

Spark to Flame: A Journal of Collaborative Poetry

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

Welcome! I have been thinking about how collaboration can create something that transcends its inputs—how it creates pieces that are greater than the sum of its parts. How it's not just about the final poem, but also the process of working with another person's words, or simply with another person. How this journal is both about what is produced on the page as well as the experience this journal facilitates.

This issue exists because friends decided to co-write a poem and strangers crafted poems (“flames”) out of the poetry fragments (“sparks”) I anonymously gave them. I am blown away by the range of emotion in these pieces—from humor to heartbreak, love to anguish. This issue is special. Enjoy.

Kindly,
Katherine Schmidt
Editor-in-Chief

Locker Room Aubade

Fatima Zahra and Aldrin Badiola

“Heterosexual male culture is homoerotic; it is man-loving.”

— *Marilyn Frye*

damn, bro. the girls are fawning over you like actual fawns.
what I mean is, they're collapsing on their knees
to pluck the flowers you pole vaulted over, no matter how bruised
and rotten they grow. they're melted butter when they weave
their hand through your elbow. what I mean is, you could sniper
through their hearts and MVP just like this.

damn, bro; the way the muscles in your arm curve as you throw
the football to me makes me feel like a roaming sheep
holding onto the shaken earth, as it cradles me in its grasp, lamb-like.

could you hang your worn football jersey on my hands today
so I could be a sheep in your sweat, and teach me how
to slick my hair back like this with the rain so I don't stop playing?
it's such a W when you only focus on yourself and the homies.
when my hair dries; run your wax-rubbed hands through it,
and I know that vulnerability is for losers, but I beg you.
I lent my jersey to my girlfriend, so lend me yours.

A Crumpled Dollar Bill

Alex Carrigan and Rachel Head

Happiness is a crumpled dollar bill stuffed deep in my bra.
It can't buy me a cup of coffee, but it funds my pop star fantasy.

Pop star fantasies always come with a price to pay. Mine come with
thousands of accidental pricks of my sewing needle against my fingers.

My fingers grow numb the longer I work on my eleganza, only for
thousands of internet pricks to try and make me bleed out on the runway.

Bleeding out on the runway would be an absolutely gaggy way to go,
but I cannot give them the satisfaction, because the show must go on.

The show must go on like Freddie insisted, so come midnight on Fridays, I'll
hit the stage in stilettos and a catsuit, breaking free like both Ariana and Queen.

"Queen" is the title that I wear upon my head and around my neck,
in costume gemstones that glisten under the light of a disco ball.

A disco ball captures all of my queenly beauty as I grab all those tips.
Happiness truly is a crumpled dollar bill stuffed deep in my bra.

Litany of the Anthropocene

Aldrin Badiola (Flame) and Aisha Al-Tarawneh (Spark)

They said the boys would be home
by the end of the year, & yet they go

to heaven in a burst of orange-yellows
licking the evening air. One worships

the setting sun with his wet fingertips.
He brushes raspberry-stained fingers

over your pink polka-dotted dress
& sinks to his worn knees in fields

of rose red. Here are flowers, blooming
on mountains, bloodied & held baby-like.

You're facing roaring & cold engines.
Behemoths crawling on their bellies.

He picks raspberries from thorny bushes
& spills blood into your gaping maw,

so wanting & desperate. You carry
the spirits of the dead in your throat.

Where Home Resides

Shikha S. Lamba and Gretchen Filart

She holds a faded polaroid
against a rubble horizon. Fragmented
rock was once a home.

Holding the tiny hands of the tiny bodies
leaning against her, she promises them
her limbs for walls, her back as a foundation,
the soft spread of her stomach for them
to lay upon at night.

Thank god for this grief,
this orphaned hearth heating
her hollowed heart.

A reminder: a true home,
despite absence, can never be destroyed.

The Bull-Hide Thickness

Alex Carrigan (Flame) and Philippa Bowe (Spark)

Can I get past the bull-hide thickness?
No, too stubborn, too tough, nothing gives.

Nothing gives but my mother's sapphire tears
mingling with my father's scarlet anger.

His scarlet anger, descended from empresses,
reflects radiant dawns, but no rainbow glints.

No rainbow glints when burned into suffusing
white, while my cursed color blurs the light.

The light blurs a gaudy disguise for us, strange as
a purple cow, uncomfortably flanked in rage and sadness.

In rage and sadness, unforgiving and deep,
I see the royalness in my purple hide.

In my purple hide, in the strange, slumping shape,
can I get past the bull-hide thickness.

Nightmare Nervosa

Elizabeth Feins and Mahailey Oliver

When they sleep, the Gretels dream
of dungeons decked with candy walls,
of parents who do not believe,
and brothers who cannot recall.

Gretels stash their daily bread,
so that their stomachs never grow.
Their guts feel better underfed,
because these wide-eyed Gretels know

children often go astray
while walking through the wintry wood.
That's why sweet Gretels live this way,
and leave behind their hints of food.

Gretels turn to skin and bone
which scarcely set off kitchen scales
while their purse pockets overflow
with crumbs they drop to form their trails,

for if the Gretels do not snack,
then they can find their own ways back.

In this forest

Emily Winters (Flame) and Aldrin Badiola (Spark)

I hold you decrepit, a dying thing, in my arms &
Wish that your sickness would melt or
Ooze away in a summer storm. But
There is nothing in this forest but ghosts & broken glass
& overgrown moss & abandoned trains & us:
Are we more beautiful because of it?

The sunlight cuts you away from my body, a tender
C-section as I give you up to the moment, let the
Earth hold you, earnestly, with roughened palms.
I try not to think of tragedies, try to muse on
Stillness and the way that frisky dew & mischievous
Mushrooms will weave through your bones &
Make our children flower crowns, someday.

In the golden hour, I learn that I can hold a
Petal in my palm & not destroy it.
In the pregnant silence that follows the rain, I
Wonder if your memory will remember me or if I, too,
Will be disassembled, dismantled, and remade.

Am I more beautiful because of it?

Children of the Earth

Aisha Al-Tarawneh (Flame) and Emily Winters (Spark)

How the crops rise on bare legs,
Their naked forms swaying in the breeze,
And there are dewdrops kissing their foreheads,
Their stems, their tiny leaves,
Wet in the face of nature's birth—
How I tend to the children of the earth,

Ecstasy tastes of heads thrown back;
I catch the dripping sands time drips upon
Us in hands; patience lacks the intimacy that I felt
The day the dawn broke our hearts in half,
Spilling gold down upon splayed palms and
I cup my calf, then my kneecap,
As if to hold in those vestiges
Of clear rainwater,
Refreshing, motherly in the way it
Spoon feeds the salt of the earth
To you, my sweat a symbol of love,
And tonight the little grass buds peer
Breathlessly up upon the night sky.

The Latecomer

Adeline Lyons (Flame) and Anton Lushankin (Spark)

Blank on blank, the glare
of white on white, the stench
of flesh on flesh, the pull
of night to night, leads me
to your finished feast
scattered in porcelain.

Shattered pieces glide
over empty streets
boasting what's ended.

Time slows to sleep, slows
to abandoned dreams
spread on empty sheets,
and you remain a man
awake and covered in blood
that is not yours.

I am a woman bleeding
on your white linen tablecloth.

I try:
nothing unbroken
makes a worthy dinner guest;
yet your chipped china
huddles shadowed
in your finest mahogany.

Back to back, the fight
of love to love, the mark
of tongue to tongue, the truth
that cries for beauty,
leads me to your doorstep,
my manners drowned
as I scrounge for
leftovers.

August's heat makes my house splinter

Luca Fois (Flame) and Nida Mubarakhi (Spark)

The bougainvillea vines shiver in the late-day,
their flowers shining like amethysts. I sweat

while walking on the yellow blades
tainted by the gold of our wedding

rings. The tired house shakes her eyelids,
flickering candles ecstatic in the wind.

I enter and don't see
you. The silence after

midnight withers on the sill
as I step on your heart, fallen

like shards at my bare feet.
The door snaps, begs

*no more waiting,
he's still not here.*

I grab the pencil
and write to *my dear lover* on a poppy

-perfumed sheet. I cut my tongue to seal
the envelope. Blood blooms on my lips.

The windows shriek, begin to crack like love,
like us barely together in a home made of glass.

In and of this here world

Philippa Bowe (Flame) and Luca Fois (Spark)

here

cosmos petals
hold universes
anemones
float in the air
eat crabs in water
sunflowers
droop apace and burn
aching with solar power

I, though

a green apple waiting for a better moment to ripen
a dried-out thistle, my time passed
a blind strawberry bereft of berries

and here

the city
clears its throat
the constant noise
the roiling song of people
who build things, pull things down, flex and hack things
tourists
call and click and clatter
buses
cheer and circle and champ
traffic lights
charon buzzing flocks
of pedestrians

I, though

a dust-encrusted pigeon contemplating hungry spikes
a statue in a forever-empty square, chipped to almost nothing
a dustbin weeping tears of sauce spilled from plastics fine as butterfly wings

everywhere

carpeted
in verve

in bawdy washes of colour
in riotous bellows

while I
am nowhere
am everywhere

Contributor Bios

Aisha Al-Tarawneh is a nineteen-year-old student from Jordan and Denmark who enjoys watching hockey and practicing archery. Her favourite hockey teams are the Seattle Krakens and Nizhny Novgorod Torpedo.

Aldrin Badiola (he/him) is a Filipino poet and photographer. His works can be found in CHARM, Cutbow Quarterly, FRIGHTEN THE HORSES, and elsewhere. He can be found at aldrinbadiola.carrd.co.

Philippa Bowe writes flash fiction and poetry, is working on a flash novella, lives on a southern French hill and has become addicted to big vistas.

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, VA. He is the author of *Now Let's Get Brunch: A Collection of RuPaul's Drag Race Twitter Poetry* (Querencia Press, 2023).

Elizabeth Feins won her first poetry contest at age six and hasn't put down the pen since. A poet, a prose author, and a singer-songwriter, she recently performed original music at the famous Bluebird Café in Nashville, Tennessee.

Gretchen Filart is a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize-nominated poet and essayist from the Philippines. Her confessional works draw from love, motherhood, healing, nature, and intersections and have received distinction from phoebe's Spring Poetry Contest and Navigator's Travel Writing Competition. Connect with her on Twitter and Instagram @gretchenfilart, or via her website, ourworldinwords.com. She is *usually* friendly.

Luca Fois is a librarian living in Edinburgh and in the liminal space between languages. He loves discussing poetry, writing, and discovering new words. You can find him in a local café thinking about the right word to end a sentence, or on X @cuttinghail.

Rachel Head is a comedy and graphic novel writer from the western suburbs of Chicago. Rachel earned her MFA in fiction writing from Roosevelt University.

Shikha S. Lamba is a jewelry designer and poet living in Hong Kong. She is the co-editor of an online magazine, *Coffee and Conversations*. Shikha has contributed poetry to publications in Hong Kong, India, the US, UK, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. In 2023, her poems were nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

Anton Lushankin is a (visual) poet, writer, playwright and translator, born in Kyiv and since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War resides in his hometown.

Adeline Lyons is a full-time student studying creative writing in the English program at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. She is an emerging writer, dedicated to honing her craft.

Nida Mubarak is a writer from New Jersey. She is the senior editor and social media head for The Empty Inkwell Review. She loves sweet treats and a good movie. Contact her at lettersfromafar.org.

Mahailey Oliver is a graduate student of English and Advanced Pedagogy at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Her poetry has previously appeared in Dipity, The Afterpast Review, and Forget Me Not Press.

Emily Winters (she/her) works in a historic site in Philadelphia by day and is a rambling poet and painter by night. She was raised in a small (no stoplight) town in New Jersey.

Fatima Zahra is currently thinking about posthumous art; airpods and steel bottles.

Cover Artist Bio

Emma Bagley (b. 1988) is a multidisciplinary artist currently living and working in Santa Fe, NM. Her paintings have been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Portland, OR, Los Angeles, and New Mexico. Her automatic drawing process explores the relationship of femininity to the psychedelic while drawing inspiration from the playful world-building nature of science fiction and fantasy. Using a stimulating palette, she creates dense theatrical compositions containing fluid transfigurations of pattern and figuration, often leading the viewer to delight and hope. <https://ebagley.com/>