

[A REJECT OF OSTRICHES]

*like a murder of crows. but
flightless. and mean

Contest Finalists & Honorable
Mentions From The Who
Freaking Cares Writing Contest
For Poetic Rejects



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[THERAPY WITHOUT INSURANCE]

by angel rosen

1st
place

The phone rings. I answer. It's always *disappointment*.
It's always death, responsibility or my ex-wife calling to ask
if she can have half of the Christmas decorations.
I briefly contemplate my marital assets. The phone rings.
I hurry to it, thinking I won't answer it this time.
I am sick of receiving.
I reach for it anyway to let myself down.
I say hello, consider confessing my love,
imagine me and this inevitable burden
driving away in a cream-colored Cadillac,
fleeing the scene of something to be determined.
This incessant communication keeps me from
loneliness, I justify it that way. The phone rings
as I take a bite of a black forest cake, the
cherry rolls off my fork and onto the floor.
Damn, I wish I had Caller ID,
I wish I had witness protection.
I tug the phone cord out of the wall,
it lands beside the cherry.
Stretched between relief and guilt,
eating my fingernails, I think about
burying the phone in the yard beside
my niece's hamster-in-a-shoebox.
My cell phone rings. I am furious,
I answer it without looking, say only "What?"
I hear nothing but my own feet stamping.
All calls are coming from inside the house.
Taken aback, I scurry to the car, drive to BestBuy,
charge three new phones to my credit card.
All day long, they call each other.
I tell no one and no one asks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Angel Rosen (she/her) is a poet, lesbian and autistic human being. She is passionate about the Amanda Palmer community, art, friendship, and telling long stories. Angel can be found drinking bubble lemonade, going to restaurants with friends, or ranting about mental illness on social media. Angel's poetry, including her books, can be found at angelrosen.com Friendship accepted on Twitter @Axiopoeticus

[TANGLED COILS]

by katie holtmeyer

waiting for the water to boil is when
I recall the best and worst of it. mesh
cloth draped over everything. your laugh
like a crooked exit sign in neon red.
I regret so many things I never even did
because I could have, right? and isn't that,
after all, the same thing? the bruises
on my elbow are turning yellow and
I've done nothing with my life since
September. I see every bit of you
but only through broken glass. I've left
my hand resting too close to the burner
again and the water is boiling over. I watch it
pour through my fingers. I don't feel a thing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Katie Holtmeyer lives, teaches, and writes in Missouri. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in Stanchion Zine, The Lickety ~Split, Pocketfire's Kindling, 3 Moon Magazine, Words & Whispers, Rejection Letters, The Shore, Superfroot Magazine, Mycelium Magazine, and Jupiter Review. She can be found on Twitter at @HoltmeyerKatie.

[REACHING FOR THE MOON]

by ivan zhao

Honorable
mention

on mooring days, when i wake to the sound of freshly brewed coffee
pumping through the atmosphere, i turn and look at the spot
 where you softly snored, now empty, filled with dust bunnies,
 mites. you used to look up at the moonlight, bed head, blanket
 fed, wishing for her to come kiss you with her divine blessing.
 there's an old buddhist story about monkeys, about those
foolish enough to look in the depths of ponds and see the
reflection of the moon peeping back at them
it was said that they linked together out of the trees
to grab the moon, their greatest triumph
and one by one
 fell
 into the water
 below the fallen starlight and dapper trees

i used to think those monkeys were so stupid
 how could they not see that the mirage in front of them was
 just that, a fake blessing
 a concept
 their own imagination
 until
 that one night where
 you cradled my hand and i peered into the pearly pools of your eyes
and for the briefest moment,
i thought i saw something there

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ivan is a writer and creative technologist from Bellevue, WA. He can usually be found at the dog park, hammocking at the top of a mountain, or baking many loafs of bread. Some day, he hopes to grow multiple hands to pet more dogs.

[NONBINARY FINERY]

by ollie shane

Category is
Pure femme Realness

I strut my stuff
Made up of
Highlight to blind my beloveds

So they blush at my passing
I want to be the kind that my non-beloveds
See at bars and think

Is that drag?
Who are you, really?
Darling, I'm more than whatever you think of me.

This makeup does itch a
bit This hair is bothersome
It must fade away.

Who I am is of no consequence,
I am just another patron in this place
Trying to find some friends

Just don't call me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ollie Shane (they/them) is a poet hailing from the East Coast. Their work has been published in AntiHeroin Chic, Philadelphia Stories and elsewhere.

[MIDNIGHT WALTZ]

by Saturn Browne

Honorable
mention

This is our last dance
Together, mother, but I

Want you to tell me why
You still let crimson run

Down your lips on Friday
Nights, why you keep

Telling yourself you'll quit
But never do. I wonder if

This is what lies taste like.
Mother, I can picture your

Gravestone in my mind so
Clearly, see that it has no name,

Nothing to prove that there
Was love left for you other than

Empty bottles. No one left to
See these beginnings and endings,

Only empty etchings of times long
ago. Then what? The bullet that

Bites still burns and now

The lamp has
finally Burnt Out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Saturn Browne (they/them/theirs) is a writer from Texas and Connecticut. They love stars and languages, dead ones preferred. Saturn reads for the BreakBread project and has attended the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop. Their work is current or forthcoming in Cathartic Lit and Yuvaah Magazine, amongst others. You can find their Instagram at @harajunnku and their website at mercurilam.wordpress.com

[LIKE STENDHAL SYNDROME, BUT LESS]

by robert hamilton

A faint mural lies on the
sandstone, sun-warmed, against
which men press their foreheads.
They, or, to be honest, we, search
for alcoves into which a little note
might have been coiled up and
slid, might be waiting for us still,
saying,
in last century's italic hand, you
were always the one I wanted or
maybe just you were not entirely
unnoticed. We use longing like
radar, to find the way.

The smell of minerals in hose water
steals over the fence like comfort, a
faint echo of childhood when, before the
mailed mortgage scams and clink of ice
cubes bleeding into scotch, one would
jump through the sprinkler's fantail and
land in the cool wet grass. The lawn is
coming back to life, having died in
strange patches that suggested, if you
didn't look closely, glyphs from an old
sacred text with their own
incomprehensible pull

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Robert Hamilton lives and teaches English in Texas. He is the author of two chapbooks, *The Best Word Was Always Silence* (2022) and *Heart Trouble* (2018), both published by Ghost City Press. His poem, "Senso Unico," which appears in *Posit*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2019. He is a poetry editor at *Wrongdoing Magazine*.

[BLACK HOLES]

by katelyn caulder

There is a phenomenon that occurs in the vast, deep emptiness of space
where gravity becomes so strong that it collapses in on itself, implodes.
And in its descent into nothingness, it pulls every surrounding piece of matter and light
down with it
and sucks it up into oblivion

And you are barely seven years old when you trip on the playground, and you look over at your uncle, fat
tears
welling in your little doe eyes as you wait for his comfort
It doesn't come
You taste the tears as they drip-drip-drop perfect little circles onto the woodchips beneath the monkey
bars Your uncle looks at your red, puffy seven-year-old face and tells you to suck it up.

Time and space expands, and a child grows up
Playground injuries are replaced by invisible wounds, little scars from harsh words that are forgotten but not
quite healed as the years pass

And somewhere in the vast, deep emptiness of middle school, there is a girl hiding in the bathroom,
wishing she could descend into nothingness, staring into the mirror until she can magically change what
she sees gazing back
Because someone told her that some parts of her are too big, and others too small, and none quite right.
And there is plenty of oxygen in that middle school bathroom, individual molecules of air infused with cheap
perfume and sweat and far too much Axe body spray,
but there is a black hole opening in her lungs, and no matter how hard she tries to take in that sweet, sweet
oxygen, she cannot manage to
suck it up

There is a point when toughing it out when the going gets tough
allows unhealed wounds to become death by a thousand cuts
You take one too many hits and something shatters within you, and shards of glass cut your insides to pieces

Suck it up

and keep smiling, keep scribbling out pages upon pages of English assignments like your life depends on it,
Because if you take away the wisecracks, and the knee slaps, and the clever words that impress people
before they can think to be concerned, what's left?

Nights where your roughly chewed down nails carve crescent moons into your legs
and you pray for a sinkhole to open right there on your floor of clothe-covered
carpet that can take all the hurt and the sensitivity and the jittery, jumpy energy—
everything about you that's just a little too much— and suck it up.

Suck it up
Suck it up
Suck it up.

It becomes a mantra, those three little words
Because when you have nothing else, you still have that: your
words

You still have that power, the ability to make letters dance with a wave of your hand
To move mountains and part oceans
to tell a story no one's heard
You have the same twenty-six letters as everyone else, but you—
You make them mean something
You can make them magical
When you have nothing else, you have that

So you stand on stage to tell your stories with nothing to hide behind
but your gilded words, the rawest parts of your soul brought to life by the ink of your pen
Pain and euphoria and divine inspiration turned into a performance piece before your tears even dried,
salty stains marring the page where you picked yourself apart from the inside out
You spill your secrets to strangers with sleek, silver-lined stanzas
And they sit and snap, enraptured by your pretty
language And they Suck. It. Up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Katelyn Caulder is a queer poet from Minnesota with a deep love for
gay YA novels, indie rock music, and adverbs. She is an avid reader, writer, musician, coffee
drinker, and karate sensei. In her free time, Kate reads, writes, reads about writing, and
spends time doing puzzles with her family (especially the dog).

[MY UTERUS: THE BLOODY COMEDY]

by yessmin arevalo

Honorable
mention

Every 28 days, for the past decade, my Uterus commits
suicide. Countless undergarments that have become dyed
With its blood and tissue.
But that is not new.

At times, the stains appear to be works of Jackson Pollock.
Just my luck.
It's the price we pay, Now
and always.

Well, until we hit menopause,
That is why there is the word pause.
Until then, my coochie will continue to bleed, And
I will suffer its greed.

Which comes in the form of cramps and birthing jellyfish And
the pain is a bish.
The worst of all is standing up then feeling the sudden rush, Followed
by a reddened face full of blush.

If you do not understand my words,
Go outside and look at the birds.
Women complain about this subject
To the point where we wish we could forget.

But nooooooooooooo,
Instead, I get reminded every month.
At least there is the fun
Of its many names.

My Uterus is a funny being, That
we can agree.
But nonetheless, my Vag is a work of art
Even as she internally falls apart.

The topic should no longer be taboo,
Let's openly discuss the red goo.
And all other body parts, We are
human, not robots. This poem is out
of control, But it's written with soul.
It is as messy as my knickers
When it is covered in crimson liquor.

I am not sure how to end this, Actually,
I do know.
It ends with a period.

Coochie
Vag V
V Vagina
Cooter
Bloody Time
Time of the Month
Lady Business

. Vajayjay, Vagina, Vag.
.Downtown, Private Area, Womanhood.
.Ovaries, Uterus, Shark Week, Period.
.Menstrual Cycle, Menstruation.
.Code Red, Crimson Wave.
. Aunt Flow, The Blob.
.Moon Time, Dot.
. Code Red, Red Flo.
. Reproductive Week.
.Cranberry Chunks.
. Girl Flu, Carrie.
.Meat Curtains.
.The Garage.
.Pink Canoe.
.Red Dot.
.Taco.

Coochie
V Vag
Vagina V
Cooter
Bloody Time
Time of the Month
Lady Business

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Yessmin Arevalo (she/her/ella) holds a Bachelor's in Mathematics from UT Austin. Occasionally, Yessmin will dabble in poetry, art, and all things non-math. Her writings are meant to be chaotic and squeeze a laugh out. She has been recently published in the Red Ogre Review.

[KIM HAS DEVELOPED AN ALLERGY TO LILIES]

by ana reisans

I know this because she texted the group chat last night to say that anyone who was thinking of sending her a bouquet should make sure it doesn't contain any lilies, particularly the stargazer variety.

Was I supposed to send a bouquet?
Are we a bouquet family now?

Well, there goes the day lily arrangement I was apparently supposed to bring to Thanksgiving. Perhaps I could try goldenrod or ragweed instead?

Also, how common is a lily allergy, really?
What's the current level of awareness?

Not that Kim would make this up, of course, but wouldn't it be far more dangerous to, say, offer her daughter a bouquet of pistachios or give Grandma a gluten arrangement?

Come to think of it, isn't Kim's daughter named Lilly? Is that irony?
Has anybody commented on this?

I won't say anything, of course. People don't like irony that may irritate their eyes.

Thank you for letting me know,
I write instead. I'll keep it in mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ana Reisans is an emerging poet and writer. She was the recipient of the 2020 Barbara Mandigo Kelly Peace Poetry Award, and you can find her poetry in *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *The Belmont Story Review*, and the *Fresher Press* anthology *Winding Roads*, among other places. She's currently working on her first novel. Follow her on instagram @anareisenwrites.

[A DIGITAL OBITUARY]

by m.a. dubbs

I found out you were gone from a
Facebook post from someone who you
didn't even like from high school.
I had to look up the obituary
online myself to make sure it
was real. I saw your name on
the news, in the articles, in
the video of them pulling your
crushed car from out of a
ditch and back on a bridge.
I couldn't help but picture you when the
blown out airbag and spiderweb glass
fracture were zoomed in by some
camera man and held in his frame.
When I search your name, the snapped
cable wires and bent guard rails are the
first things that pop up on Google. Not
your senior picture or you in your band
uniform or the you from my memories
held on a flash drive in my drawer,
frozen in both life and time. I'm not sure
how I would have preferred to find out
you were gone but
maybe something
more tasteful.
Maybe something not
crammed between
personalized ads and click bait
outrage.
Something a bit less digital and

algorithmic towards the human loss
of my friend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: M. A. Dubbs is an award-winning Mexican American and LGBT+ writer who hails from Indiana. For more than a decade her writing has been published in literary magazines, anthologies, and zines across the globe.

[GOOD MEN ARE LIKE LOBSTERS]

by sophia mcgregor

2nd
place

clad in armor, your soul is too soft to
be exposed you can't see or hear
well but god, you can feel and touch
the world with your bright claws that
have never aimed to pinch
and only tried to crack
open oyster shells that
have never held pearls
oh, you've never been given a treasure

swords and shields don't last
forever, and i see your terror as
it comes time to molt
vulnerability is not a tactic but
your greatest fear. the molt will
eventually kill you.

you know this as you fall to your
fragile side so you can glissade out
of your shell and for moments you
are helpless. you know the delicate
are delicacies. so you climb into a
new shell with only the guidance of
antenna
to log another shift survived

i've never boiled a lobster alive
they remind me too much of
you. a gentle giant hidden in
panoply existing only to molt
until the delicacy kills them

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sophia McGregor is from Tampa, Florida. She is an award winning slam poet with a passion for sheep, lobsters, and making her arguments rhyme.

[HELD.]

by melissa boles

it's like clockwork, the movements. nose to the nape of my neck. lips to the curve of my shoulder. one arm tightly around my stomach, pressed so that the curve of one breast fits perfectly in the palm of a hand. another kiss below my ear. a thumb rubbing slow circles into my sternum. my breath shakes, stunted from trying to hold back tears all day and the arm tightens like you're holding on. you're safe. i suck in a breath, tensing my body, and you repeat yourself. you're safe. it took years for me to feel comfortable crying alone but you open me in mere seconds, pulling my body tighter against yours. i dread this vulnerability, wish there weren't so many of these moments where you can see into my scars and yet live each moment in the wonder of your breath, your words, your grip lighting me up from the inside. you never ask what's wrong, instead biding your time until i fall asleep in your arms or verbalize what is happening or plead with you to please, make me feel something else. i always have to ask twice. you make me insist that i am sure and then you press against me and the ecstasy takes over and you whisper i love you. i love you. i love you. later, sometime the next morning or in the crisp coral light of dawn, you lay your head on my chest while i tell you and you trace patterns on my skin and then, only when i am ready, you place your forehead against mine and kiss me and say it again. you are safe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Melissa Boles (she/her) is a Salt Lake City-based writer and an impatient optimist who believes that storytelling is humanity's most incredible miracle. You can find her work at melissaboles.com, and you can always find her on Twitter, talking about writing, mental health, and Law & Order: SVU, at @melloftheball.

[BARGAIN BIN LOVER]

by katie rose yen

I was hunting for a new fling, something casual as
I walked up to the sidewalk sale at the bookshop
the one that sells coffee—just black or with honey,

and biscuits with jam made by a woman
whose backyard you pass on the way here,
peering past all the brambles she cultivates

to make her sweet potions,
when I dug into the lonely bin marked 'Poetry.'
That's when I found you there, silent as a winter cabin,

paperback covers in tatters unloved,
and my heart broke to find you there,
forgotten, unmoored.

You were my old friend, my old lover, the one I
used to cradle between my bare knees
on those warm summer nights when I simply could not sleep

and you lulled me into something better than rest, a
perfect world where every ocean wave was tuned
to its own secret rhythm, crashing against my breast

and sending tremors of the universe through my core.
You were the one, my lover, whom I never forgot about
even after I moved on, married, raised children.

Though I never memorized your verses, my heart mimicked their
echoes, sending them to the baby inside me, the dream lover beside
me, settling their fluttering eyes without words of my own—

Words, borrowed words, and feelings shared
like a bottle of dark wine passed around without ever emptying, some divine drink that slaked
something inside of us thirsting for a drink that couldn't be named.

And when I read your words written long ago and far away, I decided
that you were the contemplative thing I wanted to hold in my mind while
standing on line at the supermarket
or sitting on vinyl at the doctor's office
or pretending to contemplate my unanswered text messages before the meeting starts

or sitting on vinyl at the doctor's office
or pretending to contemplate my unanswered text messages before the meeting
starts

and we're waiting for those stragglers whose garage door was stuck with them on
the wrong side

or whose child felt the need to projectile vomit on the dry cleaning
or whose Starbucks order was mistaken for another's,
(who they then fell in love with and happily-ever-after'd)

making me wonder and ask aloud—
What's the meaning of it all?
And even coming up with an answer of my own

as I wait for snowflakes to settle like the dust in the box of the poetry bin
where I find you now and caress you with rough fingertips
as I slide open your covers to find my own name written inside, dedicated

from you to me, and the ink seems so familiar as do the loops of L's and
signature empty circles atop the I's like floating clouds
and your perfumed sonnets fill my eyes as I remember,

as I am rekindled once more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Born and raised in the melting pot of Detroit, Michigan, Katie Rose Yen writes fiction and poetry through a multicultural lens. Her local food journalism has been published in Edible East Bay and her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Fathom Magazine, Third Coast Magazine, America and Snarl. She studied linguistics and foreign languages at Swarthmore College, and you can find her muttering in Spanglish and Chingrish while battling aphids on her roses. For more, visit katieyen.com and follow her @katiedowrite.