

COMING HOME

an anthology



Coming Home

an anthology



youthorganize
by LGBT YouthLine

Table of Contents



Dedication	1	<i>"Void"</i> by Lamya Abraham	30
Introduction	2	<i>"Manic Gender Panic"</i> by Kristine Parungao	31
<i>"Kindred Spirits"</i> by Colleen Ford	3	<i>"one day you too will bloom"</i> by Max Ocampo	32
<i>"Seki Siki Lasa"</i> by Siki Soberetonari	5	CW: Flash warning. Depictions of body/nudity	
<i>"Recovery"</i> by Gladys Lou	6	<i>"Mourning Wishes Gasoline Kisses"</i> by Meenakashi Ghadial	33
<i>"hello"</i> by Nadia Lofaro	7	<i>"Rasa"</i> by Jayan Singh	35
<i>"Who's Home"</i> by Rosie Arulanandam	8	<i>"gossamer string"</i> by Esse P	37
<i>"Gender-Fluid"</i> by Elie Assaf	10	<i>"Celebrating Diversity"</i> by Hope	40
<i>"Dead dolls"</i> by Arha	11	<i>"Intricacy in Life"</i> by Stephanie Biczok	41
CW: Death		<i>"I Am A Galaxy"</i> by Veruca Medland	43
<i>"ہمارا وعدا"</i> by rabia choudhary	14	Painting by Kanika	44
<i>"Flora on Fire"</i> by Candace Cosentino	15	<i>"Seeing you Still Through The Fire"</i> by Syd Deneau	45
<i>"How do you identify? Select all that apply."</i> by Denelle C.	16	CW: Mentions of death	
<i>"Mama"</i> by Eartha	17	<i>"SHE"</i> by Tae	46
Illustration by Anonymous	18	CW: Blood/nudity	
<i>"After"</i> by Hannah	19	<i>"What Do You See?"</i> by Theodore Forest Quinn	47
Comic by Mister Glass	23	CW: Depictions of syringes, medication and nudity	
<i>"Garden of Self: Exploration"</i> by Arwen	24	<i>"Resurgence to Art"</i> by Suman Mondal	49
<i>"Weaving Threads"</i> by Tubz	25	<i>"Fine Line"</i> by Maz Lovekin	50
Illustration by Kris Sokoli	27	CW: References body and gender dysphoria	
<i>"Untitled"</i> by Leanne Bath	29	Mixed Media Collage by Chris Yao	51
		Biographies + Artist Statements	53
		Funders	65



Introduction

Coming Home: An Anthology focuses on the exploration of self-discovery, centering on the journey of personal growth.

This Anthology delves into the intricate and often transformative experiences and processes of understanding one's identity. Through the lens of youth voices, it highlights the unique experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Peel and Halton regions, as they embark on their paths of self-acceptance and growth.

A bit more about our work in the region:

Peel Region consists of the cities of Mississauga and Brampton, and the town of Caledon. Halton region comprises the city of Burlington and the towns of Oakville, Milton, and Halton Hills. YouthOrganize (YO) has connected with youth in these cities and towns through our transformative arts-based workshop series and drop in events. These workshops and events, facilitated by YO and local artists, were free for 2SLGBTQ+ youth to attend and fostered creativity, community, and self-expression. Many participants who joined us over the span of our programming will be participating in this Anthology. It has been incredible to connect with other youth in the region, but the engagement also drives home for us that there is a strong need for ongoing arts-based spaces and opportunities in Peel and Halton for 2SLGBTQ+ youth. We are grateful to have had the opportunity to facilitate and create opportunities for these youth to explore self-expression and healing through the arts.

Throughout the open submission process that took place from October and November 2023, we were privileged to witness the creativity of 2SLGBTQ+ youth artists from Peel and Halton regions. The diverse variety of submissions ranges from paintings and poetry to collage, mixed-media arts and more. This array reflects the richness of the personal journeys experienced by the youth in our demographic.

We invite you to join us in reflecting on journeys of the self and the many ways in which we discover the pieces of identity that make up who we are.

Welcome home.

with care and love,

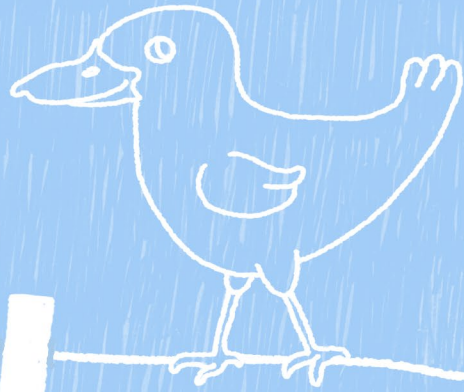
rabia and Cameo

To the 2SLGBTQ+ youth of Peel, Halton, and surrounding regions—your courage and stories are the guiding lights that illuminate the pages of this Anthology as we each embark in our journey of Coming Home. Each piece is a testament to the strength found and growth experienced in self-discovery. May these stories inspire you to embrace your own paths with authenticity and compassion.

And to our Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), our guiding team of six wonderful, talented, and passionate QTBIPOC youth from Peel and Halton—You all have been a driving force behind the work we've done. Thank you for your unwavering support and inspiration.

Colleen Ford

"Kindred Spirits"



Siki Soberetonari

“Seki Siki Lasa”

When I think of the future, I am barefoot.

twirling, softly slicing through wind
rain is here, in her usual way
falling
they watch me
head cocked to the side as I sway and carry them into my dance.

When I think of the future, my hair is a gray cloud.

a field of black and white strings atop my scalp
wet loamy soil spreads big feet
my body, follows the wind through sharp turns and slow glides

When I think of the future, I taste salt and joy.

sweat dripping down my brows
as I leap in gyration
wetness forming between my thighs
beads of rain traveling down to meet the earth

I throw my gray cloud back and the sound starts from my navel
through my center
into the wind
an offering

When I think of my future, my waist tumbles in glee.
melodies like warm butter pouring in remembrance of my mother tongue.



“Recovery”

Gladys Lou

Nadia Lofaro

“hello”

Transcript:

Hello

I always see you around but I never say hi

I'm sorry (I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry)

Could I tell you a secret? (I'm sorry)

Can I tell you a secret? (I'm sorry)

I like you (I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I like you)

Wait (I'm sorry)

Don't be afraid (I like you)

What time is it Mr. Wolf? (Don't be afraid, afraid)

I like you (afraid)

You don't have to be afraid (afraid)

You don't have to be afraid (afraid, I'm sorry)

You don't have to be afraid (time is on my mind, afraid)

Time is on my mind. Time is on my mind

Time is on my mind (I'm sorry)

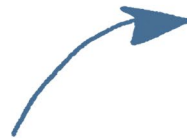
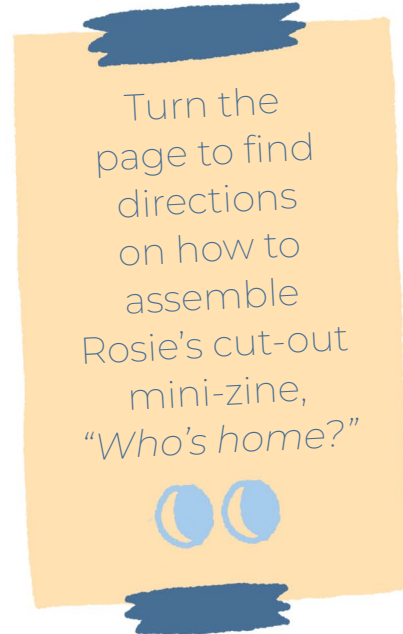
Time, time is on my mind

I like you. (I'm sorry) Can I tell you a secret?

Time (time is on my mind). Time (time is on my mind)

Mr. Wolf don't look at me like that.

Is it lunch time so soon?

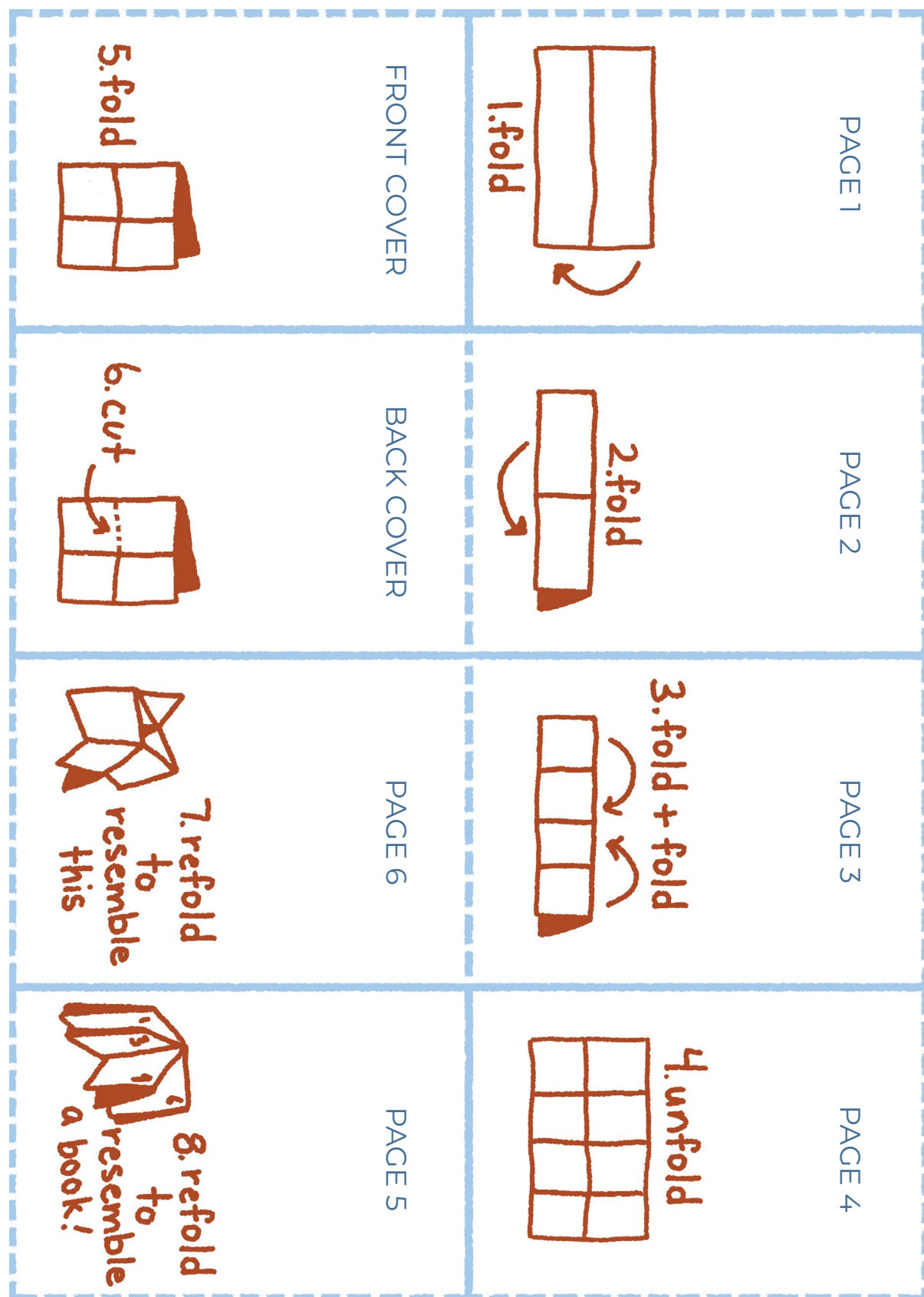


Rosie Arulanandam

Elie Assaf

“Gender-Fluid”

Who rode the dawn in a carriage of fire
 Who sought the wind a messenger of old voices
 Who rejoices amidst the explosion, imploding in a different sphere,
 A continuum of her and him,
 Who is this body carried upon the cradle of water? Swimming with the
 stillness of her and the waves of him,
 Who is this painter sharpening the lines of him and softening the pools of
 her?
 Who is this uncertainty, this unchanging spur?
 Who is this written through the lines of him, pointy? And curves of her,
 swirly?
 Who is this clear-cut shrub, who is this swaying young tulip?
 Again, the cycle, the wheel turns, sometimes fueled, sometimes from a
 momentum’s residue.
 We. Her, him, and I all, star this performance of life awaiting the audience’s
 tears, laughter and claps,
 What is one whose gender overlaps?
 Yet, we, her, him, and I all, into each other, collapse..



Use the guide above to cut and fold Rosie’s mini-zine.
 The dotted lines indicate where to cut. The solid lines indicate where to fold.

Arha

“Dead dolls”

Live when I'm alive, die when I'm dead. I've internalized this. For a while. I live daily, hedonistically, financially irresponsibly. I learned very soon. What a gift it is to live. What a waste it is to regret. Death will come. I try not to flinch at what comes my way. I do what is necessary for my self preservation, for love, for fulfillment. How naive I am to think that never looking at what lies beyond was an act of preservation rather than an act of pride and naïveté.

The truth is, I am not afraid of death. I'm afraid of murder.

I am intimately afraid of murder.

But I seem to be silly. I'm in Canada after all. Unlike those sullen brown countries. Like India, where my parents were born. With people and cultures millennia old, where gender and sexuality can only amount to vague concepts. A land colonized, split and heading towards fascism, where trans people are murdered in broad daylight. Compared to America. A Land colonized, split and heading towards fascism, where trans people are murdered in broad daylight. Right below us it seems.

Maybe the longest border in the world could stop the spread of trans genocide as well it as stops immigration.

But as useful as borders are as tools of imperialism, they tend to be quite useless to protect us from danger.

Quite useless in protecting us from stabbing at gender studies classrooms and anti lgbt protests.

But I seem to be getting carried away, I've talked enough about political violence I want to talk about the interpersonal. about what's been taken

and what's been lost.

But I am afraid of naming those stolen from this world. I fear that naming them will do them no justice. That their humanity, their joy and grief and humiliation will be washed into a stream of thoughts and prayers. That I could only ever convey the cost of their life and could never convey the value it was worth. That those young girls and women will come to the endless sludge of names no one could put a face or body to. That no one could truly love or care for. Not us at least. Not me least of all.

I am also afraid it would be worth it. That saying their names, the names given to them by themselves, could truly honour them.

Dead names as we call them. Which is not to say The name that is dead

Which is to say. The name they call us when we die.

That name that lives on in tabloids and articles. That before we rot and return to the earth and soil. Those names that will be martyred as pedophiles, rapists, abusers, criminals, sexually deviant and or mutilated bodies.

I'm afraid to look into a decryped war zone. Where bodies still bound to this world are desecrated for votes and capital.

Maybe if I read enough articles and gather all their names. I can weave a tapestry of their life. If not a tapestry. I could at least say they were all beautiful.

And how ever far these wars may be from me, whether I calculate how far are the miles or the minutes. I want to take the time to grieve for myself while I still have the chance

I grieve for zayan, my mothers son. And I grieve for Arha, a sister born from love.

I grieve that they couldn't protect me, they who named me. And I couldn't protect me, I who named myself

I mourn for that gift I have yet to receive.

The gift of growing old. To feel the pain of the life you lead ache in your bones.

I am afraid my bones will never ache. They will be buried before they are brittle. I'm afraid my skin will never sag. That I will never one day look in the mirror and wonder that, just like the sun and moon, my skin has spots and bruises. That my body, the one thing, the only thing we all truly own. Is taken.

But I want more than poetry. I want sex and pleasure. I want men lining up to play with me. I want video games and food and fun. I want it all. I want everything that is sinful and wicked.

I want to live. For myself, for them.

Joyously, without regret. But it seems to be that joy that is the quickest to be quelled.

But when all is said and done

I would sooner hope I'm stabbed in a dress and left to bleed than to be buried in a Muslim burial ground. Where a boys name is left to stand. Where one final time I was robbed of beauty and pleasure.

rabia choudhary



“ہمارا وعدا”

[hamara wada / our promise]

Candace Cosentino

“Flora on Fire”



[CLICK HERE](#)
to watch
Candace's
short film!

How do you identify? *Select all that apply.*

I am a Woman like my great-grandmother was --- Black and Proud. Nurturing and Charitable. Loud and Correct. Curvy and Sweet. Boundless. Powerful.

I am Non-Binary like the waters that fill and surround the Island of my people. Influential and Unpredictable. Dramatic and Potent. Yet, Calm and Grounding. Out of Many One People.

My gender identity connects me to my ancestors; it reminds me that I will never fit into any box or label. Just as they try and label my **Black Skin** they will try and label the way I **Transcend Gender** the way I scream “*Black Women and They/Them*” like I am pleading for my salvation.

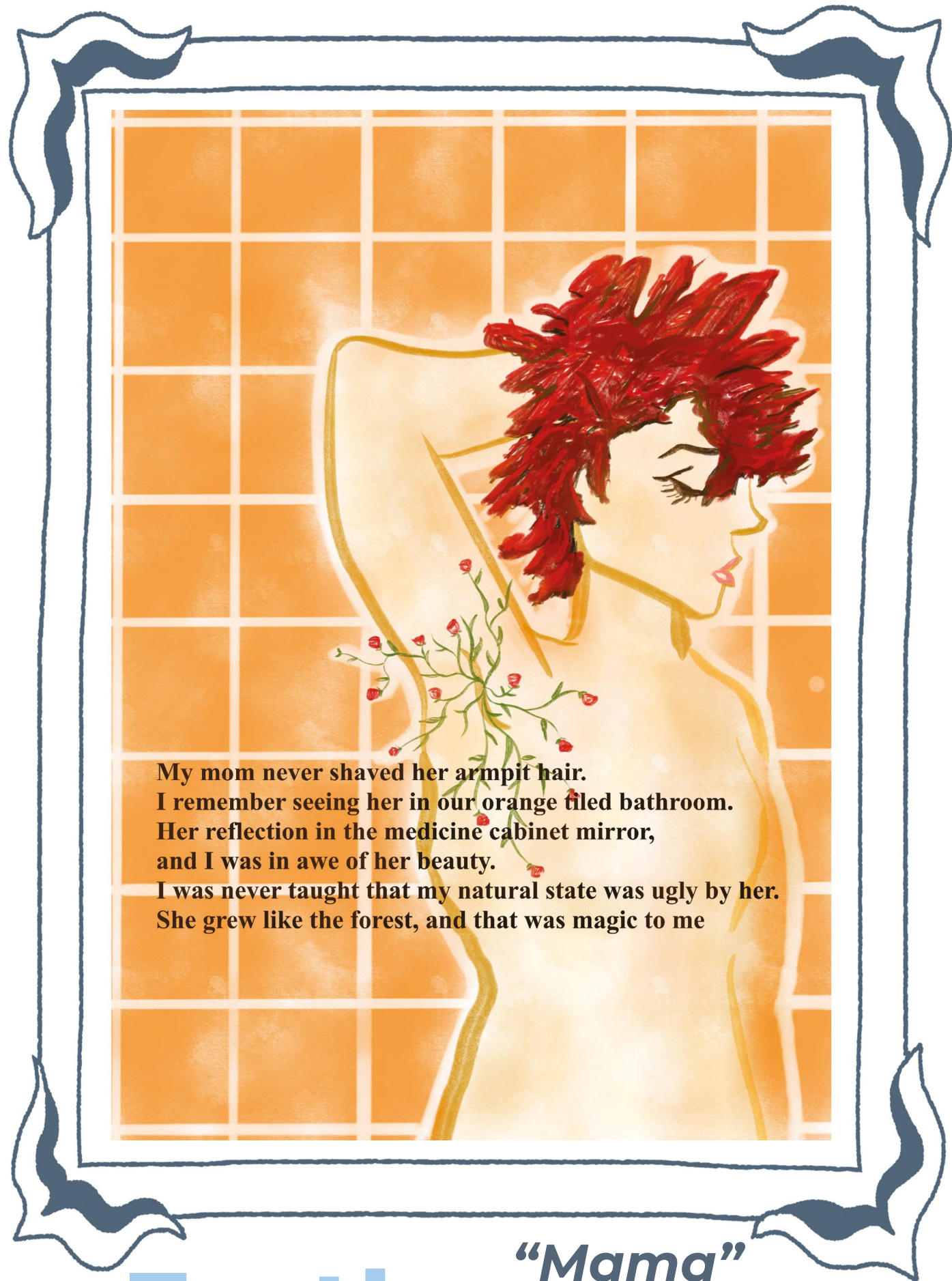
But my identity is a rolling clip of those who came before me. The way they existed as women and as people. The way they escaped the chains of mighty powers and formed their own pathways of freedom, of joy, of divergence. The way they birthed civilizations from their sacred wombs.

The way they stewed vegetables and served them with rice. The way they created love from grated coconuts and brown sugar.

The way they made *so much out of so little*.

It cannot be contained with a single word. It's expansive. Like Me. Like Them. Like Us.

Denelle C.



My mom never shaved her armpit hair.
I remember seeing her in our orange tiled bathroom.
Her reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror,
and I was in awe of her beauty.
I was never taught that my natural state was ugly by her.
She grew like the forest, and that was magic to me

Eartha "Mama"



Anonymous



Hannah

“After”

“How are you feeling?” my boyfriend Eric asks as I get in his car. I shrug.

“Okay, I guess.” Truthfully, I didn’t know. “Let’s just go.” I’m taken aback by his unshaven face. He knows I like a clean-shaven look and always made sure to shave whenever he saw me.

He adjusts his phone on the stand, hits *start* on Google Maps, and pulls back the lever. Eric’s taking me to my autism assessment appointment at CAMH—Centre for Addiction and Mental Health—because I didn’t want to go by myself. Afterwards, we’re going to the Canadian National Exhibition. I really want to see the Super Dogs show.

We drive mostly in silence, except for the low hum of the air conditioner that occasionally turns to a rumbling of sorts. Eric said it’s just old. I tap my fingers against the car door ledge, my mind working its way through all the *what if* scenarios. Outside, traffic flows on the highway, so I let Eric focus on driving. I wasn’t particularly in the mood for conversation, anyway.

It started with Instagram, then TikTok, showing me relatable content from autistic creators. When too many stories became too relatable and the not-knowing became too agonizing, I decided it was time for some proper answers.

And so, nearly a year later, my search for answers has led to this moment: riding in my boyfriend’s dusty Corolla and listening to some indie pop playing on his phone. He never let me pick the music, and I never asked.

When Eric and I first got together and he told me he was autistic, I was surprised. I’ve known that neurodivergent people tend to gravitate towards one another, but it surprised me, nonetheless. Despite disliking the feeling of his hair being too long and needing frequent haircuts and his absurdly large collection of pocketknives, Eric was a normal guy who enjoyed playing video games. Still, spending time with Eric reassured me there was nothing wrong with me and validated my feelings about autism.

The waiting area is quiet when we arrive, apart from a subtle electrical hum emanating from above, filling the space with a soft monotone buzz. Colourful patterned chairs form a neat U-shape against the walls, with two kid tables in the centre of the space.

A lady in navy blue scrubs sits behind the counter. “Are you here for an appointment?” She asks. I nod and give her my health card.

The lady types briefly, then looks up again. “You’re a bit early, just take a seat. Dr. Avery will come to get you when it’s time,” she says, handing back my health card. I put it in my wallet.

Eric and I sit and wait. “I can’t wait to see the dog show later,” I tell Eric. “You know they’ll be performing tricks?” Eric remains somewhat quiet.

Disappointed at his lack of enthusiasm, I figure he’s just tired. Eric had to get up early and drive through Toronto traffic, after all. This probably explains why his normally chatty self seems disinterested in talking much. I brush off any lingering concerns. *You’re*

reading too much into it.

Eric plays a game on his phone. I try to do the same, but my mind keeps wandering. After today, I might finally understand why I’d throw a fit whenever someone touched the spot under my pinky toe, why I insisted on sleeping with a Hot Wheels firetruck as a kid, why I have difficulty regulating my emotions, why certain clothes feel icky on my skin.

A lady with curly dirty blond hair walks toward me. “Hi, I’m Dr. Avery, and you must be Hannah?” She asks. She’s wearing a floral shirt and long skirt, with a lanyard dangling around her neck. I nod. “I’ll be ready in a few minutes. Are you okay with two students shadowing me for the appointment?” I nod again.

“Great! Well, I’ll be back soon.”

When Dr. Avery returns, she beckons me to follow her.

The room, big and open and beige, has a large table in the middle. “Have a seat,” Dr. Avery tells me. She introduces me to Amar and Grace, two medical students who are sitting across from me in the corner of the table. Dr. Avery sits beside me, but on a different side of the table, so that our bodies form a right angle.

Dr. Avery asks about my childhood and what it was like for me growing up. We talk thoroughly about school, friends (or lack thereof), my interests and hobbies, and social interactions. I interpret a children’s book with few words, pretend to brush my teeth and play make-believe. “Pick 5 things from this Ziplock bag and create a story,” she instructed. When we’re done, Dr. Avery tells me to wait in the seating area and that she’ll have some answers for me soon.

“How’d it go?” Eric asks when I reappear in the room. He’s sitting in a different spot—he must’ve left at some point to pay for extra parking time—than when I left him. He closes the book he’s reading.

“It was good, I think. Long,” I lace my fingers in his hands. He doesn’t object but doesn’t reciprocate either. Whenever we sat together, he would always wrap his arm around my shoulder, and I’d slouch under the broadness of his chest. Maybe being here makes him nervous. “She said to wait like half an hour and then she’d have answers.”

“I’m glad it went well,” was all he said.

Half an hour later, Dr. Avery comes out and motions for me to follow. “I let Amar and Grace go because their shift ended at 12, but come on in.”

We sit in the same place as earlier. Dr. Avery flips over her notes and explains how in certain situations, autism—a spectrum—becomes subjective, but in her professional opinion, she says I warrant a diagnosis.

My gaze unfocuses. *You are autistic.* Eric never had any doubt. Deep in my gut, I didn’t either. Learning about autism gave me answers to questions I didn’t even realize I had. But hearing it from a professional still struck me differently.

“You know, your friendships might look different. You might never understand and relate to people in the way others do, but you’ve got great executive functioning skills, and I think that’ll really make up for it.”

Blood rushes to my face. Somehow, I hadn’t realized—truly, completely realized—how autism is considered a disability. Now that Dr. Avery said it out loud, it hit me with full force how regardless of how hard I tried, my brain was wired to see things differently.

After Dr. Avery finishes explaining, I thank her and leave. When I come back to the waiting area, Eric is gone. I push through the clear front doors thinking maybe he’s waiting outside. Still not seeing him or the car, I pull out my phone and notice a text

message from Eric. *BRB adding time to parking.*

I call Eric. "Hey, I'm done now."

"Okay, just wait there. I'll be right over," Eric says before hanging up.

A couple of minutes later, the Corolla appears around the curb. "So, what'd she say?" He asks when I get in.

"Well, I am autistic." I buckle in my seatbelt.

The deciding factor, according to Dr. Avery, was my inability to socialize in high school which resulted in a brief hospitalization—something Eric already knew. But Eric just nods and nonchalantly enters a parking lot, like I had merely said I wanted chicken nuggets.

"What are you doing?" I ask. We planned to go to a nearby pizza place and then stop at the CNE.

"I'm not feeling up for the CNE today."

Before I can say anything, he pulls out of the parking lot and drives away.

I finally realized something was wrong when we were on the highway, and he'd accelerate—and hit the brakes—so fast my body would jerk back and forth from the constant stop and go. I was worried we'd get in a fender bender.

"What's wrong? Is something wrong?" I had asked Eric.

"Nothing," he told me.

It became very clear that something was wrong when we exited the highway and drove down Erin Mills Parkway. "Are we going to your house?" I ask. We lived a block apart, so it didn't become immediately clear where we were heading.

"No, yours."

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" I ask again. This time, he doesn't say anything. "I don't—"

"Let's just talk at your house," he interrupts. I tell Eric I don't want to talk at my house. "Not *actually* your house," he said, "like at the visitor parking lot."

The silence that followed when we pulled into a parking spot grew excruciatingly long. The uncirculated air, hot and stuffy in the car, feels suffocating. Tears well up. *No, not this. Not now. Not today.*

Finally, he spoke. "I've been thinking and um—" I start to cry. "I'm sorry," he says. "I know the timing isn't great, but I've been thinking about us, about our last conversation, you know, and I don't think it'll work out."

A few weeks ago, I had told Eric I wanted to wait until I was in a committed relationship, something long-term before we had sex. At the time he said he understood and was okay with it. I guess he changed his mind.

"It just...it's making me feel bad about myself and I don't think this relationship will be healthy moving forward." He's not wrong. We want different things.

"I understand," I say. I look up and see his face is red from crying too. "Thank you, for today," I say. "Really."

"I know how difficult an appointment like this can be, and I wanted to be there for you." Snot drips from my nose. "If you need to talk about this, I'm here for you, okay?"

"Do you have a tissue?" I ask. He fumbles around and finds two crinkly McDonald's paper napkins. Eric hands one to me and I blow my nose. "I love you," I whisper. I lean forward and wrap my hands around his neck. I take a breath—breathe in the charcoal body wash—and collect my thoughts. *Keep it together.*

"I love you too," he says. His hands are on the back of my head now. I pull back.

"Can you um drop me off at the park? I'm not ready to go home yet. I'll walk back later."

Eric drops me off at the park and we say our byes. I want to hate him, but I can't. It would've been easier to hate him. But things are rarely easy.

The wood chips baking under the hot August sun crunch as I walk to the swing set. I position myself on the seat and start swinging. When I look up, I see Eric's car driving off.



Leaves crumpled beneath my feet as I purposefully strode across them on the yellowing grass. *Crunch.* Since my diagnosis, I've been trying to be more compassionate towards myself and what I want.

It's hard to believe that just two weeks ago I was out in a t-shirt. Now, the chill breeze of an early autumn morning meant I needed a sweater to be outside. It takes about 10 minutes to walk from my house to Eric's—a route I've walked many times.

I've been meaning to go over, to the little grey house tucked in the crescent of a quiet neighbourhood with a decorative white fence out front. Not to talk to him—I didn't really care to speak to Eric—but to return his burgundy hoodie I borrowed when we first started dating. Before I went to sleep last night, I put it inside a grey Michael's plastic bag. I knotted it twice.

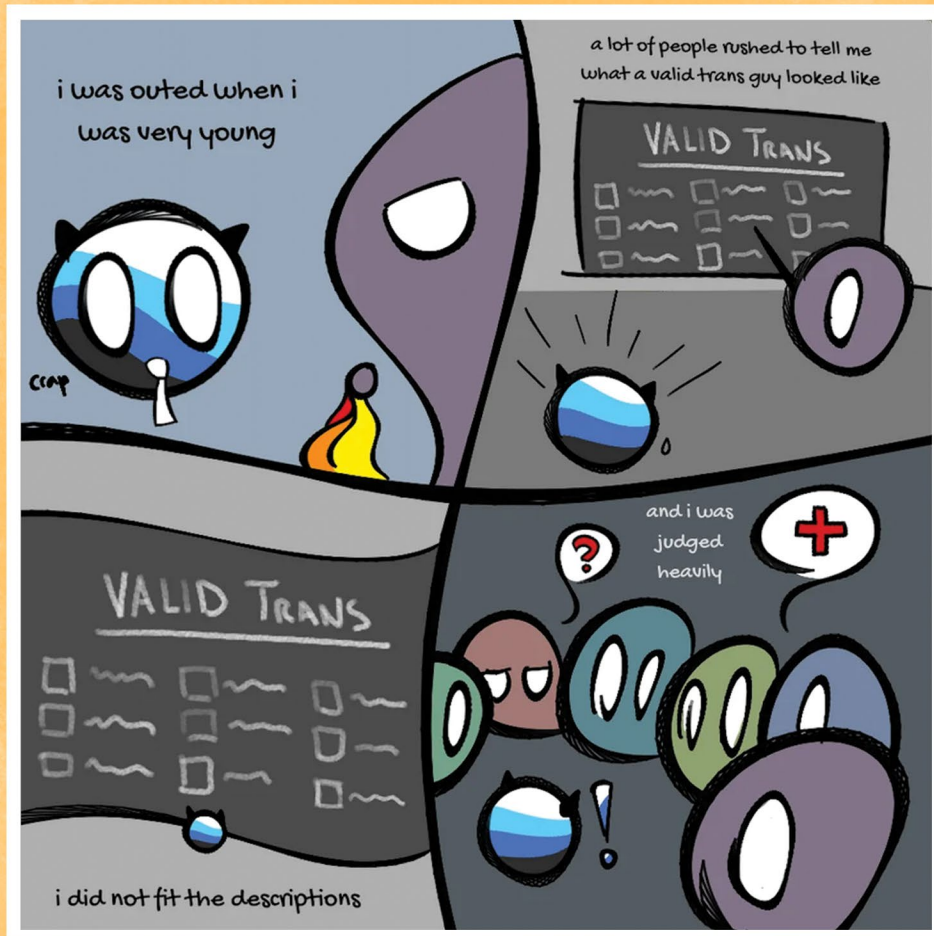
Over the last two summers, I've spent a lot of time at his house. I liked his family, and I knew they liked me too. When his mom visited France, she brought back a little souvenir pencil case and matching pinback button for me. If anything, I wouldn't mind talking to his parents again.

I tiptoe on the porch—I didn't want the creaking of the wood to alert Sass, their black lab—and place the plastic bag on the wood bench across from the front door. Last year, we'd placed our carved Harry Potter pumpkins—mine was the Hogwarts crescent, his being the sorting hat—on this same porch.

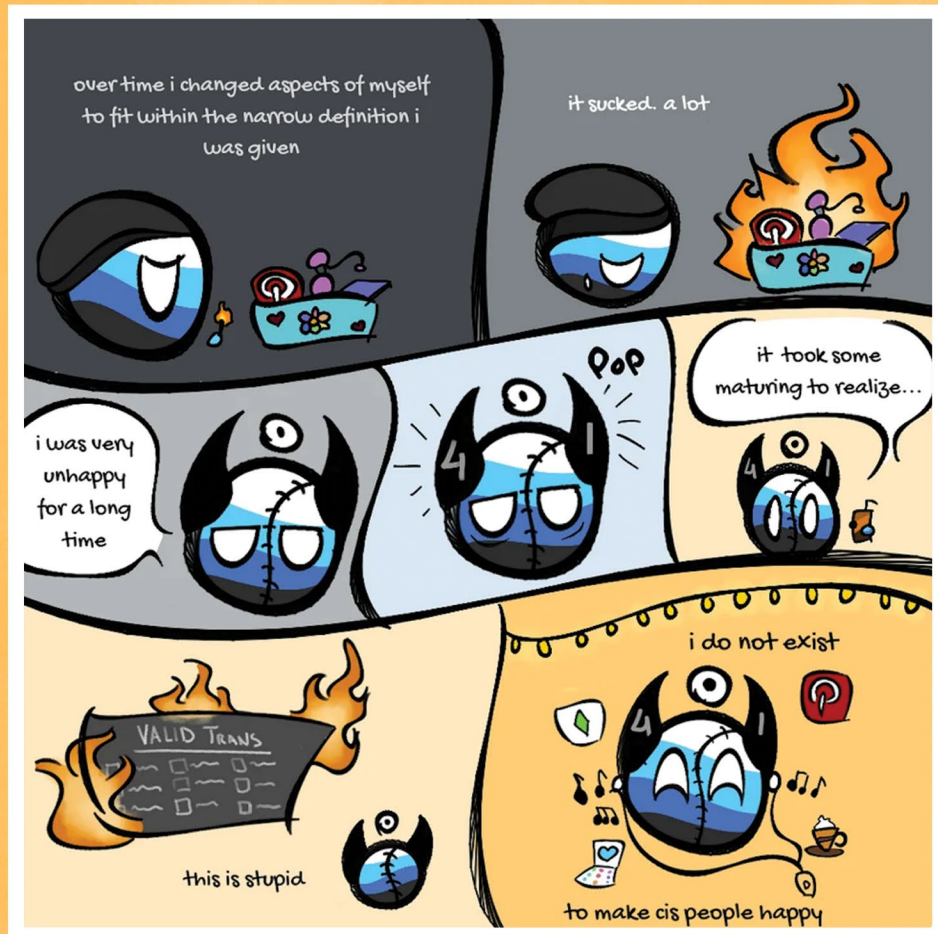
There's something final about returning his hoodie. Maybe it's knowing I wouldn't have a reason—an excuse—to see him again. Maybe it's better this way.

I crunch more leaves on my way home, feeling freer without Eric. I have all the validation I need.





Mister Glass



“Garden of Self: Exploration”

Arwen

Tubz

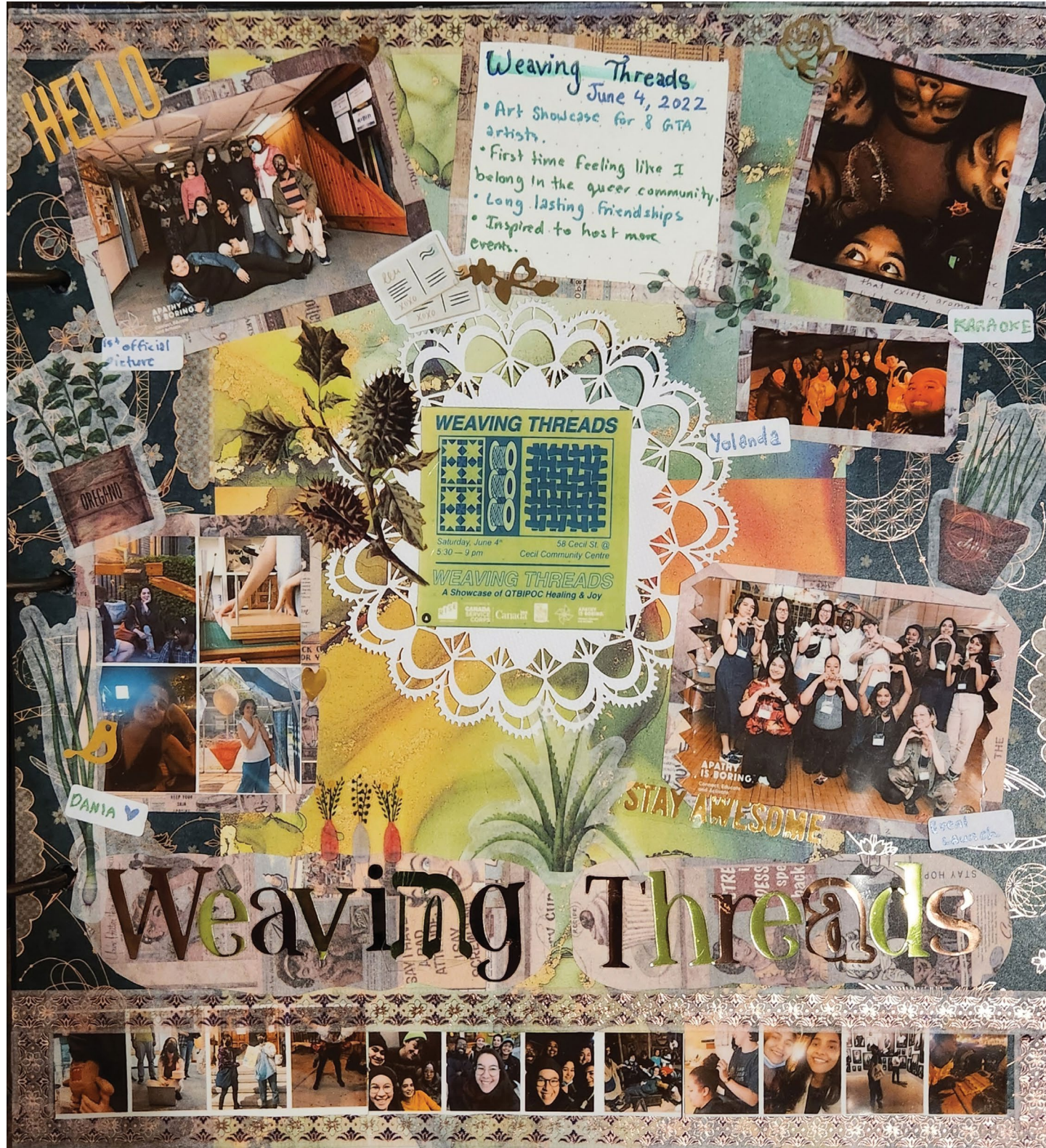
“Weaving Threads”

Weaving Threads is a small grassroots initiative founded by 10 youth who randomly met one day when they wanted to get more involved with the community. After having to stay isolated during COVID, it was a nice change of pace for me to start meeting new people.

Before I joined this program, I never really felt connected to the queer community. For me, navigating queer spaces as a sheltered Pakistani youth was incredibly difficult. I never related to the culture of sex, partying, and drugs I'd find myself in, and for a long time, that's all I thought being queer meant. I was shy, introverted and reluctant to accept my identity.

It wasn't until I met this team that my eyes were opened to the wholesome, geeky and adorably chaotic world of being queer. Upon finding out that the majority of the team identified as QTBIPOC, I wanted to get to know them more. Their infectious energy and genuine passion for change inspired me and the support and love I received from them served as a major catalyst in my healing journey as a queer Muslim. It was also the first space where I felt safe and comfortable asking folks to use they/them pronouns when referring to me and to have that request be so respected and taken seriously meant the world. It was in those moments, working together on this project aimed at highlighting queer joy, that my own emotions of shame, anger and isolation surrounding my identity changed to joy and hope.

Since hosting our community project: Weaving Threads, an art exhibition highlighting queer joy and healing, we've remained close, serving as a huge support in queer circles. This piece is in honour of those beautiful humans who carved a special place for me in their lives. I am a better person having met them and for that I will always be grateful. And especially for Dania Zafar, our beloved member who passed on this year, I hope we're making you proud.





Kris Sokoli

Leanne Bath

“Untitled”



Lamya Abraham

“Void”

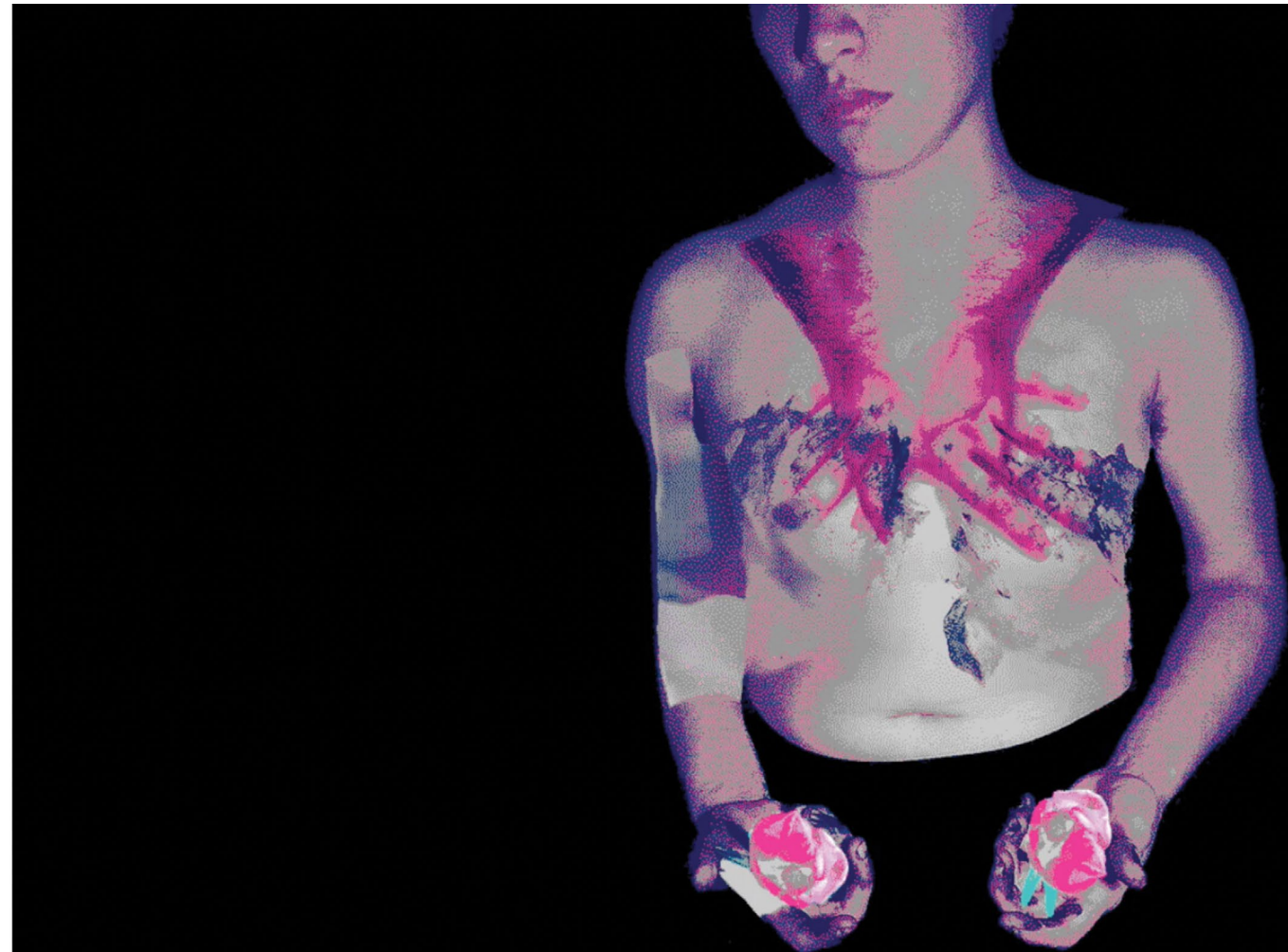
Max Ocampo

“one day you too will bloom”

CLICK HERE
to watch
Max's
animated
video!



Kristine Parungao
“Manic Gender Panic”





Meenakashi Ghadial

“Mourning Wishes Gasoline Kisses”



To the question, "What role does your name play in your life?" one model answered, "My name is complex. My name does not allow me to associate with those that do not make an effort to learn it. If I am anything, it is my name."

To the question, "How does your queerness impact your desi identity, and vice versa?" one model answered, "I actually feel there is no better context to experience queerness [than being desi]. India is a very passionate place. For me, [my queer and desi identities] blend really seamlessly."

Jayan Singh

"Rasa"

"Rasa" is a 2023 series in which the (in)congruency between one's desi identity and queer identity is examined. Models were asked to dress in their favourite cultural outfit and answered questions on how both sides of themselves affected one another.



there is no better context to experience queerness [than being desi]

Esse P



“gossamer string”

“What’s that?”

Her voice startles me, and I nearly drop the paratha on the floor of the bus.

“Um,” I stutter, face flushing. “It’s...uh, it’s like roti with a spiced potato filling.”

She drops into the empty seat beside me and leans in, curious. I resist the urge to glance behind me, where her friends are still chatting and laughing together.

She does this, sometimes—treats me like an old friend, even though we hardly know each other. I don’t really know why, though a small, silly part of me wants to read into it. Maybe she thinks I’m interesting. Maybe she wants to get to know me. Maybe she—maybe she...

My face warms further. I clear my throat to distract myself. “Want some?” I ask.

Her eyes light up. “Yeah!”

I tear off a piece and she nibbles on it. “Whoa, it’s so flavourful. And spicy! I love it!”

I bite back a smile. Oh, white people.

She brushes back her hair from her shoulder, then shifts just a bit closer so that her arm is touching mine.

Electricity races through my veins. I lock every muscle in my body, desperate to sustain contact. I don’t even dare to breathe.

Is she doing this on purpose? Is she—could she be—?

“So, what did you think of the field trip?” she asks.

I take a strained breath. “It was nice,” I say, slightly squeaky. “I like that we got

to wander around town alone for a bit.”

“Me too!” she says. “It felt like we were really independent. I can’t wait to really experience that in university in a couple years, you know? Being on my own, being free to do what I want.”

I hesitate.

I think of my younger sister and brother and how I am the first one they turn to for help navigating the complexities of school and our home and culture. I think of the quiet sacrifices and loneliness in my mother, who has so little in the way of friends and family here, and how I am the one she leans on the most. I think of waking up every morning to a cacophony of voices downstairs, of comforting home-cooked food, of knowing that I don’t have to pretend with them the way I do around the mostly-white people in my school life.

I think of the excitement in my parents’ voices as they imagine my future: becoming a doctor, marrying a man, having children, settling down. I think of the reality of never being able to tell them about who I really am, who I love, what I really want to do with my life. I think of the countless tears I’ve cried in the darkness of my room at the thought of being disowned, cast out, never to exchange a word with them.

University is a future that thrills me and terrifies me in equal measure. Yes, I will obtain freedom, independence, a chance to live my truth in bigger ways than I do now.

And it will reinforce the painful truth: that life will not last forever.

Is it better to have had and lost than to never have had at all? I don’t know. I suspect I won’t know until years from now.

I have been silent too long. I look at her earnest face and know that I can’t explain my thoughts to her in a way she can understand. For people like her, cutting family off when they cause you pain is a necessary step. It is not a reality that can ever come true for me.

I paste a smile onto my lips. “Yeah. I get what you mean.”

She leans back, our shoulders still touching, and pulls out her phone and a pair of earbuds. She offers me one casually; I accept it as though it is a pearl and gently place it in my ear.

Soft guitar music starts to play. I give her a surprised look, and she laughs. “I love soundtracks.”

I grin back. “So do I. This one is beautiful.”

We lapse into comfortable silence. The first fingers of sunset touch the sky, oranges and reds blending into darkness. I gaze out the window, letting the rumble of the bus lull me into a haze.

I am jerked out of my thoughts by a weight falling on my shoulder. I freeze, then slowly turn my head to see her fast asleep against me. Her hair has fallen across her forehead; with light, shaking fingers and a quick glance around the bus to make sure no one is watching, I place it gently behind her ear.

She really is so lovely.

Before I am caught for looking too long at her, I turn my gaze back to the window. Every nerve in my body is a live wire. I focus on the gentle pluck of strings in my ear, trying to let my heart settle.

In a matter of hours, I will be home. I will walk into a living room filled with playful bickering, fond scolding, and loud laughter, the scent of spices heavy in the air. Even as one part of me relaxes in the familiarity of home and family and my people, I will cradle this quivering, longing part of myself in my chest and tell it to go to sleep, as I always do when I return.

But for now, in the quiet of the bus, her body warm against my side, her breath pulsing faintly against my neck, I allow myself to soak into the trembling longing that vibrates in my chest. I revel in the rapid thud of my heart. I allow myself to think, *what if this was real? What if she's leaning against me on purpose? What if she likes me? What if she put in the effort to know me, to know everything that makes me weep and laugh and struggle to catch my breath? What if what if what if?*

The night stretches on, time suspended on a gossamer string. The streetlights flash by, their golden light illuminating her face, still pressed into my shoulder. I swallow the burn of tears, both joyous and grieving.

I breathe. I breathe. I breathe.

And just for a few moments, I close my eyes and let myself want.

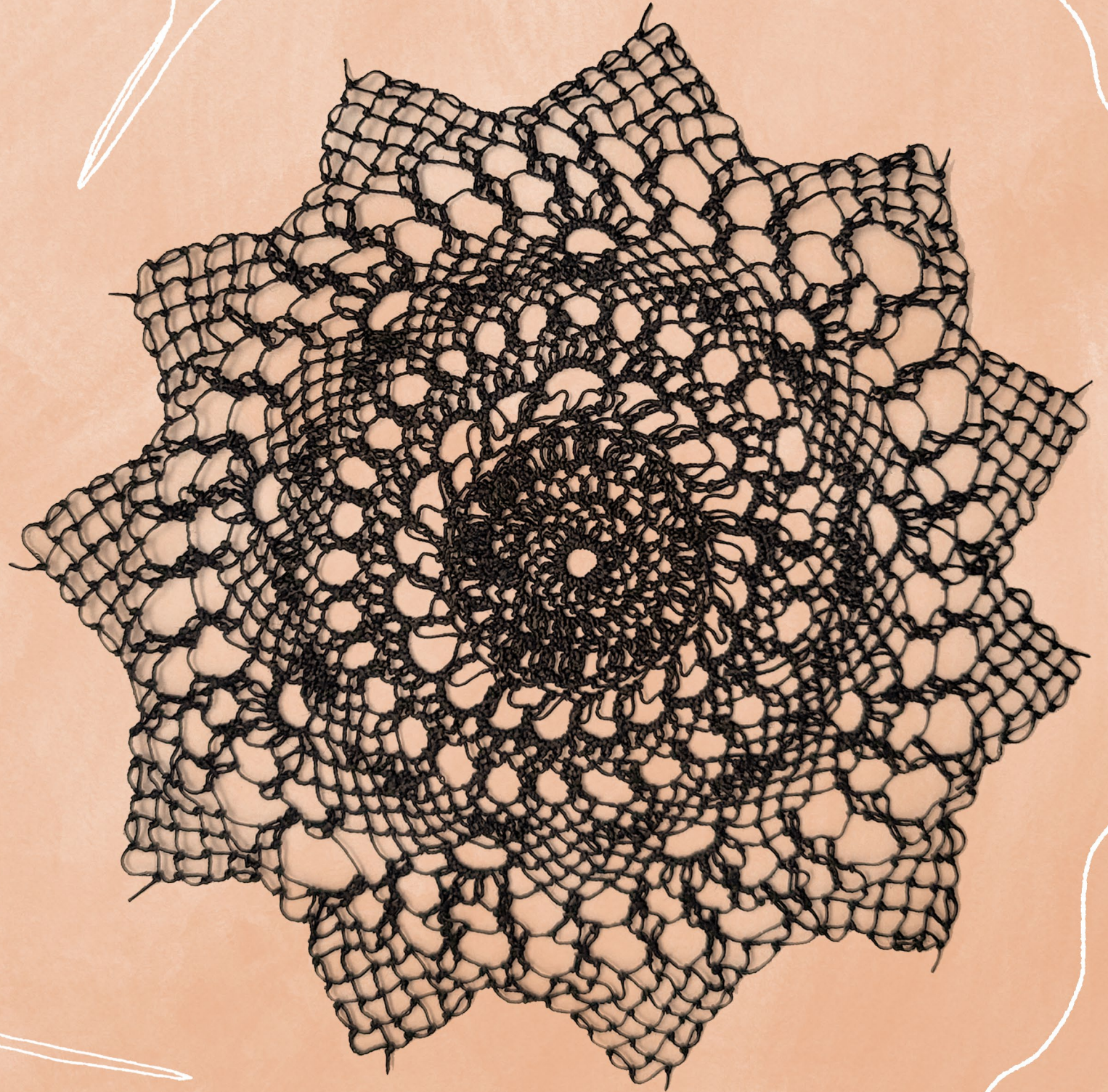
Hope



“Celebrating Diversity”

Stephanie Biczok

“Intricacy in Life”



Veruca Medland

“I Am A Galaxy”

They say the galaxy is ever-expanding
Ever-changing
Ever-multiplying

What they don't know is that I am a galaxy too
Always expanding
Always changing
Always multiplying

A galaxy so beautiful
And so dangerous
That while some fear me
Others welcome me

I encompass the space that is accepted
And the space that isn't
Becoming an explosive supernova in the limited binary
That attempts to destroy our stars

I create a world for myself
Because there is no planet that can contain
The expansive contents
Of my euphoria

I create a world where I am free
Free to dream
Free to breathe
Free to be
A world that exists in a realm of imagination
And a galaxy of possibility

As I look for life on Mars
And stray from life on earth
I discover the other galaxy dwellers
The people who carve out a corner of the world
Where they can determine
The confines and calamities
Of their own celestial eternity

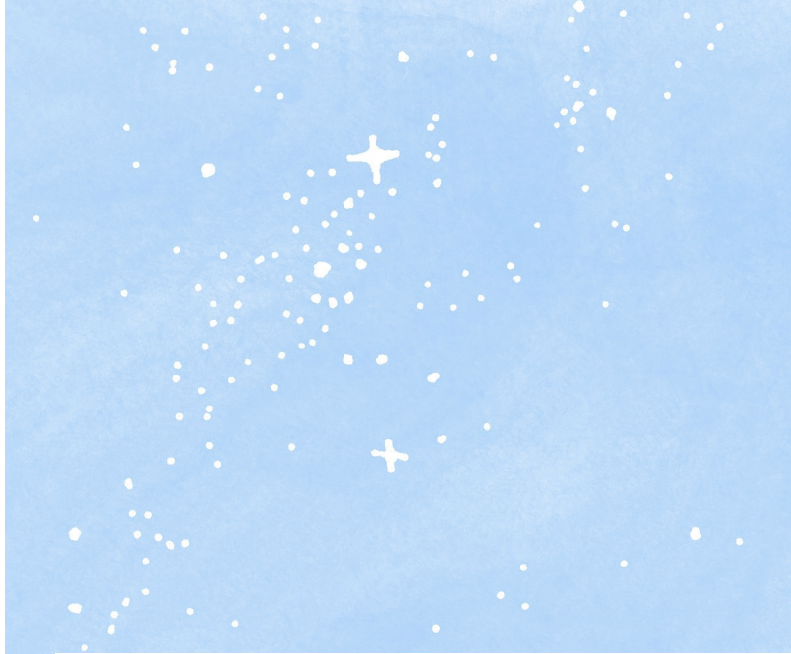
I am a galaxy

Always expanding
Always changing
Always multiplying

I am a galaxy
That dares to exist
Within a limiting universe

I am a galaxy
That refuses to die
And dares to dream

I am
I am
Forevermore
A galaxy



Kanika

Syd Deneau

“Seeing you Still Through The Fire”

yes the war is over, but the ringing over the battlefield drowns the gurgling
preach. the war is over but did anyone read the morning paper, the
headlined news? did anyone know that in the war between the self and his,
that he won?

did they know that the release of tense breath is sometimes the sigh of
defeat.

why do we give a name when asked who we are.

it's like someone died. don't be a stranger.

I fear you killed me for the familiar, don't be a stranger but we never really
knew each other. languid mornings of your choices don't be a stranger but I
became one to myself. mirroring a person I didn't know don't be a stranger
because after it ended I became myself again. but I became the myself who
you don't know because I changed to fit you, don't be a stranger.



“SHE”

Tae

Theodore Forest Quinn

“What Do You See?”

Theo used textbook and article excerpts in this collage. The citations are listed below:

Sadock, B. J. & Sadock, V. A. (2003). 22 Gender identity disorders. In *Kaplan & Sadock's synopsis of psychiatry. Behavioral sciences/clinical psychiatry* (9th ed., pp. 730-738). Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

Anderson, R. T. (2018, March 9). Sex reassignment doesn't work here is the evidence. The Heritage Foundation.





Suman Mondal

“Resurgence to Art”

Maz Lovekin

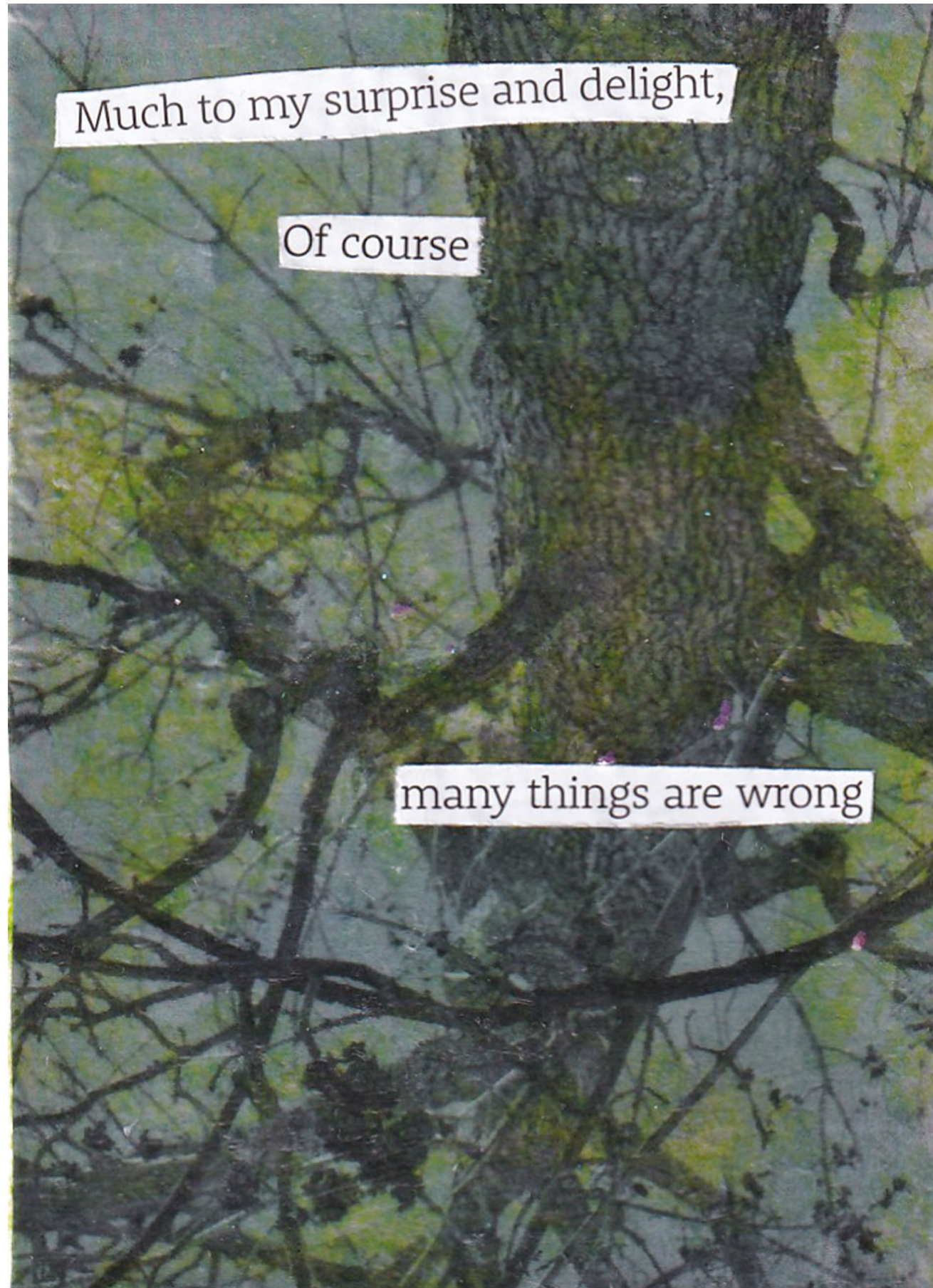
“Fine Line”

I'm in a complicated relationship with myself
I don't know why I want to be someone else
Someone with a body that isn't mine
But at the same time I can't hate it
I don't want to change it
I like the way my waist is high
And the way my voice is too
But I hate my chest
No I don't want boobs
But there are some days that I do
I don't want to have to choose
Between one or the other
Dresses or suits
Pink or blue
Each trying to pull me to their side
But neither feels right
I just want to wear what I like
And have no one blink an eye
When I change my name
Or call myself they
Existing in a way I don't need to explain
It's for me to explore
Walking out the binary doors
Into a world filled with fluidity and acceptance
No more labels or expectations
Just honest self expression
It's a beautiful thing non conformity
That makes me love who I am
Walking a fine line between two worlds
Finally not caring that I don't fit in





Chris Yao



Biographies + Artist Statements

Anonymous

"Stack of Books :: As myself feel colourful."

Arha "Dead dolls"

Arwen "Garden of Self: Exploration"

"This was my first time using a loom, resulting in an earthy garden of self reflection and expression. The creation was a meditative experiment of ups and downs, up and down, knot and repeat. Letting it grow naturally. It was greatly inspired by the trees and water that sustain life. Making this work shows me how far I have grown, from being afraid to speak, to daring to try something new."

[@arwenskiartistry](#) is a queer interdisciplinary artist who embraces cartoons, nature and talking mental health. I love working with my hands - in woodwork, textiles and trash - and expressing ideas visually. Currently I am studying Illustration at OCAD with plans to become an art therapist in the future

Candance Cosentino "Flora On Fire"

"Flora On Fire', a 13 second self-portrait by Candace Cosentino."

Candace Cosentino is a queer visual artist based in Mississauga, Canada. Always creative at heart, Candace is now a photographer by trade producing multimedia visuals for local and international brands.

www.candacecosentino.com
Instagram/TikTok: [@candacecos](#)

Chris Yao

"I doodle what I like, usually something that makes me laugh. In photographs, I additionally look for perspectives that aren't often noticed, or I look for something helpful, or something silly. I hope that what I make makes someone else laugh or smile too."

Chris is an art adventurer whose work celebrates and explores their experience as a neurodivergent transgender person of colour. Their work centers zines, clay, and exploring their joy. Their practice is titled 'Maker Meyao' to reflect and celebrate their growth with and love of cats.

Colleen Ford "Kindred Spirits"

"The beautiful smiles of my chosen family are captured in my photography. In difficult times, the people in my photos have brought me comfort, whether it was because I was struggling with work, my sexuality, or my personal battles. Their presence in my life is truly a blessing."

Colleen (she/they) is a multidisciplinary creative of Afro-Trinbagonian descent. Born in Scarborough and raised in Brampton, Colleen has always been surrounded by diverse cultures and stories. Using visual storytelling to connect with communities is something they're passionate about. Colleen is committed to creating more in the near future to inspire the next generation of Black artists.

You can follow their creative journey on Instagram at [@elated.co](#)

Denelle C

"How do you identify? Select all that apply."

"The work that I have created is a poem that expresses the way I see my gender identity. This is something that has taken me years to get to and will probably change throughout my lifetime. But as of right now my gender identity is very much rooted in my cultural identity as well as how I feel I fit into the general society. Poetry is something that I have always loved, I looked through my old journal from the "writing queer rituals" session I did with Youthline earlier this year and it inspired the work I am submitting today."

Eartha “Mama”

“My name is Eartha, this piece is dedicated to my mom, a woman who inspires me everyday to love, to create and to put good into the world. I am a Toronto based artist who is an advocate for mental health while on my own healing journey. I am grateful to work and create on native land. You can find more of my work online under Eartha Mk.”

Eartha Mk is a Toronto based artist and musician. She is currently working on her next project, making accessible art to invite all to embrace their own crooked smiles. Find her music and art online, and look out for her next release.

Elie Assaf “Gender-Fluid”

“The world we have inside of us is as complex as the world outside. Being who you are, and accepting your uniqueness is a process full of ups and downs. These words are what comes out when growth and identity come to mind. I hope you enjoy it.”

I am a visual artist and designer who also experiments with crafts, music, poetry, film-making, and photography.

I’m a Syrian-Canadian artist based in Hamilton, Ontario.

I have been experimenting and practicing with different arts since early childhood and is fully self-taught. Art has been a passion for me and has been a great influence that affected their quality of life and their freedom of self-expression.

I grew up in Syria and experienced the many ups and downs of childhood, political conflict, friendships, civil war, loss, growth, immigration, stigmatization, love, and so on. The totality and intensity of these experiences prompted a need for many outlets and creative expressions. This manifested in pencil artworks, painting, poetry, calligraphy, experimenting with mixed media, songwriting, photo editing, and many more.

Esse P “gossamer string”

“This piece is a mix of fiction in terms of the actual events of the story, but also draws on real personal experiences with how I navigate queerness (being a lesbian), family, and cultural dynamics (though I perhaps didn’t have the same level of insight in high school that my main character does). For many people of colour, cutting off family or being isolated from them is not something that is as doable as many recommend, even though it might help us. Family and community are extremely important parts of our identity, even if they hurt us in irreparable ways. It’s hard to reconcile that with the perspectives of white queer people, and I wanted to show that in some ways.”

Gladys Lou “Recovery”

Gladys Lou is a Hong Kong-Canadian artist and writer with an HBA in Art & Art History and Psychology from the University of Toronto and Sheridan College. She is currently interested in bookbinding and zine-making. She was the winner of the Broken Pencil Magazine’s Indie Illustrator’s Deathmatch in 2021.

Hannah “After”

Hope “Celebrating Diversity”

“Celebrating Diversity is a depiction of my journey of self-discovery, navigating the intersections of Autism and bisexuality in my adolescence. The central figure, a maternal symbol, represents the diverse Halton community— construction worker, nurses, firefighters, etc; contributing to my self-acceptance. From this diverse background, I emerged proudly queer and neurodivergent in my 20s. The 2SLGBTQ+ rainbow in the middle of the painting signifies acceptance, surrounded by collaboration, reflecting Halton’s collective effort to unite and dismantle prejudices. Intertwined green ropes symbolize hope, illustrating community collaboration for change. The artwork highlights my path to embracing uniqueness, emphasizing the importance of a chosen 2SLGBTQ+ family for support and empowerment.”

Hope is an emerging neurodivergent and queer artist. In 2018, she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from OCAD University, specializing in Drawing and Painting. Since then, Hope has garnered recognition and support, receiving grant funding from the Ontario Arts Council, and Starter Company Plus. Her focus shifted to realistic animal paintings, and she has sold over 400 custom pieces globally.

In 2021, Hope completed the Mural Routes program, “Introduction to Mural Art,” sparking a passion for creating community-centric art. Commissioned for vibrant animal murals and vinyl wraps in the Greater Toronto Area, she aims to raise environmental awareness. Hope’s unique approach involves capturing the soul of each animal, emphasizing their emotions through the expressive power of their eyes. Her ultimate goal is to foster community engagement and spark meaningful conversations through her public art.

Jayan Singh “Rasa”

“Rasa’ is a 2023 series in which the (in)congruency between one’s desi identity and queer identity is examined. Models were asked to dress in their favourite cultural outfit and answered questions on how both sides of themselves affected one another.

To the question, “What role does your name play in your life?” one model answered, “My name is complex. My name does not allow me to associate with those that do not make an effort to learn it. If I am anything, it is my name.”

To the question, “How does your queerness impact your desi identity, and vice versa?” one model answered, “I actually feel there is no better context to experience queerness [than being desi]. India is a very passionate place. For me, [my queer and desi identities] blend really seamlessly.”

Jayan Singh is a photographer and poet based in Toronto. Through his art, he aims to explore the intersectionality of his queerness and his South Asian identity, as well as the intersectionality of those around him. You can find more of his work at [@girls_nfilm](#) on Instagram.

Kanika

A self-proclaimed storyteller who finds peace in splattering paint on canvases. Best describes her work to life and her work as “a bit too much”.

Kris Sokoli

“This is my experience on being trans and how I’ve grown from hating being trans and forcing myself to be as feminine as possible to loving and accepting the boy I am on the inside :)”

Kristine Parungao “Manic Gender Panic”

“Self expression is such a crucial part of being an individual. Taking charge of how you present yourself to the world can be such a joyful act, especially when it’s your first time bleaching your hair in your childhood home. There is absolute glee in being young and doing affirming self care, even if it’s uneven in the back, and even if you might have permanently stained the bathroom counter.”

Hi! My name is Kristine (she/her) and I am a Filipino-Canadian, animator and illustrator. Three fun facts about me: I am the aquariest aquarius, I love to collect small guys (figurines), and I always have at least one speck of glitter on me at all times. Visit me at [@kristweens](#) on instagram and take a look at my animation work here: <https://vimeo.com/818518079> Have a lovely day! :)

Leanne Bath “Untitled”

Max Ocampo “one day you too will bloom”

“This art piece shows the difficulties faced by transgender youth. To show how everything around us can make us held back from being ourselves. But that no matter what happens, we can bounce back and become stronger. That despite these restrictions, our true selves inevitably emerge and blossom from within.”

Panamanian-born and currently residing in Ontario, Max is an emotional creator who channels his inner world into art. Within the canvas of his work, he explores a spectrum of emotions, confronts fears, and navigates the nuances of personal struggles. Discover more of Max’s art on Instagram [[@maxoestribi](#)]. Dive into his creations and see the world through his eyes.

Maz Lovekin “Fine Line”

“Coming to terms with my non binary identity was difficult. I found it hard to put into words how I felt. There was so much pressure from within myself to pick a side. When I finally accepted that I didn’t need to, that I could be all things contradictory and opposite all at once, I became free from the gender binary. This poem is about that journey.”

Maz Lovekin is a photographer and poet, using both mediums as a means of self expression. They are currently in their 2nd year at Sheridan College studying photography. [@mazthelast](#)

Meenakshi Ghadial

“Mourning Wishes Gasoline Kisses”

“In this narrative painting, I create a life-size multi-figured scene to explore the nuances of marriage and love in three generations of my Sikh Punjabi family. The figures all reside in their own respective mundane spaces, but are placed together to reflect the intersectionalities of my identity. Almost 200 miles away from my family and partner, inanimate objects are included to explore the materialities that exist to connect me to them, and them to each other. I depict intimate moments of both solitude and affection to unveil the various modalities of marriage that engulf my existence, in both my introspective and shared tender moments.”

Meenakshi Ghadial is an emerging artist from Brampton, Ontario currently situated in Katarokwi/Kingston. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honours from Queens University, and received the Elizabeth Greenshields Award in Drawing and Painting in 2022. She is a figurative oil painter who explores themes of marriage, love, intimacy, and queer identity. Through the use of current documentation as well as archival family material, Meenakshi creates narratives that explore the particularities of intergenerational experiences. Her inspiration draws from her experience navigating her queer identity as a second-generation immigrant in her family. A motif present in her current work presents the car as a safe liminal space for queer people of colour. It functions outside of heteronormative temporalities and becomes a safe space. You can find her work on her website (www.meenakart.com) and on her instagram ([@meenakart](#)).

Mister Glass

Nadia Lofaro “hello”

“The struggle to communicate often results in fleeting moments of lost opportunities that would have otherwise condoned the fostering of potentially meaningful relationships. A monologue at the beginning of the piece depicts this hardship as well as a sense of regret that aggressively takes over soon after due an inability to talk to someone even though the desire is there. Ambiguous language was purposefully utilized to afford the listener the opportunity to adopt their own interpretation which resonates with them, although the inspiration behind the piece was romantic feelings held towards a same-sex person. Included within the piece is a representation of the fear of rejection held and the feelings of shame associated with having feelings related to queerness due to a predominantly heteronormative upbringing.”

Nadia Lofaro is a student enrolled at McMaster University in the Media Arts program. Nadia’s main practices lie in sound art and video games, with a strong emphasis on an application of queer theory to their work. Interested in combining elements that might otherwise seem unattractive in unique ways to create pieces that are fascinating yet somewhat unsettling, Nadia is inspired by the true meaning behind the term “ugly”. Nadia is determined to recontextualize the “ugly” in a beautiful way through their work as an artist. Their hope is to provoke thought and generate discussion regarding the influence of normative structures within society and how they might be dismantled.

rabia choudhary “ہمارا وعدا”

“the title of this piece is ہمارا وعدا; hamara wada or our promise. it is an exploration and depiction of the interconnected nature of healing in community and the responsibilities we bear to one another, the land, and all living and nonliving things.”

rabia choudhary is an interdisciplinary artist, educator and activist. through their art, rabia explores the themes and intersections of pain, gender identity, disability, sexuality, religion, race, community care, radical love and healing. you can experience more of rabia’s work on instagram [@misguided soul](#) or on their website rabiachoudhary.ca

Rosie Arulanadam “Who’s Home”

“As a daughter of immigrants who has lived home all my life, I am beginning to feel constricted living in my childhood home and I am craving freedom. I question what home really is and whether it is a place or a feeling.”

[@rosie.arul](#) on Instagram

Siki Soberetonari “Seki Siki Lasa”

Stephanie Biczok “Intricacy in Life”

“The photo series you are looking at is what I consider my growth in textile arts and growth as a human being.

The air balloon keychain is a friendship bracelet. Friendship bracelets are quite a common activity among young girls, and many learn how to do them at day camp, myself included. The pink piece is a needle tatted necklace design. Tatting is a pure form of lace that requires only a needle, thread and scissors and dates back to as early as ancient Egypt. The black piece is Armenian needle lace. Another pure form of lace, one that is struggling to stay alive in the lacemaking community considering how niche it is.

As I came into my identity as pansexual in my teen years and had experiences that shaped my perspective of the world as a queer artist, I felt the need for more intricate and niche hobbies to express how complex I saw myself becoming. This is when I moved away from friendship bracelets and into the lacemaking area of textiles, and where I discovered tatting and later, Armenian needle lace. As I grew older and became more intricate and complex, so did my textile art.

I am no longer a little girl just making candy-striped friendship bracelets at lunchtime to give to my mom or friends; I am now a grown adult, proud of my identity and wanting to express it in the ways that make me feel most complete.

I’m young, I’m queer, I’m a lacemaker. Most of all, I’m who I want to be.”

Stephanie is a textile artist who has spent many many hours creating various textile arts including friendship bracelets, tatting lace, and Armenian needle lace among other things. She exhibits her art in a way that matches how complex she feels as a human being. If you want to see more of her textile and lacemaking journey, feel free to follow her on Instagram [@needle.needle.needle](#)

Suman Mondal “Resurgence to Art”

“The piece is titled Resurgence to Art. The meaning behind the piece is definitely more significant than the actual photo. This is because my interest or passion for art was never there, and it was like this for a long time. Ever since middle school, I was very much put down for my artistic abilities. This translated into me losing an interest in arts-based actions and spaces. Through a weaving workshop, held by YouthOrgnize, and facilitated by my dear friend, brought a new sense of joy to creating art pieces. Now, creating pieces of art, through weaving, not only brings a sense of pleasure, but I feel relief from all the stressful aspects of life; thus, becoming an escape. I am glad that a queer space was responsible for bringing this joy back to my life like this.”

My name is Suman Mondal (they/he), and I am a first-year, Sociology-PhD student. My research interest lies in the construction of gender and sexuality and social-political movements from a non-western perspective. I have just taken up weaving, which has helped relieve many areas of stress in my life. I am extremely excited to have fallen back in love with making artwork, especially crafting textiles.

Syd Deneau “Seeing you Still Through The Fire”

“A short poem about mourning a relationship that was detrimental to me in nature.”

Syd Deneau is a 19 year old photographer based in Toronto, Ontario. They are currently attending Toronto Metropolitan University for the Image Arts program.

Their work looks at darker contemporary stylings as their inspiration comes primarily from gothic fiction, horror media and thematic descriptions of death or the afterlife. Their work pushes these inspirations through a contemporary portraiture lense as they work towards a career in fine art photography.

[@snapdrg0nphotography](#) on ig
<https://withkoji.com/@snapdrg0n> website link

Tae “SHE”

“This is a self-portrait entitled SHE. Up until I figured out I was trans I was never comfortable being labeled a woman or a girl; It just never felt right. I created this image as a representation of what has been carved into my body and soul for almost my entire life. Now trying to understand my new self and move on, I am still left with the carved words SHE upon my skin.”

Instagram: [pdf.tae.captures](#)

Website: <https://taelalonde.wixsite.com/taelalonde>

Theodore Forest Quinn “What Do You See?”

“This piece was made as a final project for a Disability Studies course in my last year of Undergrad. At the time, I was on the journey of fully embracing my trans identity, had recently started HRT, and my top surgery date was weeks away. Included is one of the last texts from my father, along with an excerpt from an anti-trans article he sent me. Most of the materials are repurposed, including the medication bottle, pages from an outdated Psychology textbook, the craft paper that covers the canvas, discarded threads from my other work, HRT needles, and an old queer protest pin. The piece broadly speaks to the pathologization of queer and trans people throughout history. On a more personal level, it speaks to trans resistance, resilience, and catharsis.”

Theo is a white, able-bodied, neurodivergent, trans, queer person currently living on/benefiting from Treaty 3 land. As a Psychology Researcher, his focus is on improving trans healthcare. He also runs a small business on the side ([@threadedthriftshop](#)). In his down time, Theo enjoys thrifting, spending time outdoors, baking, reading, and going to community events.

Tubz “Weaving Threads”

“This piece is special because it’s an homage to my dear friend Dania and my struggles with belonging within the queer community.”

Tubz is a multimedia artist who loves the art of putting random stuff together i.e scrapbooking. Their passion comes from wanting to preserve and immortalize memories through art.

Veruca Medland “I Am A Galaxy”

“This poem intersects the two ideas of a galaxy and gender. Earlier this year, I discovered that I was nonbinary. My coming out process started off slow and hasn’t made much progress, but as I’ve worked on becoming more comfortable in my gender identity, I’ve realized that this truly is a process that will never stop. As stressful as it’s been to come to terms with being nonbinary, I’m slowly learning to love myself for who I am as I discover the nuances of gender non-conformity. I remain “Always expanding. Always changing. Always multiplying.” and I wanted to express that with the extended metaphor of the galaxy being an entity that astronomers are still discovering more about each day.”

Veruca Medland is a nonbinary bisexual teen who writes poems on serious illness, gender/sexuality, teenage thoughts and more. They also dabble in writing fictional stories from the fantasy and science fiction genres. Veruca is an avid reader with a focus on 2SLGBTQ+ stories, chaotic teens in fantasy situations and found family. This is their first published poem and have previously published a short story in The Quiet, an anthology by Polar Expressions Publishing. They reside in Mississauga with their two sisters, an overly excited golden retriever and an endless TBR.



Funders



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