Our WORDS are the MUSIC: *Hear Us SING!*

A creative writing publication of the Pittsburgh Pride Choir

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Our WORDS are the MUSIC: Hear us SING!
First Edition

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Table of Contents

Letter from the Director - Kym Scott 4

Introduction 5

Boxes to Bridges - Serena Ragsdale 6

Whenever You're Ready - Beth Turnbull 8

In the Magic Hour - Chuck Denk 12

CHOSEN FAMILY. - Bobbie Hall-Price 14

You Are Enough - David Brzozowski 18

The Grey Whale - Ali Macomber 20

Caged Coloratura - Dorian Young 22

The Return of Silica Flynt - Trae McCarthy 24

The Moss and the Steel - Kirk Shepard 26

Taming the Monster Within - Lydia McShane 28

Red - Nick Coronado 30

The Letter P - Emily Matelan 36

Trust Falls - Silvan Maxwell 39

The Pittsburgh Pride Choir - Liz Tafel-Hurley 40

Letter from the Director

Kym Scott

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Introduction

The Pittsburgh Pride Choir, via QUACK Productions, is proud to present our 2026 literary publication: *Our WORDS are the MUSIC: Hear us SING!* This publication celebrates PPC's 40th Anniversary by showcasing poetry and creative prose written by the unique and talented voices in our choir. Organized by editors Ali Macomber, Clara Osburg, and Oliver Pinder (the QUACKs), this collection is anchored to the theme of *reading, HEARING,* and equally *celebrating* personal stories that tell of self-discovery, finding true voices, and searching for and creating connection and meaning as LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies. This collection ultimately aims to share unique experiences that have brought our members closer to themselves, and thus, closer to their community as choir members.

The QUACKs, on behalf of the Pittsburgh Pride Choir, surely hope that you enjoy this collection as much as they enjoyed putting it together for you; and THANK YOU for being a part of our celebration!

Boxes to Bridges

Serena Ragsdale

They had been stacking up for a while now.

Secrets that like the clear containers would have been easy to see if one had bothered to notice.

The boxes were only mentioned right before the van was set to leave; the flying monkeys would not have time to stop us.

We removed ourselves from the map and off we went.

The trip was a long one but necessary, filled with music, laughter, and comfortable silence.

We finally happened upon the yellow bridge that would bring us to our new home, a bridge of acceptance and new possibilities.

The bridge was unlike the ones of the past that had been built upon straw, with tolls too steep to maintain.

This bridge was solid steel and connected people with
each other instead of dividing them;
sunlight filtered from above bringing hope anew.

Once the trip had reached its end, we walked until we
found ourselves in a space full of people
and greenery.

As we laid on the grass, a relieved sigh escaped and our
troubles fell like water from the circular
fountain nearby and finally there was peace.

Whenever You're Ready
Beth Turnbull

I walked into the room with the face I had been practicing for weeks.
Determined, confident, deserving to be here.
I looked around me at the people milling about and their faces were not so different.

But their lives were.

I had been preparing for weeks.
I memorized the sheet music, I listened to the soundtrack nonstop. I was ready.

Finally I was going to become a real performer.
My mediocre high school theatre department was finally doing a musical that I had heard of and *I was going to be a part of it*.

I strutted into the audition room with a confidence that didn't feel quite like my own and took a deep breath.

I was confident, I was talented, I deserved to be there. *I could do this*.

The director, the choreographer, and the stage manager sat like *grand judges* behind their table.

They told me to sing whenever I was ready.
I was definitely *not ready*.

Nevertheless I had to take the plunge.
Well, I didn't *have* to. I could have given in to the notion that I might fail, but I didn't.
This was my chance to finally become a part of something I loved.
The theatre.
And I loved it so much, that *just picturing myself on the stage* was enough to dissolve my fear.

I opened my mouth to sing and it felt *exhilarating*.

It kind of felt like I was a *plane flying over the ocean* with an empty tank of gas.

Whenever You're Ready | Beth Turnbull

That feeling where you know when something good is happening that *something* eventually has to go wrong. *It has to. It always does*.

And it did.

After the audition I dreamed of the cast list.
Maybe they would take a chance on me and give me a role.
Maybe if I was in the ensemble I'd get to have a few lines.
Maybe I'd finally get to perform on the high school stage.

No, no, and *no*.

Apparently, there was "a lot of interest in this show" and "we can't cast everybody"
"you should really gain some experience and audition next year"

And so I did.

Scanning that cast list and not seeing my name was one of the greatest disappointments of my so-called "theatre career."

And I would not let myself feel like a failure again.

I was going to work *harder*. I was going to work *smarter*. I would play the game and win.

Whatever it takes - that's what I'm going to do.

I worked hard in my voice lessons.
I watched every piece of theatre I set my eyes on.

I was going to be what they wanted - if that's what it took.

I joined chorus, signed up for theatre club, went to the summer theatre camp.

This theatre camp was my chance to prove myself - my grand two-week audition.

No one expected to see me there, *this girl who had never stepped foot on their stage*.
They didn't know how hard I was working to belong.
To them - I was just another person who thought they were qualified to perform.
But I was qualified, and I was willing to prove it.

I auditioned for every solo. I danced like my life depended on it. And in a way, it did.
And I didn't get the solos. And I was in the back, dimly lit corner of the stage for every dance.

But I was on *the stage*.

And I felt like I belonged there.

Then fall rolled around, and the next season of auditions and possible disappointments was upon me.

We were going to do Spamalot, a musical based on one of my favorite movies of all time: *Monty Python's Quest for the Holy Grail*.

I was going to be in this show. I had to. I wanted to. I *needed* to.

I walked into the room with the face I had been practicing for weeks.

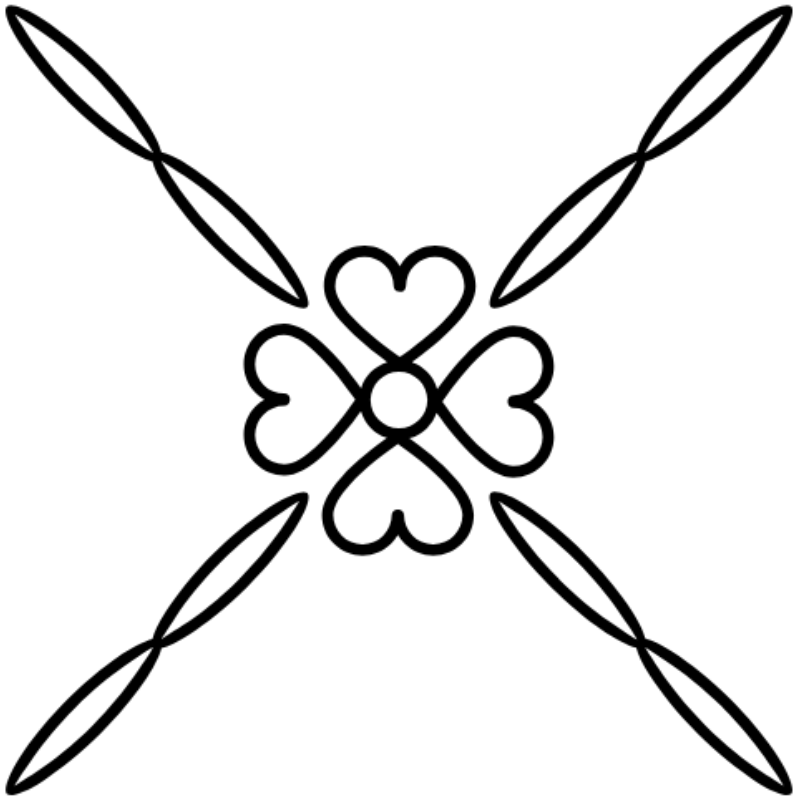
I strutted into the audition room with a confidence that didn't feel quite like my own and took a deep breath.

It kind of felt like I was a *plane flying over the ocean* with an empty tank of gas.
That feeling where you know when something good is happening that *something* eventually has to go wrong. *It has to. It always does*.

But it didn't.

After the audition I dreamed of the cast list.

And this time - I was on it.



In the Magic Hour
Chuck Denk

Summer
On a summer day, you'll find me out early
The magic hour, just after dawn
The light is soft; the colors are warm
Harsh shadows are yet to come.
I share this time with the fishermen
And the runners in bright-colored shoes
They're unaware of my camera and me
I focus where I choose.

As evening sun outlasts the clocks
The light turns golden again
Sidewalk diners linger downtown
Over tea or a last glass of red
In the parks you see there are swimmers, and tennis,
and children, chasing fireflies
Balding men speeding in open-top cars
And I spy, as my shutter flies.

In the magic hour
I am the camera as I make my rounds
In the magic hour
I'm just a face in the crowd.

Autumn
Autumn mornings, the yellow school buses
Remind me of wind-driven leaves.
Every porch has their witches and pumpkins,
As Hallowe'en captures the scene.
Bright football jerseys meet up after school
Boys and dogs mix in the scrum
But the evening brings an early gloom
Hinting at cold days to come.

In the Magic Hour | Chuck Denk

Winter
Winter-gray trees with naked crowns
Ballerinas on skates steam the air.
Shoppers lurching on ice look like clowns
I'm smiling but they're unaware

My eye sees the distance light travels in time
My heart sees a dream passing by

Spring
Early spring blossoms and leafing shrubs
Invite the bees and the birds
Nature needing the focus close up
Each vision its own little world.
Hopeful picnics and festival crowds
Scan the sky for afternoon rain
The rhythms of my comfortable town
I'm eager for summer again.

In the magic hour
I am the camera as I make my rounds
In the magic hour
I'm just a face in the crowd.

CHOSEN FAMILY.
Bobbie Hall-Price

My name is Bobbie Annette Hall-Price and I use she/her pronouns. I wanted to tell you a little story about my family. Music has always been a really important part of my family. My father is a jack of all instruments with perfect pitch and my mom a beautiful singer and guitarist. I'm actually named after a song called "For Bobbie, For Baby" that my parents sang to each other at their wedding... That was back when they thought it was a love song. Later on, they found out that it was actually a lullaby and they decided that the first child they had, they would name Bobbie.

A song we sang at Pride 2025 holds a special place in my heart. To help you understand, I want to tell you the story of how I came into this world. Three decades ago, my parents began on their journey to grow their family. My father had been in and out of cancer treatments through the previous decades receiving both chemotherapy and radiation for a cancer that was incurable but manageable through treatment. Though he had created 2 wonderful children as a teenager, he no longer had sperm that could produce a child.

However, my mother desperately wanted children and as a woman of "advanced maternal age" her time was running out. Ultimately, they decided on sperm donation. They meticulously combed through hundreds of profiles until they found one matching my father well enough. The donor had blue eyes, a psychology degree, and was a musician, all mirroring my father. The only downside was my father's signature firetruck-red hair did not match the sperm donor's profile. Alas, they desperately wanted a child and so they took good enough before they ran out of time to find another match. Spoiler: I don't have red hair, but I still have all my father's signature red-headed freckles.

They tried IUI nine times before having me. They always knew conceiving would be hard, but I don't think they realized how hard. But in their hearts, they knew they both wanted a family to call their own. A physical embodiment of their love -- their "for Bobbie, for baby." Still, as a boy from the hollers of Kentucky, my father struggled to come to terms with not being related by blood, and still does to this day. As a result, it wasn't until early adulthood that I learned of the cancer and the donor. All came to light as a result of a 23andMe test, but that's a story for another time.

When I originally gave this speech at our 2025 Pride Concert, my father was in the audience. I hadn't told him I would be sharing this speech, especially not to a room of hundreds of strangers and a livestream. This is a complex, nuanced topic in my family, but I wanted to share it because one of our songs exemplified all my feelings about my family, my Dad and more.

As a donor conceived person, I wanted to share with all the queer and non-queer families alike who, like mine, needed to or chose to use modern medicine to complete their chosen family. To the current and future parents of donor conceived children, please truly hear this:

It's okay.
We love you.
You are our chosen family.
And we would choose you over and over and over again if given the chance.

And to my Dad -- when we lost Mom, I know it broke you. It shattered our family. But over these past few years you have stepped up in ways I'm sure you didn't know that you could for our family.

I want to make sure that you and all other parents of donor conceived children hear this message:
We don't need to be related.
We don't need to share genes or even a surname.
You are our chosen family.

I love you, dad. In this choir and community, there are countless other parents that know the hurt that you feel at times. But know that I love you. You are my chosen family. You are my chosen father.

Here are the lyrics to the song that this speech originally prefaced. I hope as you read or as you listen that you can truly feel the lyrics in your heart. Thank you for being part of this chosen family.

Where do I belong?

Tell me your story and I'll tell you mine
I'm all ears, take your time, we got all night
Show me the rivers crossed, the mountains scaled
Show me who made you walk all the way here

Settle down, put your bags down
You're alright now

We don't need to be related to relate
We don't need to share genes or a surname
You are, you are
My chosen, chosen family
So what if we don't look the same?
We been going through the same thing
Yeah, you are, you are
My chosen, chosen family

CHOSEN FAMILY. | Bobbie Hall-Price

Hand me a pen and I'll rewrite the pain
When you're ready, we'll turn the page together
Open a bottle, it's time we celebrate
Who you were, who you are
We're one and the same, yeah, yeah

We don't need to be related to relate
We don't need to share genes or a surname
You are, you are / My chosen, chosen family
So what if we don't look the same?
We been going through the same thing
Yeah, you are, you are / My chosen, chosen family

I, I chose you / You chose me
I chose / (Chosen family)
I chose you / You chose me
We're alright now

We don't need to be related to relate
We don't need to share genes or a surname
You are, you are / My chosen, chosen family

So what if we don't look the same?
We been going through the same thing
Yeah, you are, you are / My chosen, chosen family
We don't need to be related to relate
We don't need to share genes or a surname
You are, you are / My chosen, chosen family

- “Chosen Family (Elton John)” by Rina Sawayama

You Are Enough
David Brzozowski

Have you ever asked yourself if you were enough?
I have.

My answer was, and often still is, “no.”

It’s the reason I try to be the very best at everything I do: school, work, important competitions,
unimportant ones, cooking, baking, hosting, being a friend, a brother, an uncle, a neighbor.
Always asking myself: how can I be the best... and finally be enough?

Through a lot of self-discovery, meaningful therapy, and learning to be vulnerable, I’ve come to
realize something difficult: I may never fully feel like I’m enough. It’s something I work on
every day. I try not to be so hard on myself or chase perfection. I remind myself that I’m doing a
great job, but that quiet voice still creeps in: *Are you enough? Did you do everything you could
have?* And sometimes, it still wins.

The irony is that I often come across as confident, sometimes even cocky. But that’s the mask.
It’s what someone who doesn’t feel like they’re enough learns to wear. It shows up differently
depending on the situation, but it’s always there, tucked in my back pocket. I don’t go anywhere
without it. Feeling like you’re not enough is a constant work in progress.

The good news is that I'm aware of it. Still, it can be exhausting, especially when the thing I feel
"not enough" about truly matters. I understand now where this comes from: years in my youth of
being made to feel like I didn't meet others' expectations. Not just one person...many. That kind
of messaging sticks with you, even through therapy and growth.

So the real win is this: recognizing that the feeling of not being enough didn't start within me.

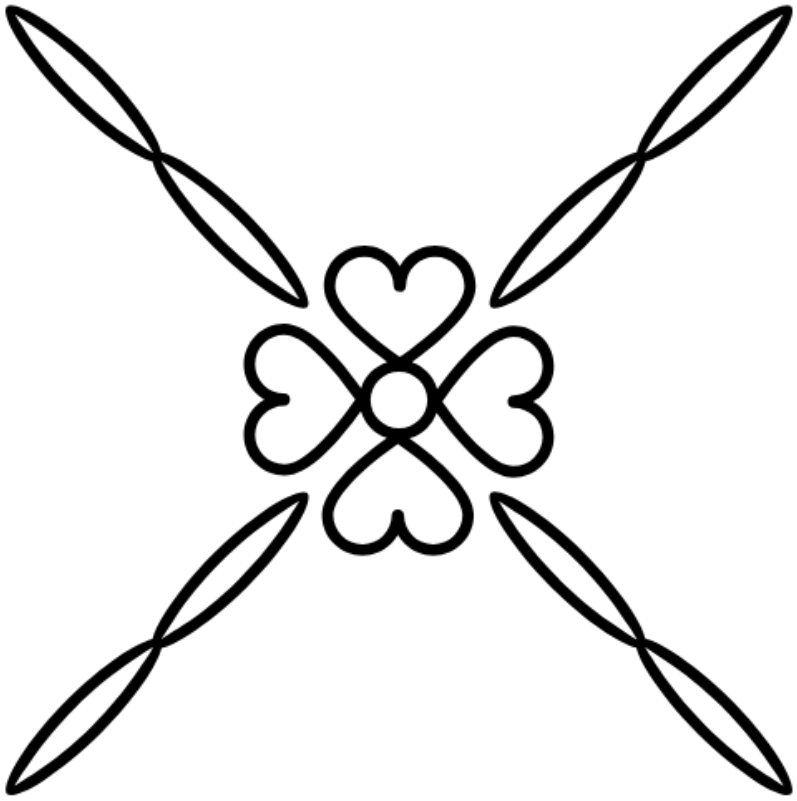
My journey now is about becoming enough in my own eyes, my own heart, and my own
soul...not anyone else's. It sounds simple, but it isn't easy.

What has helped the most is surrounding myself with people who truly see me as enough. That
has been one of the greatest gifts in my life. So, I continue to let those people in, to build that
community, and to learn from it.

Because being enough... is all I've ever longed for.

The Grey Whale
Ali Macomber

The strings tied to your past ignite along the flicking breeze
and the discovery of a sense.
A sense of ease and rapid desire as the whole world greets
you with the eye of the grey whale.
He who is swept by the dust of the kelp and varnished by the
plump truth of being beyond these bodies.
When you touched the worms in their houses and smelled the
grass brewing fables and making tales for breakfast, the whale was there.
The kitchen has always been a place to find spoons and forks
and pennies and pens – a place to find him on the soft and supple
tail end of childhood.
When the wind flicks, you are suspended in hands over the sea
in an aching and holding place of gold-en, phosphorescent
giving.



Caged Coloratura
Dorian Young

My notes rise, free to soar
Weightless, ethereal
I want to join them
My wings push against a gilded cage.

“Why change?” they ask
“It’s such a shame, a waste”
“Dragging down that heavenly sound,
Falling on discordant keys”
“This cage was made for you”

But I want to fly
Ascending with the music, freedom never felt
Would they see him, wings stretched wide
Or will the shackles never break?
Will they only see what they want to see?

I’ve seen them, multicolored feathers in a pastel sky
Shimmering birds that could never be caged
Spirits taking flight in song
Why can’t I join them?

The cage shatters
My wings unfurl
And I rise
Free to soar.

Art accompanying *Caged Coloratura*
Dorian Young

The Return of Silica Flynt
Trae McCarthy

One of the dancers helped me with the corset, pulling the ties tighter and yet tighter until my waist was snatched and the ladies looked as plump and juicy as they are. Glad I chose the satin skull-printed one.

A goth touch for emceeing a Friday the13th Valentine's burlesque show.

Fishnets perfect. The garter panties look hot. Definitely worth the money.

Velvet cutaway tailcoat. A bit masc. The tails rumpled but there’s no doubt who's in charge.

High heeled leather boots, zippers, nasty pointed toes. Should have had my boot black touch them up, but he's all tied up at home. New bootstraps covered in spikes.

Snap on the studded wide leather bracelet I've had since the 80s. That bracelet could tell stories. Load the others up both forearms. I flex my hands. The short, fingerless leather driving gloves fit perfectly.

Attach the red flogger to the loop at my waist. It’s my “pop of color.”

Place the new velvet top hat over my long violet hair. Should have sized the hat up an 8^{th} of an inch.

Put on my goddess necklace in case anyone forgets what I am.

Make up on point. The eyeliner enhances my green eyes. Add a little more vampire-red lipstick.

Check out the full effect in the green room mirror. I look good and feel better.

Grab the spare set of cuffs and slip them into my coat pocket.

One minute til music is cued. I stand behind the green room curtain, muscles engaged, ready to move.

“Tainted Love” blasts through the speakeasy sound system.

I strut through the crowd, smiling, making eye contact with as many audience members as possible. They’re bright-eyed, eager to please, drinking me in.

I wonder which ones I'll be cuffing tonight, and which ones I’ll flog.

I reach the stage, pivot, and take the mic.

I own this audience, and they'll do my bidding.

Silica is back.

The Moss and the Steel
Kirk Shepard

I learned to hold my breath in the pews of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

My childhood was a landscape of grit and unspoken commandments, where the hills were hollowed out for coal and the people were hollowed out for capital. In the church camps of my youth, God was a straight line. Authority was a closed fist. And safety was a comedic performance as to not be cast out.

I was a creature trying to molt in a geography that only knew how to rust.

So I left. I followed the rivers West until the steel mills gave way to the damp, green cathedrals of the Pacific Northwest.

It was there, among the nurse logs and the constant rain, that I learned to be unapologetically queer wasn't just about who I desired; it was about how I related to power. In the forest, I saw that nature does not believe in prisons. It does not believe in binaries. It believes in the mycelial, the circular, the chaotic collaboration of rot and rebirth. It wasn't just the topography that saved me; it was the people. It was the lovers and activists who moved like water. They made me fluid and fierce.

I learned that abolition is just another word for decomposition: the willingness to let the old, rigid structures fall so that something living can breathe.

I became a parent there. A partner. A wayfinder. I learned that safety is not a police cruiser patrolling the border of a neighborhood; safety is a root system. It is the deep, tangled web of communities who know your name and refuse to let you fall.

I always felt a tether pulling me back to the confluence of the three rivers. It was an illogical, magnetic tug. And then, after twenty years of breathing that green air, I came back to Pennsylvania. The grief of leaving the PNW still sits in my chest like a stone.

The Moss and the Steel | Kirk Shepard

Returning to Pittsburgh at this moment, in the midst of a Christofascist tightening, is a somatic shock. My nervous system remembers the old silence and performative grit.

But I am not the young adult who left.

I have returned with pockets full of seeds.

To be a queer, gender-non-conforming parent in this collapsing empire is to be a specific kind of architect. I walk these three rivers now with my child, and I try to teach her to read the land beneath the concrete. I am teaching her that the Earth does not belong to the extractors.

There is something about Pittsburgh that I had forgotten. This is not just a city of rust; it is a city of reinvention. It is a place that has died a thousand deaths from industrial collapse to economic abandonment. And yet, it insists on rising. There is a queer resilience in that. I am here to witness the collapse of the old way, yes. But more than that, I am here to compost it.

My story is no longer a secret I keep to feel a sense of belonging. It is a frequency I broadcast. It is the assertion that we can build a world that values connection over control, tenderness over toughness, and the wild, messy truth over the lies.

(I am?) We are the water that wears down the stone. We are the green that grows through the cracks in the pavement. We are the moss returning to the steel.

And we are not going anywhere.

Taming the Monster Within
Lydia McShane

Life can be a wild ride,

With bumps along the way,

Though happy times are many,

The hard things seem to stay,

Way down deep inside you

These secrets dark and dread,

One word, one look, one gesture,

They raise their ugly heads.

It’s crazy how it happens,

It comes out of the blue

The monster is awoken,

To prove that wrongs are true.

The bitter words that follow,

Unfair and full of pain

Just leave me so regretful.

The memories to blame.

Yet....

I'm taking off the boxing gloves!
Cutting off the thorns!
I don't need that protection,
My heart is finally home.
My thistles turned to petals,
My fences taken down,
There's calm in knowing your love,
Is strong, steady, safe and sound.

I know I won't stop healing,
It's a lifetime job ahead.
My past has left a mark on me,
But there's so much good ahead.
Embrace each of the years behind
And hold them with great care.
The future's full of love and light
The view's so fresh and fair.

Red
Nick Coronado

It was nearly the eve of his thirtieth birthday when Roger discovered he couldn't see the color red. His best friend Gemma pointed it out on one of their walks. He took too long to spot her bright red phone in the dead grass, and she wouldn't drop it.

"What about these?" she asked, plucking a rose from one of Mrs. Parkins' rose bushes. She held it against a color wheel on her phone like an open book test.

"Mmm, it's a sort of orangey-purple," he said, pointing. She laughed, then stopped when he didn't. They spent the next two hours going over just about anything Gemma could name.

Some reds, like ladybugs and Coke cans, were dull, lifeless things nearly dissolving into visual snow. Others, like blood and firetrucks, hid among red's orange, purple, or brown neighbors. Others, like strawberries, shifted with the light, shimmering with blue, green and gold luster. No two reds were the same.

For her part, Gemma did her best to explain red.

"It's like... an explosion in here," she said, poking Roger in the chest. "Or like orange grew up and started wearing cocktail dresses. Oh! You know at the very end of a sunset, when the sun is just that wiggly line poking over the horizon? That warmth, the way the whole world crackles like a hearth? That's red." She paused and shook her head. "It's the color of love. Anger. Dang. And it's *just* red, huh? Not any kind of colorblindness I've ever heard of. Everything must look so... strange."

She said this without malice, but an odd weight tugged on Roger's gut.

The topic didn't come up again until late spring. He cannonballed into the dating pool once again, searching for something he'd always struggled to define. Amidst the sea of terrible conversations he screenshotted for Gemma's amusement, he found his buoy. Mary. Cute. Short. Curly brown hair. Thick glasses. Covered in piercings. They agreed on a date at an art museum and met in the lobby.

"I try to make it at least once a month. Sometimes I'll bring a sketchpad and hang out with the busts. I should warn you now, hanging out with me involves a lot of art crawls and espresso," she said. Her eyes glazed over with infectious warmth, and Roger liked the way she said *hanging out*.

"Shall we?" she said, offering her arm. He linked his with hers, and they marched together into the exhibit. To his surprise, he lingered on her touch well into the first room.

Mary had a quiet intelligence; she cocked her head at each painting, and there was no searching in her gaze, only easy noticing. And right as Roger's eyes began to glaze over, she'd invite him in. She'd lay her fingers delicately on his shoulder and rise up to her tippy toes to whisper something as close to his ear as she could get.

"Look how the light plays off the waves," she said of a ship battling the high seas. And Roger smiled and nodded like a happy idiot. He was a happy idiot.

He did some looking on his own, but for the most part he was content following her like a well-trained puppy. They stood in front of a sad jester dressed in dark orange, slumped in a chair while a gala danced behind him. Mary touched Roger's shoulder, and the pads of her fingertips radiated pleasant warmth. She rose to her tiptoes. He anticipated her soft whisper like a tree waiting for wind.

"I love this one. I think the red symbolizes his isolation," she said. And the happy idiot's smile vanished.

Roger searched the canvas for red. The chair and rug were both dark brown. The gala was bathed in a yellow-orange light. The longer he looked, the less appealing the image got. It was flat, dim, monotonous. He remembered his conversation with Gemma, and a small bead of sweat formed on one of his temples.

"You okay?" Mary whispered, jogging him out of his stupor. He'd been squinting, trying to get the red to reveal itself by sheer force of will. He nodded and stepped back, fixing his face.

They slowly traversed several more rooms. Harsh lights, which would have been at home in a dentist's office, proudly spotlighted each painting. *Behold the red flag, stabbing the sky like a scalpel,* one said. Or, *look how his red robes telegraph his fury*. Roger's stomach twisted as he searched for the invisible. Were those flowers red? The wallpaper? Her hair? His book cover?

He stole furtive glances at Mary. What about her? Had she worn her best red dress for him? With matching shoes? Were her glasses rose-tinted? When she looked at him, what did she see?

Mary approached and touched his shoulder to point out a couple dancing, and her fingers burned. He nearly jumped. Her whispers cut the silence like shattered glass, echoing off cold marble. His nodding became perfunctory, placating. He absently drew away from her, but she stayed a few steps away. In place of eye contact, he stoically scrutinized the placards. She got the hint and receded.

They arrived separately to the last room. She waited for him at the entryway. A massive Rothko hung on the opposite wall entitled, simply, *Red*. Roger froze. Mary extended both arms and approached.

"Ah, and the *pièce de résistance*," she said. "How's my baby?" she cooed at the painting. He willed himself forward, to her side. They stood next to each other, hands behind their backs.

Finally, she put a hand to her chest. "It's like a lover's embrace. Can you feel that?"

He could not; it was one of the ugliest things he'd ever seen. Three different shades of hideous brown splashed across the canvas in horizontal layers like dried mud. She touched him lightly on the arm and watched while he scoured the frame. He stiffened. The seconds inched by. In this ugly painting was everything he knew to be red. A matador's cape. Valentine's Day hearts. Santa Claus. Rubies. Mars. Passion. Anger. Coca Cola. All transformed into ugly, unremarkable sludge. He blinked stupidly, then did his best to say something profound, but her fallen smile was all the response he needed.

They shared a glass of wine at a small bistro afterwards, and she let him down gently. She swirled her purple merlot in its glass while they awaited the check. His favorite Pinot sat untouched. He drove home with the radio off, deleted Bumble, and put on a black and white movie.

Roger moped in Gemma's apartment while she opened a bottle of wine. She laughed through the entire story.

"So you're one band short of a rainbow, who cares?" she said, handing him his wine.

"She said it felt like a lover's embrace, and, I don't know, I panicked. Is that a thing?" he said, staring into his glass of blue wine.

Gemma looked at Roger for a few moments, then her face cracked and she laughed like a truck letting off its brakes.

"Sounds like she spooked ya," she said. "It is a bit much, I'll admit. She introduced you to her *baby* on the first date." Another fit of laughter.

"No, no, I liked her. I just didn't know..." Roger said.

"Well, hey! Maybe we can get you those glasses for colorblind people and make a video of you weeping over tulips," she called over her shoulder as she walked to the kitchen for more wine.

"Maybe," was all Roger said. He wasn't sure she heard.

Autumn ended early for Roger; the leaves turned from yellow to orange, then right to brown. In the changing season, he felt himself pulled back to the museum's white embrace. It was unrecognizable.

"This ain't the right place," a bored desk clerk called out. He was leaning so far back in his chair, Roger hadn't even seen him. Roger started, then let out a noncommittal noise.

"Admissions is that way," the clerk said, pointing down a long hallway covered in scaffolding and *Sorry for the inconvenience* signs every ten feet.

"Getting ready for next season," the admissions desk said in that I've-apologized-fourteen-times-today way, as Roger looked around at all the signs. Still, he paid the twelve dollars, and after lingering in the entrance, made his way inside, passed by the busts, and stood once more in front of Red. When he looked up, he flinched as though struck. He forced himself to look. While he stood, shifting from foot to foot, the wall shook and clamorous bangs from the adjacent room rattled his skull. *Sorry for the inconvenience*. He kept his face as even as possible in defiance, even as Red hammered his eyes and ears. He didn't stay long.

He came again. Lingered in the entrance, passed the busts, wound around the signs, and again, Red's brown stripes revealed nothing. He sat on the unupholstered bench in front of the painting with his hands clasped between his knees, and his breath shuddered slightly. The black-clad security guard standing in the corner eventually averted her gaze.

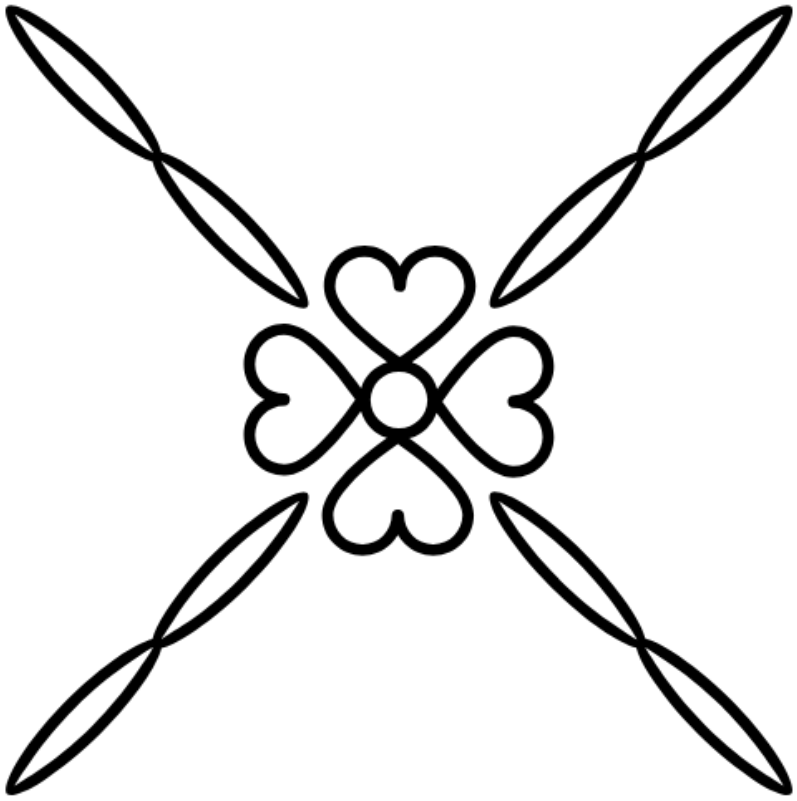
Every week, he returned. Another twelve dollars, linger, busts, Red. Every week, crouched on the bench, he awaited the barest of touches on his shoulder, or the softest whisper in his ear, but it never came. Every week, he left the way he came.

He returned to the museum one day to find the scaffolding and signs all gone. The lobby was bright with cool colors announcing their new Van Gogh exhibit. The two women behind the admissions desk flashed him warm, authentic smiles as he paid.

The halls bustled with life; their walls echoed with appreciative whispers, and impatient children lay supine on the benches or the floors while security guards hovered near their parents. Groups numbering between three and seven wafted by like scents as Roger strode to the last room. Against the opposing wall, where Red used to be, hung a small sign.

We're sorry you missed us!

Roger smiled, rolled his shoulders, and went to look at the Van Goghs.



The Letter P
Emily Matelan

Pansexual. The “P” people forget is there. Attraction not confined by gender. A heart that has always been expansive, even when others tried to reduce it.

I have always known, before I even had language for it or knew the word queer.

For a long time, the only words I heard were wrong ones. Confused. Phase. Attention seeking. Bisexual, said with a dismissive look. Gay, said as a correction. Straight, said as an assumption.

Language evolved around me long before I found the word that fit. And then one day, I did.

The feeling itself was not new. The knowing had always been there. But when I had a word for it, something inside me rejoiced. A weight I had been carrying without realizing it began to lift. A single word made room for me to breathe.

In elementary school, I did not feel confusion. I had a crush on both Sailor Moon and Tuxedo Mask. It did not feel radical. It did not feel brave. It felt obvious. The adults were the ones confused. And after I was seen kissing a girl in second grade, I found myself in a counselor’s office not because I was kissing someone at an inappropriately young age, but because that someone was a girl. I was put in therapy once a week to scare the gay away.

Spoiler alert: It didn’t work.

In high school, I wrote it down on lined paper. My shaky handwriting said, I like boys and girls. This is me. I folded the page carefully and left it on my mother’s dresser.

I waited for something to happen.

Nothing happened.

Her silence was not neutral, it was erasure. Her silence said “I do not accept this reality,” without needing to say the words.

I came out again. And then again. Three separate attempts to hand my mother the same truth. Each time met with denial so quiet that it almost passed for misunderstanding. As if I had spoken in a language she simply chose not to learn.

When I tried to tell my best friend at age fifteen, she laughed and said “no you’re not.”

It is a lonely feeling to have everyone closest to you try to edit you to fit what they find comfortable and palatable. To have your certainty treated like a phase. To feel your identity corrected by people who have never even tried to understand it.

Later, I married a man.

From the outside, it looked like confirmation that everyone else had been right all along. I quickly learned how often people mistake visibility for validity. He called it our straight relationship. Constantly, casually, conversationally, as if repetition could rewrite me. Each time he said it, I recoiled.

I began to mistake their confusion for my own. It took me years to understand that being unheard does not make you wrong. It only makes you quiet.

Divorcing him felt like freedom. A chance to unapologetically settle into my most authentic self.

I learned how to justify myself. I learned how to explain that queerness does not evaporate in the presence of a man.

The Letter P | Emily Matelan

When I told a family member that I joined the Pittsburgh Pride Choir, she asked “but are you gay?”

Even now, the question arrives like a narrowing. As if queerness must resolve into something tidy. As if the only acceptable answer is one that fits inside a single, familiar box.

From my first choir rehearsal, something inside me steadied. Here was a room where no one asked for proof. No one required clarification. No one tried to rewrite me.

We breathe in together. We exhale into harmony. Basses, tenors, altos, sopranos - distinct, necessary, interdependent. No voice erased. Difference was not a threat to the music, it was the music.

For the first time I did not feel the need to justify my existence, I just sang.

And looking around a room full of people like me, I realized something simple and unshakeable:

I have always been this.

Even when no one answered the letter.

Even when someone said no you’re not.

Even when silence tried to erase me.

Even when my marriage was labeled for me.

I have always been this.

Now I am in a place where I do not need to come out every day. I do not need to defend the shape of my own heart. I do not need to ask anyone to confirm what I already know.

I only needed to come home once, and I have.

Trust Falls

Silvan Maxwell

I stopped catching
My falls at that pre-teen era
When my body ceased to be
An indivisible part of myself
And became the uncontested territory
Of men thrice my age
Who told me how mature I was for mine.

What was this strange being
With a chest so large that running was impossible
Arms so weak they could not support
The body's weight
Unrecognizable to me but taxonomized:
Woman?

I didn't realize how much I had ceded
Until after two years of testosterone therapy
Climbing cliffs in a corner of Cornwall
I aimed my arm above my body
Tacitly trusting that it could tether me
And it did.

The Pittsburgh Pride Choir

Is a place of music and singing.
And to all
Much joy it is bringing.

A safe place to many,
You can hide here too.
Everyone is equal.
And that is true.

No matter what
Your pronouns are,
You don't even have to
Be a star.

Singing is Joyful.
Singing is fun.
It makes me happy
As well as everyone.

Our music tells stories
About struggles and triumphs.
Some that are sad.
And others are glad.

What is my reason
For being here?
Since it's my daughter
Not me, who is queer.

When she came out,
I was one shocked mama
The next few months
Were filled with drama.

Not my daughter!
To God I had prayed.
And by my side
He really stayed.

It took some meds
To calm my fears;
And to realize there was
No need for tears.

When the answer came
It was ME who changed
My heart filled with peace,
And my mind re-arranged.

Now I'm a proud ALLY in
The Pittsburgh Pride Choir.
Everyone's voices and courage
Are a lot to inspire!

- Liz Tafel-Hurley

PITTSBURGH
:PRIDE CHOIR