affirmed. Letters from Brooklyn, Hawaii, and Germany kept me afloat and held me close from afar. Pasting collages onto postcards for J and feeding poems into lined envelopes for Jess were their own kind of prayer. We resisted despair following the news of the

murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breanna Taylor. We scribbled our stories of survival and collective joy on leaves of paper sent across state lines. Sprigs of lavender, photos of distant memories, recommendations for books and bingeable TV shows arrived at our doorstep. We shared fears about the future, concern for the well-being of elders, strategized harm reduction for essential workers, and exchanged methods for effective organizing. We built networks of mutual aid and mounted resistance against the structural inequities that enact harm against our communities. We looked out for one another, when no one else seemed to be looking out for us. One year into the pandemic, my wife and I welcomed our first child. We received letters from all over the world full of well wishes for our growing family. Receiving full support for our two-mom family from our community helped ease the immense feelings of loss.

As we collectively inch toward the hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, letters begin to be replaced by text messages and invites to outdoor gatherings. As the days of standing at the window awaiting mail delivery slip deeper into the recesses of memory, I hold dear this collection of messages stacked to the brim of a wicker basket. Some day in the unforeseeable future, they will be reminders not just of what we lost, but how we held each other close in the face of unfathomable grief. They will be proof of life—reminders that we created an expansive world of wonder, warmth, and community through a simple gesture. We built new monuments for the future in pocket-sized envelopes. As we imagine new worlds of liberation, we will continue to create new tools. May we also honor and preserve our traditional methods of connection and collective care, even those as simple as a pen and paper.

India in the Second Wave

Srijani Mitra

Throughout the night there is such heaving. Cracking light, a broken sky
upholding the sorrows of millions,

Graveyards choke,
Silence stabs,
A pain travels in the humid halogens of air touching us in a hollow way,

As if we are standing in the middle of a litany, pleas of survival
Christen the upheaved cities and villages, The nation in decrepit ravages.

Doomed democracy unfurls the garbling leaders
And their ridiculous lies.

Morning recites the same bearings
Of the bodies gathering like decayed ruins,
Monuments grappling fears, lifelessness—

An urgency dismayed, I wish
To cusp some breath and offer life.
Yet what can we do else praying, else
Turning to salt, grain, some devotion that can row us to sanity.

We skim through surfaces dreaming waters,
Green somewhat serene, some yearning,
A slow pricking love

To remind life,
Seeking some solace structure to soothe these tensile ribs,
Looking at the dark horizon blotched with pink dusk spots
Hoping, shantam, Shringaar

Will return,
Haloing, curing our motherland in free falcon flight.

Untitled 2020

Ron Leo Vogel

- after *Untitled*, 1992, by Robert Gober

The inside walls of my brain
painted in perverted camouflage
lock me in a prison
of the stares of half-naked men
mocking, “look at the Fag,
who let him in here”

their water left running in the sinks
as they turn to bully and beat
this threat of femininity
this deviant, degenerate Perv
now in their space
vulnerable in the intimate
prisons in their own brains

how couldn't they let this be mine too?

Did they win the Cold War
and turn to start the Gulf War
while AIDS killed thousands
and then ten-thousands and
hundred-thousands in a maze
that only led to this final space?

Yet another space i don't belong

closing me further in its catacomb
of fear and i wish i could see trees

and leaves
with sunlight speckles
earthen roads among them
leading in any 4 directions
i could choose
paths leading to my freedom.

Competition and confidence
are things i don' have.

Even to arrive at this trap
between prison and freedom
i roam a labyrinth in darkness
with trick lights and decoy corners

alone

stacked upon stacks of fake news
i devoured as if it were all truth
a rat bait to kill me
although there was a disease

what was the disease?
uncurable virus or uncurable injustice.

All i ever really wanted
was a connection to another human being.

We rebelled in anger at AIDS
because death was the final road
painted on the walls of the undesirables

yet today we don't rebel at death
killing thousands
and then ten-thousands
and hundred-thousands
distanced in our consumerist comforts
in our prisons of perverted privilege
fed the patriarchy like rat poison
and forgetting, forgetting

while injustice continues
and continues, continues
camouflaged in the dark corners
and final spaces
inside the walls of all imprisoned
but where traps

will turn to trees
earthen roads among them.

Untitled, 1992, by Robert Gober, is a room-scale art installation made up of darkened blind corridors, sinks with running water, windows with prison bars, a brightly lit interior chamber, walls covered by a 360-degree mural of a forest with earthen roads, piles of newspapers, and boxes of rat bait. Together these elements form an architectural, visual and aural environment — an immersive work of art. The work was first conceived and installed for the Dia Center for the Arts in New York (now the Dia Art Foundation) and is on view indefinitely at the Glenstone Museum in Potomac, Maryland. (Description adapted from glenstone.org)

Syndemics theory

Onyinyechi Jessica Ogwumike

Turned inside out
Maybe it could house the two of us

I would let you scald me
Peel up all my skin

Pull my petals into a shawl
Secure you from the bristly things

Encompass you a puddle of pus
A moat of me
To muffle out the screaming

Brush down the hairs with your wet palms
The skin is still red and warm

You can't believe there's a place better
You couldn't be anywhere more comfortable

All the substance of me is borrowed to you
Barrels and barrels of my insides and outsides
The latticework of my barely withstanding

Suspended in a loan to you
Stored in a tin room of you

Sinking in a bottomless cup of you
Sanguine and endless and filled to the rim

And if I could give you this city,
I would give you this entire city

But there are microscopic things,
Even smaller than us,
Eating everything but our needs.

You are nodding off, and there is nothing on your bones
But you say thank you, and you wait for your suboxone.

Self-soothing

Onyinyechi Jessica Ogwumike

I know where all my hands are

The column of my neck is encased in one

One is pressed into my back

The skin and the muscle pucker around it

The dimple fills with soft pressure

The touch becomes a house

Occupied by many crumbs of myself

Sheltering a very heavy heat

I know that the water is a friend

It has a mouth and the moon

And salivates over the tough of me

Dissolves me down into branches, chains

Shells and power cells

Porcupine needles

Simple syrup, still

Simmering in a room cleaned by steam

Where the boulder of me wears away

untitled poems

Ina Espiritu

late night speak
turn to daylight heat
as we touch
be--longing

boundless

spheres

grasping
and knowing

come to me

They whisper.

It seems that all I do is Steal

a glance
a smile
a touch

borrowing and burrowing
into worlds
that have always turned

maybe a hoarder's mentality
was never about what you can have
but what you can't

What would you do for love? she asks

as morning light touches her face
and behind her --
dusk shadowing all things
known

eyes sweeping
up and down,
back and forth
she implores

silence

As if love ever gave her anything back.

in death, you are

rosario santiago

we speak of the dead in past tense, as if there is nothing left here in the anatomy of right now, as if flowers stop blooming, as if spring won't come again. in death i forget what comes after winter, but i know that familiar sensation of the sun, a word i forget no, a word that has been laid to rest but still inside of me. you lose blood but you still have veins. you are dead but here here here you are, in my chest, built into the very bones of this place i call my body. in this time of grief i've lost the words but remember you, found you, your intimacy your tenderness your oath your song, even if i don't have the tongue to speak it. i will tell you after death you are not past tense. i've learned to spell portal like bridge like tunnel like promise like i'm still here, how else if not with you. i can feel you being here, present, you are you are you are.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Chris/tine Deng is a queer, Chinese American writer and multimedia artist born and based in New York. She is the co-creator of “Chinatown: Then and Now”, a public art exhibition highlighting displacement and gentrification in Chinatown, Manhattan at Essex Market Gallery. Their work was recently featured in “F-Stop in Chinatown” a group exhibition by ThinkChinatown and the JH Project. Her writing explores grief, collective memory, and community resilience. You can find her on Instagram and Twitter at @heycdeng.

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Brandon Blue is a black, queer poet and French teacher based in Washington, DC. He is a reader for Storm Cellar Magazine and Poet Lore. His work has or will appear in [PANK], the Capital Pride Poem-a-Day Campaign, Lucky Jefferson, and more. His work will be featured in. @writindirty_

Z. Hanna Mahon is a writer from Washington, DC. Their short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Guernica, The Breakwater Review, Every Day Fiction, After the Pause, and the 2022 Beyond Queer Words Anthology. Their short story “One-Person Tent” was nominated for the 2022 PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers.

J. Lamoureux is a queer, disabled poet and scientist located in Baltimore, MD. They have a background in geology and activism and have spent the last few years focusing on art and creative writing. Since March of 2020, they have been living with the complex neurological disease known as “long covid”. They enjoy dreams, the richness of colors, and the space of meaning antecedent to words.

Nuha Fariha is a queer, first generation Bangladeshi American writer. A first year MFA Candidate at Louisiana State University, she is the Fiction Editor for the New Delta Review. Her work has appeared in Jamhoor, Magma and Stellium Literary. Her first chapbook, God Mornings Tiger Nights, is forthcoming with Gameover Books. She lives in Baton Rouge with her son and partner.

Ugochukwu Damian Okpara is a Nigerian writer, poet, & the author of the poetry chapbook, *I Know the Origin of My Tremor* (Sundress Publications, 2021). He is an alumnus of the SprinNG Fellowship, and Purple Hibiscus Trust Creative Writing Workshop taught by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. His works appear or are forthcoming in *Poetry Magazine*, *The Republic*, *African Writer Magazine*, *Lolwe*, *The Masters Review*, *Ruminate*, *The Penn Review*, and elsewhere. In 2019, Ugochukwu was the 1st Runner Up in the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize. He was also a contributory interviewer for poetry in *Africa in Dialogue*.

Michael Brown is a 27 year old queer black guy from Oakland, California. He has been writing and performing the majority of his life. Michael was a Creative Writing Major at the University of California, Riverside until some unfortunate life events brought him back home. Michael has several pieces self-published on his personal website: cavemanthinks.com.

Jessica G. Simon wrote her first poem when she was seven-years-old. After competing in the 2001 D.C. National Youth Poetry Slam Team, she began to perform her poems as well as study, write and edit original work. Her poems have been published in the *Atlanta Review*, *Slipform 2020 Anthology*, *Moment Magazine*, *Magnolia: A Journal of Women's Socially Engaged Literature*, Vol. II, *Edge*, Vol. 9, *Nature in the Now*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal* and *Super Stoked: An Anthology of Queer Poetry from the Capturing Fire Slam & Summit*.

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Ron Leo Vogel (he/him/his) is a poet and essayist living in Hyattsville, Maryland, who revels in language, curiosity, imagination and finding deeper meanings. He was awarded the Prentice Prize in German from Wesleyan University where he translated short stories. His recent work has appeared in Pensive, Global Journal of Spirituality and the Arts.

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Ina Espiritu is a queer Filipino immigrant who wrote and directed the 2019 short film, “Homies”

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Dorilyn Toledo is a Guatemalan Filipina editor and educator from California. She is a recent graduate of UC Irvine where she obtained degrees in Political Science and Social Ecology, focusing on law/race and social behavior. They can be found on Twitter @dorilyntoledo.

Rasha Abdulhadi is a queer Palestinian Southerner who cut their teeth organizing on the southsides of Chicago and Atlanta. Rasha's writing has appeared in Mslexia, Strange Horizons, Shade Journal, Plume, Mizna, Room, |tap| magazine, Beltway Poetry, and Lambda Literary. Their work is anthologized in Essential Voices: A COVID-19 Anthology (forthcoming), Unfettered Hexes (2021), Halal if You Hear Me (Haymarket Books, 2019), Stoked Words (Capturing Fire, 2018), and Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler (Twelfth Planet Press, 2017). A fiber artist, poet, and speculative fiction writer and editor, Rasha is a member of Justice for Muslims Collective, the Radius of Arab American Writers, and Alternate ROOTS. Their new chapbook is who is owed springtime (Neon Hemlock).

Marisa Dreher is a freelance data visualization designer and scientific illustrator living in Fort Collins, Colorado. She is also an artist who works with a variety of media, ranging from acrylic and watercolor to silkscreen printing and digital art. Her work can be found at dreherdesignstudio.com.