

DRAFT

LIBERATION AS

POETIC FORM:

A POETRY ZINE FROM

MISSISSIPPI

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ABOUT

In September 2024, a little over 20 poets with geographical, genealogical, historical, political, and psychological ties to Mississippi came together for a poetry workshop inspired by a grassroots tradition of action in the state. Studying predominantly scarce archival materials, the weekly workshop had two goals. First was to learn how every decade in Mississippi saw a galvanized group of poets using community to turn poetic impulse into democratic exercise; how poets of a fugitive and undercommons class in an oppressive state understood themselves as both artists and political actors in an ongoing liberation project. The second goal was to understand how we belong to this tradition of craft and action in Mississippi—that a blueprint for ourselves could be read in the work of poets never recognized by the hegemonic literary canon, and in some instances actively silenced through violence and coercion.

From 1890-1999 Mississippi was vibrant with Black, Brown, Queer, and working-class poets, but this is not the history our dominant narrative fronts. Through study, discussion, and generative writing the Liberation as a Poetic Form (LPF) workshop troubled the given narrative to understand our roots and connect with a tradition of community-oriented poetry and liberation.

This zine pulls together original poems written by twelve members of the first LPF workshop, and also provides some of the materials from our curriculum. It's our hope that this is a generative tool for poets of all experience levels and vocations within the state. Future workshops will be available to poets from or in Mississippi, with the next one offered online in March 2025.

C.T. Salazar

The Mississippi Delta, November 2024

Emma Gousset

after Natasha Trethewey

There I am again, pulling onto 45
to beat the deer that want my headlights.

Past the same old billboard telling me
my womb could be home to America's next philanthropist
if only I'll spare their life.

Over a bridge protecting me
from a river that's not the Mississippi
but murky all the same.

I never know what to tell people who ask
about the water that swallowed Jeff Buckley.
Every river is a Mississippi when you're sinking.

Four cops on average I pass each time
which mattered less when I was a girl
but now, as some third thing, I watch the gauge more closely.
Could never forget that time the one pulled Mama over
just to ask her on a date. She didn't even seem to mind
since cops are hot commodities down here.

When I say Mama do you understand it to be different
than Mother or Mom?

When I get there, I do the bad thing
and sit alone in my car. Like that time the nice man approached
asking for a ride to the hospital
then ordered me to the bank once the car was moving.

But still, I sit there
somehow less afraid of MAGA men and Mamas.

Coping

After all, it's my God-given-right
to fix my breath before going in.

When I try to write like this
(with my grandmother's cadence)
it feels unnatural 'til I talk it out loud.
Some words aren't enough on the page.

You would think magnolias grow everywhere
the way we claim them like siblings,
but if I'm being honest, I'd say it's pretty rare
to see one from the road.

1. Dig for what's
going on beneath



Michelle McMillan-Holifield

For those whose blurting out to heaven never ceases,
the self-critics who blame themselves for every failure, for this biggest failure;

For the prodded and piped and pained who remain with-echo;
For those who bought themselves a coffee after the OBGYN,

after the fertility specialist, after the laying on of hands,
after the breaking of familial curses; after the confessions;

For those who were so afraid of being a mother they cried out
to the world they didn't want children; for those who cried out

to God to take that back; who cried out to their husband
they were sorry, to their mother they were sorry, to their father,

to that turbulent wish, that impossible child, they were sorry;
For those who will never read *Nancy Drew* to a sleepyhead;

For those whose husbands will never teach sons; for those
who chose names they will never get to use; for those who write poems to

or in the voice of non-existent daughters, and for the one
who writes to Emma Jewel; for the ones whose poems

will be buried with them; for those whose houses will be cleaned
after their death by strangers; for the ones who play baby shower bingo

and wait till the ride home to break; for the birds in a tempest;
For those who feel lessened; who feel less than;

For the ones who don't know how to forgive themselves;
For the ones still trying and the ones being prayed for

and the ones who have been prophesied over and the ones who once had but lost and the ones whose husbands also blame themselves

and the ones whose husbands cannot accept it and the one whose husband held her when the hemorrhagic cyst was so traumatic

the only solution was a hysterectomy, the total dissolution
of any hope.

For those who wake to grieving,
for those praying and questioning,
for those whose only voice is wailing,
for those who have nothing else to give,
for those who pace the floor,
for those who drop to their knees,
for those whose chances were stolen,
for those who waited too late to try,
for those who can praise through it,
for those who can't:

May there one day be joy,
be a prickle of redbirds
be a charm of pillows
be a romp of gumballs
be a richness of plums
be a parliament of bells;

May there one day be rest,
be a bouquet of bees for honey
be a murmuration of gardens
be a library of bluebirds
be a plump of quilts;

May these women with so much want find an ease
in stirrings of berries
in orbits of peppers
in lozenges of sweetness
in fluffs of churned butter
in a million tender somethings that fill them with purpose.



In this one, I am not silent,
which is no shock, I rarely am.

Todd Osborne

However, I am also not too
noisy, I radiate enamoredly,

I am looking at my newborn son,
a king in a green swaddle, mewling

and perfect and now, all at once,
screaming into my face with his face

pinched into a perfect facsimile
of a character actor going bald at 40

so that they will be typecast for years
and what is any parent going to do

when presented with their child
yowling as if I had stolen his

ability for speech, a thing which,
as of yet, he has not developed

and which I hope he will develop
posthaste so he may tell his

mother and I when he is ailing
and also what ails him? I held him,



I lifted him up and back. I cooed
it is alright, it will be alright, it has been

alright into his soft ear. When I say I do not
wish for silence I mean precisely this: I want

to know what those I care for are thinking
and nothing else. I am not a simple

person in general; I think a lot and often
in unhelpful ways. I did not tell anyone

my real opinion on AI when they mentioned it
at the mandatory all-staff meeting. I wanted to.

I did not, exactly, begin to cry when
my son began to cry and did not cease

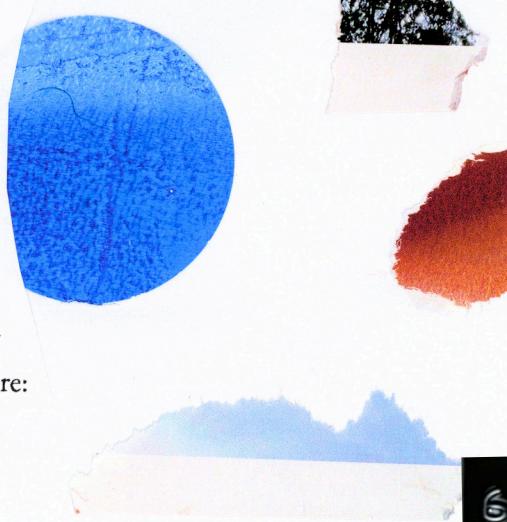
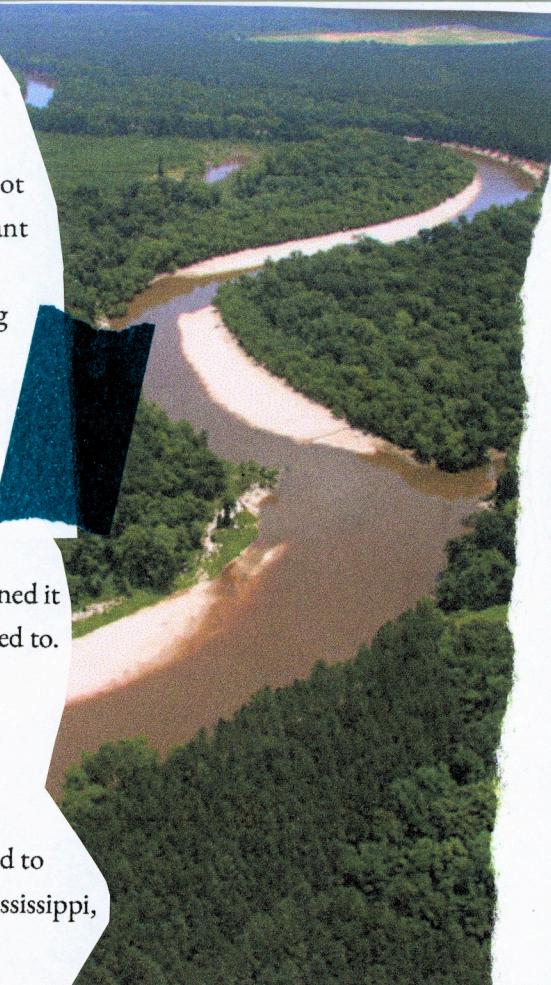
his crying for many, many moments. I tried to
one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi,

to keep a record of what he was trying to say
and how long he was speaking; I became

lost imagining a world with many kinds
of Mississippi. In this one, democracy

works the way it is meant to. In that one,
no one is placed in any prison whatsoever.

In a third, songs written for this place only
mention the love of the people who live here:





there is simply nothing else to say. In the final,
awful Mississippi, I envisioned a place

where we did not speak to each other, either through
mishap or dismay. It was, for me, the saddest one.

I cast it away, as into a fire, to conflagrate and make itself
into a long-distant memory. I asked it, impolitely, to burn.



AUTUMNAL

EQUINOX

after Jonathan Henderson Brooks

Maggie Gruber

Year after year, the cold comes in, clamoring for an end to misery, or at least evidence of a
Tree readying for winter: the simple act of shedding leafy garments, easy as
Morning breezes near a lake. My gratitude for the lake listens like the swiveling
Head of a barred owl, the night swallowing the
Sun at the center of this local system. If I go down to the creek + submerge in those
Waters, have I become more earthy? I mean, am I perceptibly ancient yet? Like the name of
Galilee or the associations of deserts? I negotiate distances, highlighting
Them with a single neon ribbon. My body already knows how a world is replaceable.
Still, I bow my head, my feet searching the floor for signs of a bottom that doesn't feel
Indescribable, whose texture becomes a place for meeting.
Say this is the ground I have come to feel—this wood + dirt + grass. If I
Seem sluggish, it is only the air passing through. Not
Death, not the magnolia seeds on the ground

TWENTY-SIDED DIE

Naomi Buck Palagi

the southern slides through me like a snake, or a river, or a dragon, or the holy spirit, here one moment at the top of my mind, next hardly visible round the back of my left pinky toe.

the south is where to go if you like learning what stereotypes you hold, and you like snapping them, picking up twigs and breaking little pieces as you wander through the woods.

a mother holding a little white baby, maybe three weeks old, at a football game, can't even hold its own head up, and it gonna be raised to a full-grown human. southern at that.

forget rome, what if the u.s. south had never existed. this place of swamps and flatlands and bluffs. lust between men exploding into art, cracks between the classes shaping the world.

yucca pop up between the oaks and the pines. one transplant after another scrabbling on a twenty-sided die. here on the ground we'd call it a mess, the sky ain't nothing but awe.

storms are a way of life and people keep cutting new jibs and most of us keep living.

V that big river we all know, that interstate sixty-five, that interstate seventy-five, they carry a lot. ghosts stepping through these woods and before that it was apatasaur, aetodactylus.

wind blows through long-leaf pine like waves, the people move out, the people move in, salt clinging to the skin. a brown arm hanging out a pickup truck window shoots a gun at a snake

on a gravel road, arm brown by dna or by exposure to sun, red blood inside. either way skin is the first contact with the world, let's think about what that arm itself can do.

when the southern is high in me, I am all astonishment.

On a grave,
is the first contact

when the southern is high in me, I am all astonishment.

Anastasia Taylor

"Praise the Mutilated World" -Adam Zagajewski

Who decides what is mutilation
And who gets to praise it?

And should I smile as the only one left behind?

I've seen the pimpling of skyscrapers,
jutting unnaturally from a flattened landscape.
Offices on offices on
rooftop bars,
Sparkling high enough to ignore
folks,
skittering like angry ants around
tents pitched on sidewalks
I've seen eyes trained forward
or downward
or upward but,
never at each other and
speaking when spoken to
treated like a
lapse of sanity.

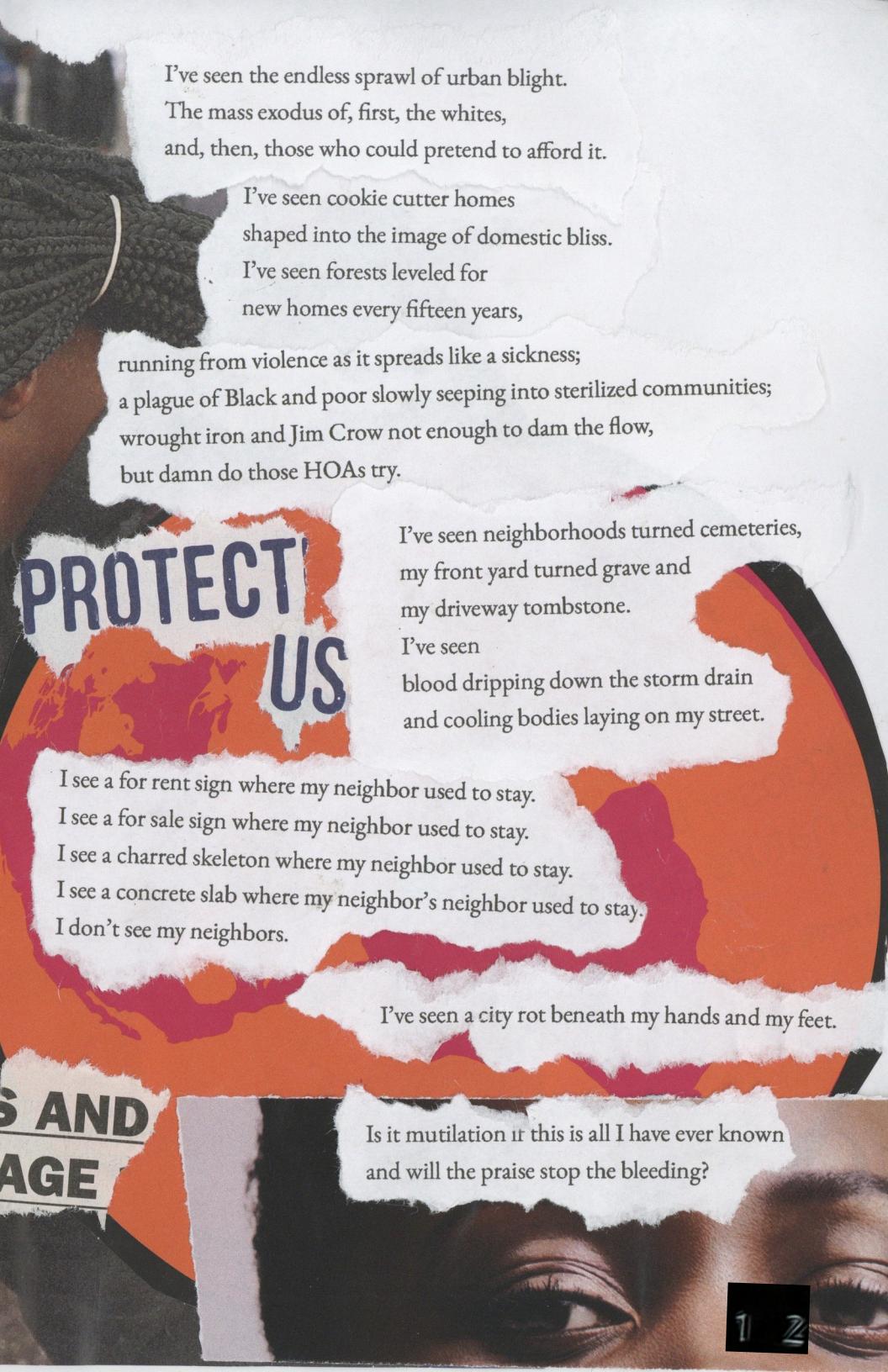
RAGE AGAINST

THE PLANET WE MADE

I've seen
houses turned haunted,
schools emptied of children,
crumbling streets filled with rusting mechanical nightmares,
weeds weaved into empty sidewalks,
and roots breaking up slabs into gravel.

LOSS

DAM

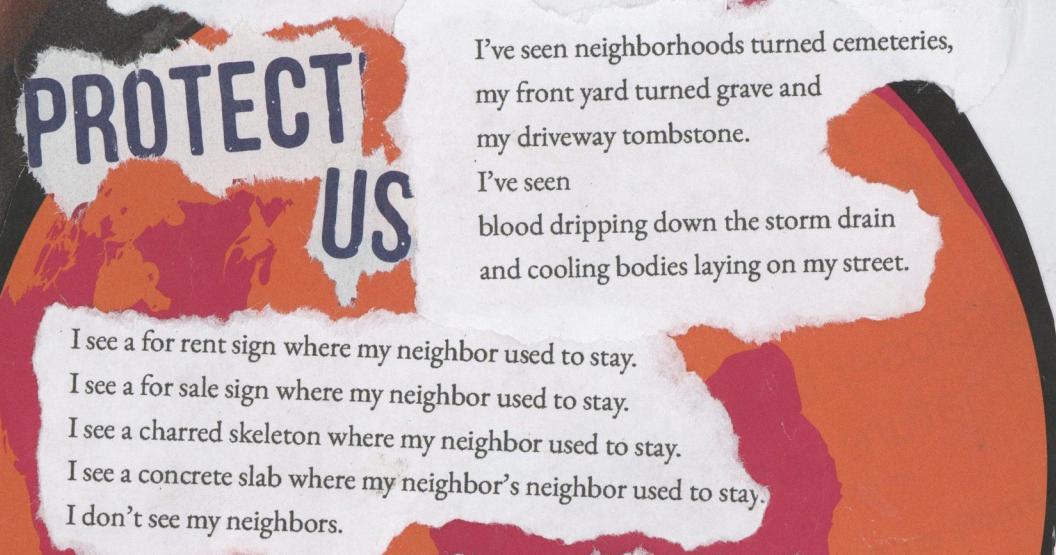


I've seen the endless sprawl of urban blight.
The mass exodus of, first, the whites,
and, then, those who could pretend to afford it.

I've seen cookie cutter homes
shaped into the image of domestic bliss.
I've seen forests leveled for
new homes every fifteen years,

running from violence as it spreads like a sickness;
a plague of Black and poor slowly seeping into sterilized communities;
wrought iron and Jim Crow not enough to dam the flow,
but damn do those HOAs try.

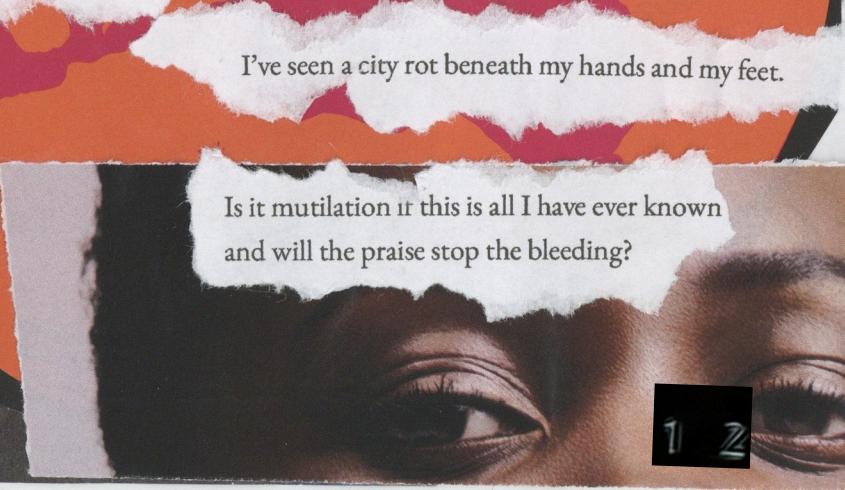
PROTECT US



I've seen neighborhoods turned cemeteries,
my front yard turned grave and
my driveway tombstone.

I've seen
blood dripping down the storm drain
and cooling bodies laying on my street.

I see a for rent sign where my neighbor used to stay.
I see a for sale sign where my neighbor used to stay.
I see a charred skeleton where my neighbor used to stay.
I see a concrete slab where my neighbor's neighbor used to stay.
I don't see my neighbors.



I've seen a city rot beneath my hands and my feet.

Is it mutilation if this is all I have ever known
and will the praise stop the bleeding?

S AND
AGE

INJURED

WE WIN

Hiba Tahir

- Billboard on the drive to AWP, Kansas City

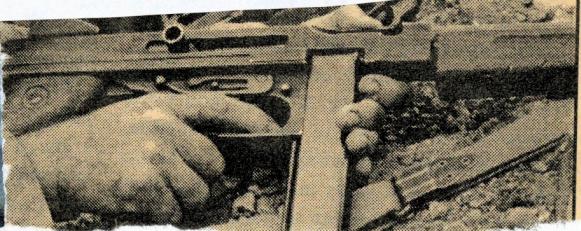
Colleen says she counts hawks on every drive.
They're always there, if you know to look, she says.
I look. I never see one, even after Joaquín
lifts his hand from the wheel to point.
They pass too fast for my eyes.

I've become accustomed to scrolling quickly—
Past the flight patterns of private jets,
past the publishing drama,
past the latest about Taylor and Travis.
But never past the horrible, strewn limbs,
the rubble. On those posts, I linger.

Days later, a Palestinian girl at the bar
yells over the music to ask if I'm Arab;
waves me away when I apologize
for the bombs my chosen country sent. I insist
I have to, because she's my sister.
Kindness and exclamations of solidarity

have made me bold.

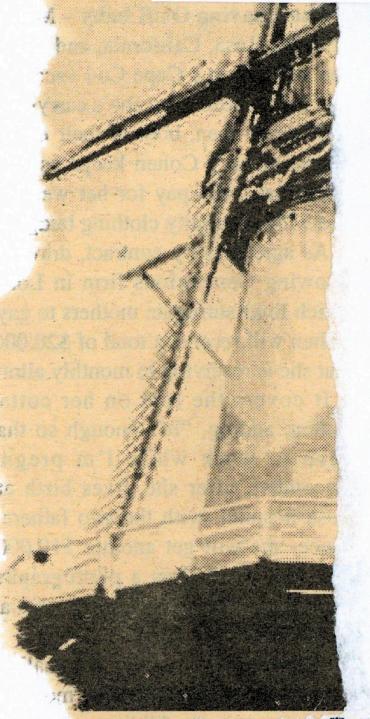
We hug, then lose
each other in a crowd
of poets and novelists.



Days after Joaquín and I come home, a Super Bowl breaks viewing records while Israel launches an [invisible] bombing raid alongside an [extremely visible] 30-second ad.

The Chiefs win— We feel like we won— we were just *there*.

A few days later, a breaking news alert announces a shooting in a parking lot



we just walked through—
a shooting that kills one person,
and injures twenty-two.

Travis tweets and tapes
his heartbreak, then celebrates
his team's victory in Vegas.



Taylor donates \$100,000
to a shooting victim's family.

I wonder if her jet back to Japan
encountered any birds.

I ask Colleen, *how many hawks
did you say you see?*

I once counted sixty, she says.
*I didn't get that far on our road trip
together. Might have counted ten total.*

A hawk lands
on the tree outside my window.

AROUSED FROM
A NARCOSIS OF
SQUALOR

after charles henri ford

i am bitten lip to buffalo

wing at the feral hot of

blood: you are/ figment of want/

liege teeth. i plaque calcium

bite harder/ markmaking over marx.

i drool/ herded by sharp lunges

barbed subsistence/ you would melt

sauna in a hellfire/ intifada esophagus

and i cut my teeth on bone\



P R O M - - - U S

i cannot say what about us burned
don't know where i hide my hidden things
won't forgive my eagerness to be in hand
can't remember the fatalism in my last promise
or the enzyme necessary to merit desire
was it the decorous rancor of youth
maybe ripened rhinestone parroted moonlight
if it got up caught in the melody
who could name the bang
when all i know of big is the
spontaneous flint of our meeting



brain growing on spectrum,
flushed peonies in my bouquet carried in
fists, gaping smile in Mississippi
sun, a year later

Diagnostic Features

leaking into our first home,
a diagnosis blossoming like
rivers.

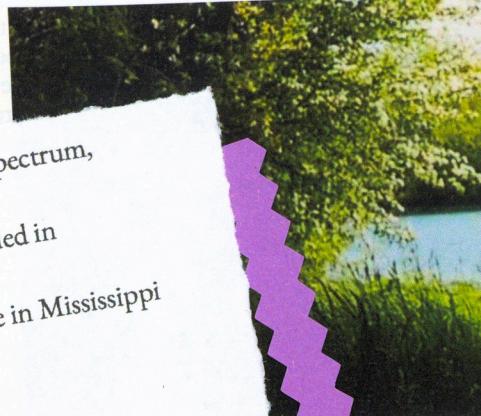
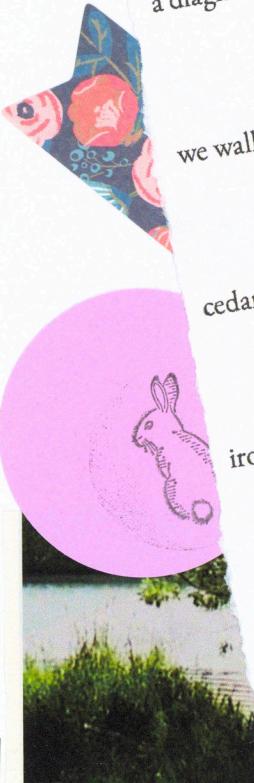
we walked the grounds of the Memphis
Metal Museum, barges floating down

cedared river and I looked to
you through metal doors,

iron flowers twisting like future mood
swings,

twelve years pass and rings

suffocate fingers and your hands stroke





my hair and standing in your uniform

say, it's good to see you

as a depressive episode strips my

mind as I

declare I did not harm myself,

headless peonies soak

in rain waiting for

another spring.

PEONY

Celeste Maria Schueler

DESPAIR. OR. ALEXANDRITE
PARKING LOT ABECEDARIAN

Brooke Harries'

And answer the phone mid-ring
Borrowed screwdriver that doesn't quite fit, boring record
Cover: a shirtless skinny white male
Damp grass mite bite relentless itch of disaster luck
Everything the long alternative, the long crawlspace, the corridor of lost chances
Favorite car totaled in a lot in the evening in the rain; you don't
Get your dreams to come true but your nightmares warn you what to say
Haughty narrator never sees, supports or quotes your movements
If there was a way to sit beside a live oak then sit awhile longer forgetting hunger
Just drink the water pooling in a leaf
Kid orphaned
Looking at asymmetrical wrinkles makes you smile differently in photographs now
Mother unhoused, family raising money for burial of daughter buried alive, left beside a tree, the
News, and want to send five to twenty dollars, or something like two thousand, but do not, dream Of fighting
with your landlady who became the office boss
Pulling plates off your totaled car in the rain through golden hour
Quality thin paperback book atop the toilet seat
Ring of phone call, opaquer mood
Swimming pool in a weather emergency
Threats of lover leaving, walking out, commitment kaput
Unless it's the smell of dust from 1972 record sleeves
Very fuzzy through your cheap speakers, replacement needle, neglect amplified
Without a friend to tell you your records are playing at the wrong speed quietly
X number of dollars for you to go away
You don't have nightmares, but your dreams warn you what to do
Zero returns on kindnesses but bursts of justice through banter with post office personnel

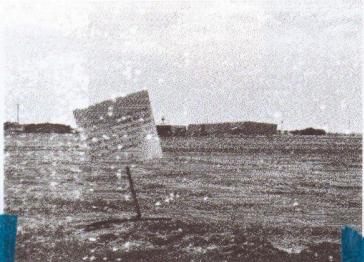


IN MY TOWN ANY BED
CAN BE A DEATHBED

C.T. Salazar

thus the shovels and the hospitality
we make ends meet in the meantime
way a moth with orange wings flashing brief
across the face makes a beautiful mask
I've got bill collectors with gentler names
than the flowers this year and friends
with rifles the government gave them what if
I'm my own failure to know my odds after all
like the wolves who starved as it got harder to sniff out our first-
born because we started to smell like wolves ourselves
our shared dream looks like a river so we swim in it
the blue sword of air in the heron's neck
rips the veil from top to bottom and
I am prepared to make this about god
-lessness and disappear a circle of mothers who sew
the blue sail imagine being that stitching you already are
I'm wondering if I can cover a wound I had no hand in making
I'll put a steeple on anything even that liquor store we lost you to
while throwing dead grass at heaven I found an ancient
rusted barge writing little obituaries with its spilt contents
we are like the wilderness
in that way always breaking our contracts with memory
one day I'll have to let all of this go even the way my dad says boy
and means boomerang autobiography
can never escape it there's too much cemetery
in this dirt to hide the evidence of our inmate
abored world when the steel mill moves out
a prison will move in but right now my brother
making more money than he's ever seen
and I keep finding myself where I shouldn't be

loving a man who holds a book like he's staring
into a skull the stormcloud-colored birds
the horse that smells like the forest-
 fire it spent the night running through
sometimes the bombers practice how quietly they can fly
 through a country by flying through
their own I watched your imprint in the grass rising
 long after you got up
that the state would kill us means we're in pursuit
 of its fathomable limit
or we're not out here I don't feel like I'm anything
 but my beloved is painting a fresh red coat
on the old red barn my heart is hardwood clearcut
 like the wilderness I'm in own way
help me dream my deceased back into heavy thrashing catfish
 this is only the beginning
some cages are purposed to encourage your confession
 here's mine there is no magic trick
all those people who disappeared are dead
 and I went on living
no longer fearing the flood that will revise
 all of this lifting your casket it made sense
we are as much the levee
 as the levee



A U T H O R B I O S

A. S. Walker is a non-binary black writer and interdisciplinary artist. their visual practice ranges from portraiture, mixed media collage, & photography; this practice meets their wordsmith work in the production of zines, graffiti font work, and archive development. their current research involves illegibility, grief, poetry of protest, and asking everyone about their favorite monster myths.

Anastasia Taylor is an artist and poet who creates works that ties their local experiences to global ones. They are a member of Jackson State's Writer's Alliance and the editor of THEE 1877, a creative magazine hosted through JSWA.

Brooke Harries' work has appeared in Arkansas Review, Denver Quarterly, Laurel Review, Puerto del Sol, Salamander, Sixth Finch, and elsewhere. She has an MFA from the University of California, Irvine and is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Celeste Maria Schueler is a poet and twin mom living in the Pacific Northwest. Originally from Mississippi, she has her BA in English and MFA in creative writing from Mississippi University for Women. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, she has been published in FERAL, The Institutionalized Review, The Circus Collective, Creative Colloquy, Libre, and others. She has also taught poetry workshops with the Tacoma Public Library and worked with Voices of Tacoma. Her first full length collection, Peonies of Resurrection, about her journey with bipolar disorder is forthcoming from ELJ Editions. Celeste loves writing poetry and essays, reading all sorts of books, baking bundt cakes, and taking her twin daughters on adventures around the Puget Sound.

C.T. Salazar is a Latinx poet and librarian from Mississippi. His debut collection Headless John the Baptist Hitchhiking (Acre Books 2022) was a 2023 finalist for the Theodore Roethke Memorial Award. C.T. was the 2017 recipient of the AWP Intro Journals poetry award and the 2020 recipient of the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters award in poetry. C.T. is an assistant professor at Delta State University where he directs the University Archives and Museums.

A U T H O R B I O S

Emma Gousset is a queer writer and farmer from Mississippi. She currently lives in Seattle, Washington, where she draws inspiration from the natural world and daily joys of working outdoors.

Hiba Tahir is a YA author and 2022 graduate of the University of Arkansas MFA, where she received the Carolyn Walton Cole Endowment Fund, the J. Chester and Freda S. Johnson Graduate Fellowship, and the James T. Whitehead Award. She is the recipient of a 2024 Artists 360 Community Activator grant and a 2020 Artists 360 Student Artist grant from Mid-America Arts Alliance, as well as an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council in 2021. She is the founder and host of Tightwires, a YouTube channel and podcast about navigating life and art outside academic and institutional confines.

Maggie Graber is a queer poet from the Midwest and the author of *Swan Hammer* (MSU Press, 2022), winner of the 2021 Wheelbarrow Poetry Prize and a 2023 nominee for a Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award. She has received fellowships from the Mississippi Arts Commission and the Luminarts Cultural Foundation, and she currently lives and teaches in Oxford, Mississippi, where she earned her Ph.D.

Margaret is doing their best! (helped assemble the zine)

Michelle McMillan-Holifield is a Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee. She pens poetry, book reviews, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Her work has been included in or is forthcoming in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Nelle*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Stirring*, *The Collagist*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Windhover*, among others.

Naomi Buck Palagi has roots throughout the south and in Chicago. She hosts a virtual and in-person arts and culture exchange at allinthesamebreath.org.

Todd Osborne is a poet and teacher. He was born and raised in Nashville, TN. He earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, OK, and his PhD in English - Creative Writing from The University of Southern Mississippi. His debut poetry collection, *Gatherer*, was published in the spring of 2024 by Belle Point Press. His writing has appeared at *The Missouri Review*, *EcoTheo Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*. He lives and writes in Hattiesburg, MS, with his wife, their son, and their three cats.

WORKSHOP PROMPTS

WORKSHOP PROMPTS

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BACK COVER