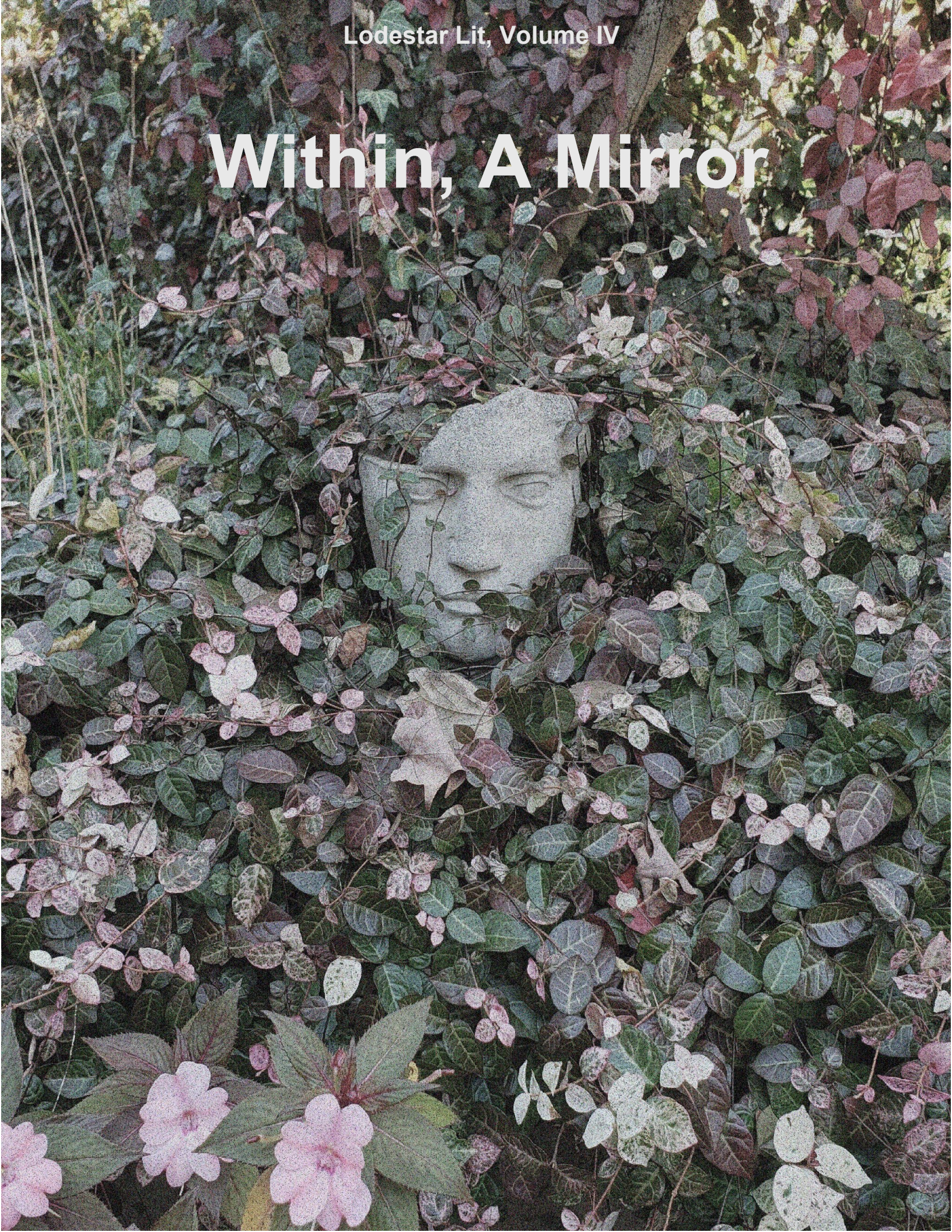


Lodestar Lit, Volume IV

Within, A Mirror



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Resting Position

Inspiration: *statue of Nataraja, Shiva as the Lord of Dance, 1000's, Bronze, South India*

The golden dancer emerges from the palm of Mother Earth, Bhumi Devi

Tho Dhimi Tho Dhimi Tha—

Ankles wrapped in tiny copper bells

perch atop the Guru that foolishly tried to crack bronze with

venomous words

—Tha Dheem Taka.

Tho Dhimi Tho Dhimi Thai—

Warrior eyes streaked with black lines, emboldened pomegranate-red lips

the Ring of Fire melts away the glittering

rumpled fabric and fake gold jewelry

until an unadorned body descends into resting position with knees turned outwards,

pure devotion

—Tha Janu Thaka.

Thai Tha Kitta Thaka—

A drum beats and beats

muscles quiver, collapse, rise again

Fingers pulse with ancient rhythm

whispers of proud ancestors
woven through grains of wood beneath
—Ta dheem thaka thom.

Ta Ta Kitta Thaka—
The cycle of life and death
eternally frozen within the metal exterior
the past and present blurred, Mother Earth
envelopes the dancer once again
—Ta dheem thaka thom.

Srila Munukutla (she/her) is currently a third-year student at Case Western Reserve University, originally from Chicago. She is majoring in medical anthropology with a minor in creative writing. She writes poetry and short fiction, and performs spoken word exploring themes of community, activism, and cultural identity—often weaving rhythm, movement, and storytelling drawn from her background in Indian classical dance. Her work has appeared in *Case Reserve Review*.

How To Get Them To Like You

SEVEN:

The first time I was told I was gay was in the second grade. It was recess—my daily thirty minutes of torture—and, like always, I stood alone on the playground, my blue Crocs planted firmly in the woodchips as I awkwardly stared at my classmates pushing each other down slides and racing up rock walls. That was fourteen years ago. I now have both of my front teeth, am halfway toward my college degree, and haven't seen anyone wear Crocs in at least two presidential administrations—but I can still tap into that feeling of shame, rejection, and loneliness that comes from being surrounded by so much laughter, so many smiling faces, and to having no idea what to do, who to talk to, or when things will get better. I simultaneously felt as invisible as a ghost and as hypervisible as a clown on stilts. But that day, a boy came up to me, and suddenly I felt like neither a ghost nor a clown, but a person. My heart leaped as he opened his mouth to speak, hoping he might ask me to play with him. Instead, he told me what the other kids would whisper to each other when they saw me, which was that I was gay. The strangest aspect of this interaction was that the boy did not ask me if I was gay; he didn't even call me gay, the way a kid might call someone a four-eyed fat dweeb (or whatever cruel descriptors the kids of today use). It was like being told that my shoe was untied or my shirt was stained: a matter-of-fact, observable truth. A truth that was decided for me and could not be argued, mostly because I had no idea what the word meant.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you act like a girl, look like a girl, talk like a girl, and one day, you’ll get married to a man like a girl is supposed to.” An image popped into my head of two men in matching suits kissing at an altar. I knew that part had to be a joke, but the rest of it wasn’t. My hair was down to my shoulders (a barber had clipped my ear, so I refused to go for a cut again), I had a Disney obsession, and I spent my free time in class drawing, not trading baseball cards. Do I even need to say what order I was picked in for dodgeball? The thought of telling my parents what had happened terrified me, worrying that they would reprimand me. Before starting the year at a new elementary school, my mother warned me not to “ask kids to play Beauty and the Beast at recess.” At the time, I didn’t understand why, since she never explained. But I think I can finish her sentence now: “Don’t ask kids to play Beauty and the Beast at recess if you don’t want to come home with a ‘kick me I’m gay’ sticky note on your back.” I don’t blame her for the advice.

In elementary school, I lacked the self-hatred that can easily take over the lives of young people who are seen as different. Yet the thought lingered in the back of my mind that there was something wrong with me—some small, unchangeable fact that I sensed everyone was aware of. People could either choose to let it guide their interactions with me, or they would choose to ignore it. I found peace in discovering that I could befriend those who choose the latter. Most of these kids had their own unchangeable truths, things that made them inferior in the eyes of overly judgmental seven-year-olds: a girl with facial paralysis, an uncoordinated nerd, a tomboy, an introvert often mistaken to be mute, a girl who was taller than every boy in the grade. Despite the teasing I faced throughout the next two years, I was happy. It was the only time in my life in which I acted without worrying about how others perceived me. If living authentically was like constantly having untied shoes, I let my laces drag on the ground with confidence. People could

point them out, or they could tie them together and watch me face-plant, but I would always get back up and keep walking.

TEN:

After fourth grade, students from every elementary school in the district were brought together to take on a new challenge: middle school. Everyone hears about the life-changing transition from high school to college, which is, of course, a tough one. But for a former sexually confused pre-teen with a new identity crisis each week, entering middle school was even tougher. Suddenly, kids went from holding hands with their classmates in line to holding onto their girlfriends and boyfriends, and instead of play-dates organized by their parents, they socialized through Instagram messages. My surroundings might have changed, but I stayed the same — at least at the beginning of the school year, when I continued rocking embarrassingly tight skinny jeans and competing in art contests. Yet the pride I once took in being authentic soon dissipated, and I developed a craving for acceptance and popularity—a craving that would remain unsatisfied for months. I just couldn't figure out how to convince people I was normal.

Everything changed that Christmas. In the past, I had asked for toys and drawing supplies. But that year, all I wanted was an iPhone. Finding the device under the tree was like discovering the Holy Grail.

Through tears of joy, I yelled, “I *knew* I would get one!” My excitement didn't stem from the fact that I could now play Angry Birds on a device more portable than a tablet, but because an iPhone was my ticket to revoking the inferior status my bullies had assigned to me. I could use it to learn how to mask all my idiosyncrasies and become what I had yearned to be since the start of that school year: the same as everyone else. Instagram and Snapchat taught me how to cut my hair to look less of a dork and to wear sporty apparel that could hide my complete lack of

athletic ability or hand-eye coordination. Twitter and Vine (may they both rest in peace) taught me how to be funny and showed me what was cool to talk about, which was definitely *not* Disney movies. After years of existing as whatever other people labeled me, social media gave me the chance to present myself as the person I wanted to be, even if that person was merely something I invented. I refused to let myself attend a new school and continue to be seen as gay or uncool, which were almost synonyms in my mind. Teaching myself how to appear proud, masculine, and straight was like teaching myself how to tie my shoes. I wanted to run with the popular kids, and I never wanted to trip and fall again.

ELEVEN:

After winter break, I began living a life devoid of truth.

“Hey! Come play vampires vs. ghosts with us,” the girl who was taller than all the boys said to me at recess.

I looked around, afraid that someone had heard her, afraid that someone would be reminded of what I once was (I’m not sure why I thought I was fooling anyone—it had only been one week since I transitioned from dweeb to mini-hypebeast). “Sorry,” I said, “I’m gonna hang with my new friends.” She and my other elementary-school friends—people who had only ever treated me with compassion—exchanged looks of confusion as their friend (who was suddenly dressed like a Nike-brand orange highlighter) turned away from them and walked toward a group of boys who looked like they would have pushed him down the stairs a year prior.

These “new friends” were boys I had met earlier that year, but with whom I was now ready to form a fully-fledged clique—the final step in my mission. Their fake names and true descriptions are as follows: Josh, a wannabe-hockey pro obsessed with his father’s opinion;

Noel, a tall, strong girl-magnet; Anthony, a high-achieving swimmer; Brian, a closeted gay soccer player who pretended like his femininity was a tool to talk to girls; and finally, Carter, the group's leader. No one was as outgoing, hilarious, and self-assured as Carter, whose golden hair and radiant smile enamored every girl in the grade. He was also an impulsive, manipulative egocentrist, and I watched him make people laugh as much as he made them cry. But looking at him made me think of the image that came to mind that day at recess in second grade: two men at an altar, matching suits. I promised myself that I would remain by his side and in that group, even if it meant enduring suffering, betraying my values, hurting the people I cared for, and abandoning the truth.

TWELVE:

It's funny to think about how simple my friendship with Carter must have seemed to anyone else. We were just two middle-school boys who liked riding skateboards and climbing trees, always eager to have fun, make trouble, and do whatever we could to pass the time in our mundane, suburban surroundings. Quite an endearing sight, we were—but an incredibly familiar, ordinary one. I imagine he thought of our friendship in a similarly uncomplicated way. Yet despite how commonplace it might have appeared, my relationship was something completely different in my eyes. In fact, it felt more like an experience than a relationship—a bizarre, paradoxical, eye-opening experience that helped me understand more about myself than I could handle knowing. The paradox stems from the two reasons why I was so dedicated to remaining close with Carter: on one hand, being by his side made me feel normal, and by 'normal' I mean masculine and straight; but on the other hand, he had maintained a firm, inescapable grip on my heart since the moment I met him at only ten years old. I was a worrisome kid, and before Carter,

I was always the one to sit on the sidelines to avoid scraping my knees, to stay inside on a snow day because my mom told me I would catch a cold. Then I met him, and suddenly I was running barefoot through the woods, not caring if I got splinters or brushed against poison ivy, following close after him.

“Come in,” he yelled from the dirty creek he had just jumped into. “It’s warm.”

I stood there among the oak trees, gazing down at the muddy bank, the green water, the ripples spreading toward me. Were they from fish? Leaches? Would they bite me? No—they were spreading from the center, where he stood waist-deep, his white shirt soaking wet. He hadn’t even bothered to take it off. The sunlight shone through the canopy of trees, shimmering off the water surrounding him, painting him yellow.

“All right,” I said, my heart racing as I ran toward him. As I stepped into the water, my old pattern of thinking resurfaced for a moment: What if I slip on a rock? What will Mom think when I come home with wet clothes? Then I was with him and he was smiling at me and shaking his damp hair away from his eyes and all I could think, all I could ask myself was this: How can a person possibly feel things this strongly about another person, and how, *how* can I possibly continue trying to bottle them up?

Carter was the key to naming what I felt about other boys—naming it with complete certainty, rather than sensing strange, uninvited emotions and immediately fighting them off. A feeling was easy to name because I could look at it as separate from myself. The idea of naming what *I* was (using terms such as gay, straight, or closeted) remained terrifying because I perceived these labels only in relation to their social connotations, rather than their actual meaning. Gay meant weird, bottom-of-the-barrel, screwed for life. Straight meant regular, but it also felt like a lie. Any other terms required too much thinking, and spending too much time

dwelling over my sexual orientation was something I always made sure to avoid. It was like thinking for too long about your own death: you know you will have to face it eventually and that it is probably best to be mentally prepared for it, but it is too unsettling to think about for more than a brief moment. So it wasn't exceedingly discomforting to analyze how I felt about Carter and to call it what it was: attraction.

On the elementary-school playground, kids never came up to me and told me, "You're attracted to other boys." I don't know if they actually thought this was true. Maybe they didn't know if that was even possible. Therefore, I never developed an aversion to the idea of same-sex romance or intimacy by itself. Young children typically see romantic relationships as embarrassing or silly in general (even between opposite genders), and they are either unaware of sexual intimacy or repulsed by it. When they bully other kids by calling them gay, they don't do so because they idealize heterosexual relationships. They are simply regurgitating the patriarchal gender norms that adults have taught them, which they are not yet intelligent enough to think critically about. The classmate who told me I was gay at recess did not mean it in the literal sense. He meant that because of my long hair and lack of athletic talents, I did not fit the mold of how a boy should look or act—standards his parents or teachers had handed down. I grew to loathe these marks of femininity. I prayed that I could erase them if I tried hard enough, even if my attraction to boys was permanent.

Despite my insecurities, another detail made it easier to bear my feelings for the same sex: they mirrored my feelings for the *opposite* sex. Throughout my childhood, I'd had a roughly equal amount of male and female friends, which was uncommon even for someone so young. Crushes I developed on my friends were random, uncontrollable, and often inconvenient, and they did not discriminate based on gender. As I entered the sixth grade, I became more aware of

these feelings, especially since sexuality became more of a topic of conversation among people my age.

“I wonder when everyone we know who’s secretly gay will come out,” Carter said to the group one day in Josh’s attic, where all of our most philosophical, sexually explicit, hilarious, and utterly stupid discussions took place.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe in high school.” *God, I hope I never have to do that*, I thought.

Other conversations displayed more certainty than curiosity. “Boys can’t be bisexual,” Josh said at a sleepover at Noel’s house. It was probably four in the morning; we often stayed up until dawn just talking, and whoever fell asleep first woke up with a penis drawn on their forehead. “They’re just gay and can’t admit it. A girl can be bisexual, but not a boy. It’s physiologically impossible.”

“You mean ‘physically’, dumbass,” Anthony said.

Everyone laughed, including me. But internally, a lingering fear had awoken: my attraction to girls would disappear, and all that would remain was my attraction to boys.

Although Josh’s comment always remained in the back of my mind, my fear never came true. Every time I developed a crush on a girl, I felt relieved (until they ended up dating Carter, leaving me with a double-dose of jealousy and bottled-up frustration). I could tell that my friend Brian (who I knew was gay despite him being closeted until high school) had a different experience than I did, even though we never spoke about it. Growing up, everything seemed like an extravagant effort to convince others and himself that he liked girls and did *not* like boys. It started with playground weddings with his girlfriends, and then transitioned to boasting about his love for long-haired blondes in an undeniably inauthentic way.

“He acts like that to make people think he likes girls, but everyone knows he doesn’t,” I would often hear people say. I knew it was true, and I felt bad for him. But simultaneously, despite how cruel it was, Brian’s circumstances made me feel better about myself. I took solace in knowing that I was a better liar, and his bad lying might inhibit any suspicion of me. Additionally, I had only half as much of a burden to carry: I might’ve had the misfortune of liking boys, but my attraction to girls hadn’t gone away yet, meaning that Josh was wrong after all. This is what finally made me comfortable enough to name what I was: bisexual. I could only overcome my fear of being different if I thought of it as a reminder that someone else was *more* different than I was. My self-acceptance came from a place of selfishness, which is why I could feel comfortable with my sexuality while continuing to feed into a culture that enforced shame and division.

Even though I was aware of my bisexuality, I had no intention of letting anyone else in on my secret. The thought of everyone accepting an inauthentic version of myself was preferable to a select few accepting me for the truth, as that would come with rejection from others. My all-male friend group was my means of preserving this idealized image, this lie. As long as I had them, I was safe.

THIRTEEN:

As our group became closer over the years, I sensed the image, the lie, becoming increasingly convincing, even as my feelings for Carter persisted. We spent our summers biking through tree-lined suburban streets, trying to keep up with Carter as he pedaled so fast that he nearly crashed into dog-walkers. In school, we would build sculptures out of cafeteria food, help Carter prank teachers, and try not to giggle as we sat in detention together. When the weekend

finally came, we would ride skateboards and play lacrosse all day, until daytime rolled into long nights of whispering secrets before drifting off to sleep on Josh's attic floor. It was the happiest period of my life. Except for when it wasn't.

"Imagine having to be Evan's dad," Carter said to the group one day.

Josh laughed. "That would be horrible, like not having a *real* son. If I were his dad, I would beat the weirdness out of him until he became normal."

I still remember the feeling it brought—the stinging in my chest, the lump in my throat, wanting to cry but knowing I couldn't, wishing I could just ask "*What?* What *is* it that's wrong with me?" but pretending like I didn't care, wondering if it was because of *that*. But they didn't know about *that*, about the lie. Or did they? Maybe they had no idea. Maybe their believing the lie still wouldn't make them think I was normal. Was I hopeless either way?

The group that I had maintained to make me feel normal and confident was constantly reminding me that I was different and weak. My mom would always tell me that boys could be cruel without any motive, that it didn't say anything about me. But like I said, I worried a lot, and I didn't believe her.

As I became more aware of my sexuality, I became increasingly afraid that my friends would too, which made me hypersensitive to anything off-putting they said to me. So, as embarrassing as it is to admit, I became a kiss-ass—anxiously obeying my friends' every command. Instead of scaling down the mistreatment as I had hoped, they seized an opportunity, and I was inadvertently transformed from a member of a friend group to a strange sort of friend-group servant. If they were thirsty, I had to fill a cup with ice. If they wanted something at the store, I had to buy it for them. Initially, disobeying them only resulted in cruel remarks, but eventually, my friends resorted to violence. Josh's hits weren't particularly powerful, but my

face was always the target, so I would go home from hangouts with bloody gums. Noel's hits were strong and painful. Refusing to buy him something would infuriate him to the point of jabbing at my shoulders or ribs, always stopping later than I expected, leaving me with dark bruises that I couldn't explain to my parents.

I had always seen my friends as strong and tough, and I hoped these traits would rub off on me. Yet instead of becoming like them, I became their punching bag. There were so many times that I felt the urge to run back home, to never speak to any of them again. But my urge to remain in the group, even as a punching bag, was still greater. Nothing could be worse than not being accepted by other boys. After all, isn't it in our nature to be violent? Aren't we supposed to endure it? That's what it means to be strong, right? And how could a boy ever feel happy if he doesn't feel strong?

FOURTEEN:

By eighth grade, I had not only convinced myself to accept any mistreatment I faced from my friends, but also to accept their mistreatment of others—including those I cared about.

At the start of that school year, Carter exiled Brian from the group. Even though Brian had been one of my closest friends, I said nothing when it happened. A couple of months later, Carter expressed an alarming realization to us.

"Dude, I think Brian has a crush on me."

We all told him we agreed. I mean, it made perfect sense. We knew Brian was gay (even though he wouldn't admit it), and Carter was a boy (a good-looking one at that), so it was impossible for him not to have a crush on him. The group agreed that he must have only wanted

to be in our circle to work Carter over. He shivered at the thought of Brian staring at him as he slept or changed.

“Guys, get in this Snapchat,” he said to me and Josh. We posed for a selfie on Anthony’s basement couch. After he took it, we could see that it was going to be sent to Brian.

“Three people who think you are gay,” he typed.

Everyone laughed but me. I didn’t want him to send it, but I didn’t stop him. Although I felt guilty, I was also a bit relieved. Who would ever think that the boy sticking up a peace sign next to Carter in that selfie would be the one who *really* had a crush on him?

I learned that one of the easiest ways to avoid facing hatred is to become complicit in it.

I didn’t hate Brian, of course. How could I hate him for something we had in common, something that was the source of most of my struggles? I just wanted people to think I did. When the group chased him home from school with a boombox blaring homophobic songs, I didn’t follow along with them because *I* was cruel and bigoted like them (as I tried to convince myself). I did so because chasing someone down in a herd makes it far less likely that *you* will ever be the one who has to run from them.

I doubt my friends hated him either. They had no deep-rooted moral or religious opposition to homosexuality that motivated their cruelty. They also had no desire for him to be straight like them (no one would have wanted that but Brian himself), but for him to be exactly what they thought he was and for him to be ashamed of it. His shame reaffirms their perception of themselves as dominant. No one wants everyone to be the same as them. Everyone just wants to be more normal than everyone else.

As I finished my last year of middle school and prepared to take on a new part of my life, I wanted to feel hopeful, but all I felt was confused. I simultaneously tried to love myself for who

I was and convince others to accept me for who I wasn't. I wanted to prove to myself that I was a good person, but I wanted everyone else to see me as incapable of being emotional or sensitive. Somehow, I convinced myself that being a member of a group that faced discrimination (despite refusing to openly claim membership) alleviated me from the moral responsibility to stand up against discrimination, whether it was targeted toward my own group or any other. I was so afraid of becoming the long-haired second-grader that I had once been that I forced myself to become the exact opposite: someone with no values who befriends bullies and submits to their mistreatment instead of uniting with their victims—someone who wants nothing more than to be exactly the same as everyone else.

Each night after a long day of suffering, I reminded myself of one thing:

At least I got them to like me.

Yet deep down, I knew I felt even emptier than I had standing alone on that playground seven years before.

Evan Jacobi (he/him/his) is an English major at New York University, where he learns about the craft from published authors and collaborates with other young writers. As a student, he spends his time studying innovative literature, writing fiction and creative nonfiction, and editing his peers' stories.

To P.

**Why do you keep the clouds?
Trash them out, darkness has an expiry date,
And Spring got it wrong, no flowers, no clouds,
Hardly a shivering blue, night and her heaps
Of scattered stars, when sham seasons loom over souls,
Words, skies, and survival comes in handy-
Same old story, you know, but what's that,
No free food for souls, just those tenants
Of the underwood, clouds in God's eyes,
Waves, and a different life if she wheezes
Among slant words, so very young, so naive
When mixing up stars and shadows,
Or leaping in fear into seasons, and trees-
And ambos, alarms, lost bits all left in the dark,
No need for maps or rhumbs, just snatch her up,
Yes, light, and you, moon, don't screw around,
Leave them alone, rooms, streets, hidden places,
Play the game if she says blue will see to it,
Giving you shelter if you freeze from the cold-
Drop dead, shadows, on the border of her soul,
As the briars of her blue are growing,
And no, the skies won't fall down
Among scantily-clad girls, half-naked men
Wrestling in the heat,
Or songs she rescued from water-
See? Just like Moses.**

Born in Italy some decades ago, **Gabriella Garofalo** fell in love with the English language at six, started writing poems (in Italian) at six and is the author of these works: “Lo sguardo di Orfeo”; “L’inverno di vetro”; “Di altre stelle polari”; “Casa di erba”; “Blue Branches”; “A Blue Soul”; “After The Blue Rush.”

They're Treating It Like A Doctorate

"Memories like the corners of my mind"

And we took all of those days for granted

Or, could we actually say that we were so, so busy

Leaving space for "Donde El Aire Es Mas Transparente"

Until we really did complete everything possible

That we really didn't let a day get past us

That we were fully aware of our responsibilities in time and space

That we carried out our callings and fulfilled our capacities

"Smiles we gave to one another"

The duties of a department director

Executive in chief of the New York University Spanish Department

Handling goals and paying attention to the details demanded by the office

A Greenwich Village hosted department for poetry majors

When we were giving it all that we had

A casual perusal of the books in the Mexican literature section of the library

And I am touched by the dedication and spirit of teaching performed by Helene Anderson

Guillermo Bowie is a Portland, Oregon based writer. In 2025 he was published in *Maryland Literary Review*, Maryland's *Academy Of The Heart And Mind*, *Northwest Indiana Literary Journal*, Ohio State University's *Hog Creek Hardin*, Australia's *The Font: A Journal For Language Teachers*, *Edmonton*, and Canada's *Version 9*. Bowie has a B.A. in Sociology from Portland's Lewis and Clark College, a M.A. in Religion from Columbia University, and a second M.A. in Spanish from New York University. He studied doctoral Spanish at Harvard University and completed ½ of a Ph.D. in Spanish at the University of Oregon. Bowie is a Chilean trained poet who began writing while doing his first M.A. under the direction of Chilean poet Enrique A. Giordano. During his second M.A., he studied with Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, and after studying Spanish at Harvard did doctoral work with Harvard graduate and Chilean poetry anthologizer Juan A. Eppele.

Erections of biblical proportions

—“*and the tower fell and the people were scattered
in a thousand different directions
with as many different tongues*” Genesis 4:8-9

The tower rose like a, like a, like a . . . well, in truth, there had never been anything like it before. It just rose. And rose. And then it rose some more, the largest erection to date.¹ These were the days before languages were taught in colleges, before colleges, before tuition placed on plastic. Everyone in these days may have known a language, one language, *their* language—but not two. And certainly not three.

But with towers, as with love, what goes up must come down. And it did.² Which is when the people at the bottom heard the great Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt sound of the grand and golden zipper in the sky. Well, not exactly *in* the sky, but high enough up the hill to approximate such a visual even to the myopic, and from ground level there could be gleaned degrees of grand and amounts of golden.³

Did I say the tower had collapsed just before the great and golden zipper made its appearance? Well, it had. Straight down. Splat. Once the descent began, gravity proved no ally. And then the Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt. Oh, sweet Jesus, the great and golden zipper was opening, and the day’s second great erection was emerging, only this construction was horizontal, a golden shaft seeming to grow, to extend out from the grand and golden zipper.

On the end of the shaft, the tip if you will, which seemed now to have reached full extension, could be seen a sweeping head of hair, orange, glowing, and beneath the head of hair came sounds, words, so the people on the ground assumed that somewhere beneath the grandeur of the orange coiffure must be a mouth, and the words were so loud it was assumed the mouth to be large. And so it was. Very. And so it spoke: "I am Don." And the shaft seemed to vibrate with the sound of each word and grow even longer and closer to the people. Then the orange hair rose up until the people could see two squinting eyes (possibly necessitated by the sun's reflection off the great and golden shaft that held the now-hovering head aloft), a nose that flared like the nostrils of a mythical horse whose tales had yet to be told, and finally the mouth itself, its lower lip protruding slightly as if to catch and swallow all reflected gold. The mouth repeated: "I am Don."

Only a single man below understood the orange head's language. To the rest of the people staring up from the base of the hill, Don may as well have been speaking the foreign language that, to them, he *was* speaking. "I have come."

And then the head stopped talking as if just announcing his presence was enough, and perhaps it was. Later he would resume talking, promising jobs, good jobs, the best jobs money could buy. The very best. And he would hire some of these very souls now standing amid the rubble of their fallen tower.

But either soon enough or eventually they would tire of waiting for promised paychecks, would find themselves without benefits or, worse, fired, erased from the fringes of the grand and golden head's world. Don would tell them not to worry, that their tower, as tall as it had been, basically sucked and was no match for the grand and golden shaft that had emerged from the grand and golden zipper and that he fully intended to build a new tower, no, make that "*two* new

towers” right there on the “*exact same spot*” that was covered with the rubble that had, pre-Don, been the people’s erection. And his towers would be better because they would be bigger, you could bet on that.⁴

And they would be cast of gold, oh yes, gold, beautiful gold. When—if?—people asked if the tower/towers to be built on their particular spot was/were going to be fashioned of *solid* gold, Don would in his language explain “the logic of gold plating,” “the nuances of electroplating,” and his “prowess as a businessman.” He would gesture in his unique way, which involved a mushrooming of his magnificent orange head until it seemed ubiquitous and omnipresent, and the people would OOOH and then he would project pictures of his wife *de jour* across the whitest clouds, and the people would AAAH until one day Don decided that they should no longer be able to either OOOH or AAAH at that day’s wife, for he suspected that as they looked, they did more than look. He suspected that they thought, that they visualized images that did not include Don, so explaining gold plating came to be as out as using gold plating was in—and the great and golden head always took pride in being the first to know what, and who, was in.

But he did explain to these people, these souls standing just beneath him, that they would be allowed to enter his two towers and that, for a price, they could play with whatever they found inside.⁵ His explanation involved facial tics, squints, inflections, and, due his lacking actual arms, much waving of his default appendage.

And the people saw the growing spectacle and they heard the sounds. And the people thought by standing close they would become like him, they would become close to him, they would be able to share his stuff, they would be able to speak to him and to each other in the new universal language of gold plating.

The only other man besides Don—this is assuming a dazzling, orange glow atop a long shaft to be male or at least to be possessed of some degree of manliness—this other man who spoke American English, understood, if not Don, then Don’s words. This man did not look up. He just listened. No one else standing in the rubble of the fallen tower could understand *anyone* else. Still, it was hard not to be transfixed by this loud and swaying image.

Don took it upon himself (or, as he would say, “*myself*”) to explain how he rose above the rubble by being *born*, by being born *above* the rubble, on the top of the hill, which is to say that Don proceeded to explain *Time*: “I am from your future, standing in our present, in the middle of my past.” The sun seemed to glint off Don’s hair as his lips moved. “All three of which—‘your future,’ ‘our present,’ and ‘my past’—are mine.” To Don, the people below him seemed suitably stunned, enthralled with his words, but, in truth, it was partly that their tower had just collapsed. Plus, they had never before seen an orange and golden head atop a golden shaft emerge from a grand and golden zipper. In fact, grand and golden aside, not one of them had ever seen a zipper. So, yes, they stared at Don. Intently.

He continued to explain: “I own it. You see, I bought Time. All of it—past, present, and future; lock, stock, and barrel.” The head smiled. “It was not that big a deal. It was not like buying gold. Which I also bought, of course. And lots of it.” The head allowed the smile to continue: “The smartest people, the very smartest—” his smile now seemed to encompass his entire head; had the smile been higher, it might have been mistaken for a halo “—came to realize the importance of this one fact: That everybody always does what everybody’s always done.” And to some it was a halo. “Of course it took a complete economic meltdown with everyone scrambling for anything they could get to fully appreciate that people just do what their daddies did before them. And their granddaddies. And so on. Which is: To try to get as much as they

can—” here the head seemed to inch closer “—in any *way* they can.” Then the head pulled back. “What’s new?”

And the smile now seemed to be everywhere. As did the hair that was now more orange than hair. Just color. Encircled by lips. “That’s when *I* realized the three supposed parts of Time—past, present, future—were as worthless as a promise.” Don shook his head. The people closest instinctively ducked behind the closest rubble. “Time was—*is*—nothing more than one big circle. Round and round and round it goes, and where it stops now *everybody* knows: It doesn’t. Ever. Stop. Or go anywhere for that matter. Nothing old, nothing new.” Don cleared his throat and straightened his shaft. “So I bought it short. I bought Time. It’s the art of the deal, my friends—‘get it on the cheap.’”

Some in the mingling crowd were becoming more hungry than interested as they listened to this strange noise on the hill. The grand and golden talking head had been around long enough for some to start taking it for granted, to just accept its presence, to start considering sandwiches, port-o-lets, and other priority needs. But Don was on a roll: “I had my people buy it all. All of it. The whole circle. All 360 degrees of Time.”

That’s when the man below Don, the one man who spoke American English, put down his sandwich, stepped out of line for the port-o-let, and realized that the grand and golden zipper from which Don had emerged had itself become a circle. Don had not just bought all of Time—Don *was* Time. Don could just emerge from any arc on his grand and golden zipper. His choice. He could emerge wherever and whenever he desired. And wherever he emerged he owned.

“That’s right,” Don continued, “I am the majority owner of Time. So I own you. And you.” As he spoke the head seemed to point to each person being addressed. “And—” the head was now looking straight at the man who spoke its language “—you.” And he did.

And the hair was now completely aglow—a fiery orange.

And the man owned by Don, the man who spoke the same language, simply shrugged, picked up his sandwich, and reclaimed his spot in line for the port-o-let. “‘Circle’ my ass,” he muttered. He knew a spiral when he saw one.⁶

Notes:

¹ It is not uncommon for amateur and even a few professional towerologists to confuse the Tower of Babel with Trump Tower. Veteran towerologists recommend differentiating by year built, Babel having been erected circa 1250 BC and Trump Tower having been erected in 1983 AD.

² Although Genesis gives no accounting of the Tower of Babel’s destruction, sources such as the *Book of Jubilees* and the *Sibylline Oracles* credit God with having razed the tower via wind power. Trump Tower still stands but remains vulnerable to downturns in the national and global economies.

³ A minority but vocal number of professional towerologists insist that geographical location rather than year built is the better way to differentiate the Tower of Babel from Trump Tower. They concur that Babel was located in Babylon and that the Trump Tower most likely mistaken for Babel is located at 725 Fifth Avenue on the corner of 56th Street in New York City.

⁴ Other Trump Towers have been located in Chicago, Illinois, and Las Vegas, Nevada. Trump Towers rumored to exist in New Orleans, Louisiana; Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; and Tampa, Florida, have apparently been put on hold until certain contractual language can be agreed upon.

⁵ Towerologists have found variations on the Trump Tower concept, specifically the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort, the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino, and the Trump Marina Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

⁶ The origin of The Theory of Spiralocity is often credited to W. B. Yeats as initial traces of the theory can be found in the first stanza of his poem “Second Coming.”

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