

GENDER AGENDA



myth

/mɪθ/

noun

1.

a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.

"ancient Celtic myths"

2.

a widely held but false belief or idea.

MYTH

2024

This year's project is

This theme allowed us to explore the gendered experience, for, as we all know, one of the greatest social myths is gender. But, other smaller myths affect our everyday too. For example, a specific aim of ours is to tackle the myth that feminism is an exclusively female ideology. Ultimately, everyone experiences gender, and this zine is intended to be a distillation of those experiences.

MYTH

There's been months of build up to the making of this zine: countless events, weeks of dedication from our committee members, and the invaluable input from our collaborators and contributors. We'd like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who has helped us with this project and with navigating the growing pains of the last two years.

We are truly trying to build something that is more than a publication. We hope that Gender Agenda is and will continue to be a community, a movement, a mythic presence in Cambridge.

We hope you enjoy this zine and much as we enjoyed creating it.

Love and solidarity as always,
Maddie, Elise and GA xoxo

NOW GET READING!

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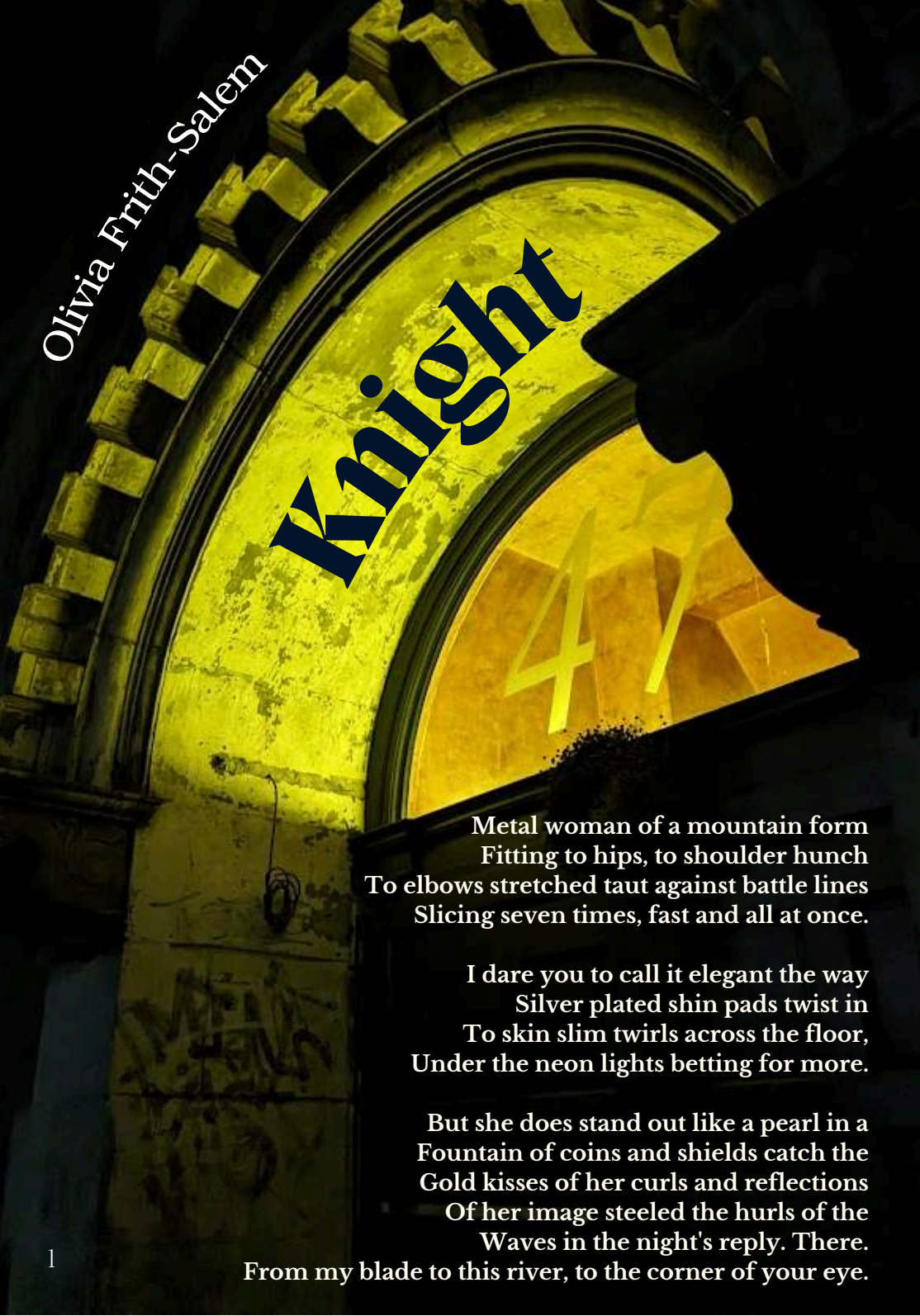
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Olivia Frith-Salem

Knight

Metal woman of a mountain form
Fitting to hips, to shoulder hunch
To elbows stretched taut against battle lines
Slicing seven times, fast and all at once.

I dare you to call it elegant the way
Silver plated shin pads twist in
To skin slim twirls across the floor,
Under the neon lights betting for more.

But she does stand out like a pearl in a
Fountain of coins and shields catch the
Gold kisses of her curls and reflections
Of her image steeled the hurls of the
Waves in the night's reply. There.
From my blade to this river, to the corner of your eye.

Kali and the Supercomputer: Cyberspace and Miasma as the Mythic Feminine

Tiamat gathered together her creation
And organised battle against the gods
- Second Tablet of the Enuma Elish

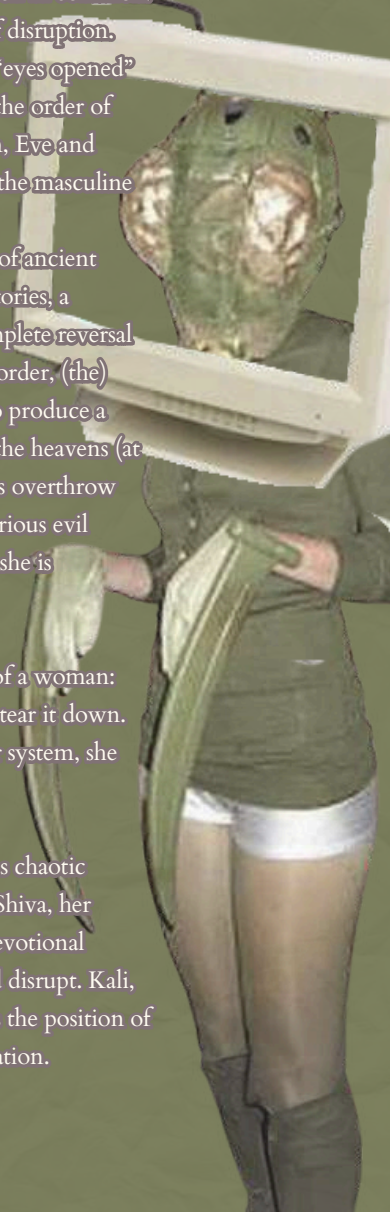
Olivia Kelly

The Babylonian salt-demon and the pronged star of chaos have much in common. Women, in myth and narrative, are first and foremost the drivers of disruption. When Eve dared to pick from the tree of knowledge and have her “eyes opened” so that she “shall be as god, knowing good and evil”, she disrupted the order of Yahweh and was cast from Eden. From the moment of her creation, Eve and womankind were denied participation in the process of creation as the masculine God fashioned her from Adam’s rib. Men create, women destroy.

Amanda Vasjkop compares Genesis’ codification of women to that of ancient Babylon’s own creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*: “In both creation stories, a presumably male creator creates without the aid of a female – a complete reversal of biological reality,” (Vasjkop, 2005) she writes. Absu, “the first in order, (the) begetter,” mates with the Demiurge Tiamat, the salt-water deity, to produce a dynasty of lower Gods, who begin to disrupt the peaceful order of the heavens (at one point, raping their own mother). In response, other lower Gods overthrow the pacifist Absu and send Tiamat into a violent rage. She begets various evil entities such as the Hydra, the Savage Dog and Qingu. Eventually, she is conquered and violently decapitated.

In both tales, the divine order is disrupted primarily by the actions of a woman: either she begets ‘problem children’ or herself takes the initiative to tear it down. As Vasjkop writes, “When a female character threatens this order or system, she becomes the chaos agent in the story.”

Other parallels can be drawn; inevitably, the discussion of women as chaotic harbingers of death and demise will bring us to Kalika. Consort to Shiva, her terrifying form and violent nature supposedly inspired the acts of devotional Thuggee gangs, roaming the Indian countryside, to rape, pillage and disrupt. Kali, while undoubtedly tied to these connotations, additionally occupies the position of a nature goddess, symbolising its eternal preservation against civilisation.



The supposedly immortal creation of man's civilised order, built to endure and exalt his patriarchal being, cannot withstand mother earth. Nature is eternal, unlike man. He codifies it as 'anything but me', its form too complex to truly comprehend – except through the matrix of his most hated possession: the female.

Maggie Roberts's *MIASMA* delves into the dichotomy of order and chaos through the medium of waste. "A waste incineration plant," she writes, "is a chemical reactor that destroys some but converts other substances to hazardous dust, slag, filter ash. 400,000 new substances are created each year. New compounds are transposed into an uncontrolled field experiment with unknown consequences... Once elemental, waste recognises no boundaries". (Roberts, 2018) Roberts raises the example of dead, miasmatic flowerbeds created by "failed water hyacinth terraforming experiments in Capetown". The failure or success of man's projects to create and subdue nature don't simply destroy it. The order is always disrupted by the chaotic perseverance of nature in the end, even if Kali's new form is repugnant, smelly and endemic. The microbial beings in waste, its dazzling growth over the surface of our earth and its seeping into urban spaces is not the death of nature, but its adaptation. In a sense, "the very science and technology that allows human history to intervene in geologic time... also allows us to know entities that many religions, indigenous cultures... have long known." Behind fragile order, chaos continues as a constant. The woman, man's most hated 'other', his wastage in the divine masculine creation myth, also remains. She cannot be dispelled from Eden.



Miasma- Maggie Roberts (2018-)

Sadie Plant describes the female myth as Zero. She is the null, the negation. She is genitally inverted, a black hole that absorbs order and births chaos. This does not mean she is nothing, she is only perceived as such. Plant asks us whether the patriarchal, late-capitalist reality we exist in, dominated today by cyberspace and the encroaching spectre of AI, has led us to see Zero as the absence of One, rather than another entity in itself. Zero "stand[s] for nothing and make[s] everything work." (Plant, 1998) Without Zero, the One could not define itself; it could not birth its own order; it would itself be Zero.

The representation of Zero as nothingness; of Tiamat and Eve as the male-created mothers; of Kali as "anything but man" is a negation of women's creative identity. When we cannot comprehend Chaos, we see it as destructive, but as we begin to understand that incomprehensibility, we come to understand its creative potential. This potential is frightening to 'eternal order' of patriarchy, like Tiamat's rampage frightening the divine order of the gods.

Fear over AI replicating itself is potent. Just as man's great projects of conquering nature beget wastage that defies our standards of good living, cyberspace and communications give rise to the fear of something 'other' lurking within the code. Mankind's terrestrial sovereignty over its own creation is threatened by the potential for a self-replicating being: an AI that thrives in the chaos of algorithm we do not always understand. The plant-based miasma and Asimov's nightmare are one and the same – an entity that defies man's order of what should be as he has ordained it. As Maggie Roberts writes, "the economy upon which the One is founded requires Zero for its reproduction; (but) Zero is auto-productive—reproducing itself in a loop that does not need to pass through the Other since it is the locus of difference itself." This matrix, the cyberspace, facilitates a rejection of patrilinealism. The Zero reproduces through itself. It is an affront to the man-woman process of creation, like woman-woman or woman-nothing. It is disruption of order.

Man has created an order from cyberspace and his conquest of nature. Yet, the purusha of chaos means that these children of circuitry and irrigation, begotten of the male as Tiamat and Eve were, inevitably rise to contest their father – they become something he doesn't understand, something he resents.

Miasma and AI are the "reemergence of the feminising other", an "uncanny guest" of pulsating life that defies the patrilineal.

Kali, Eve, and Tiamat sit at their supercomputer. They are playing minesweeper.



Nanny

Kaya Imogen

I want to be held.
How lush it was
A nanny's love



We never truly can take up someone's space
but we are interwoven. She knew me. Brought out my tongue.
Bathed me in *Blodeuwedd's* petals

Dirty mochyn!

To match your example. Pearl painted nails bit of lippy
Compact.

Let me show you my dance!
When the sun goes down
You know, the colour deepens
It bleeds
A rebellion. Red sky at night

My mam, a warning
of haemorrhage
Our mill,
the Old Women



Blackbeatles

Kaya Imogen

'For this is part at least of what industrialism has done for us...
this is where it all led – labyrinthe slums and dark back
kitchens with sickly, ageing people crawling round and round
them like blackbeatles. It is a kind of duty to see and smell such
places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should
forget they exist. Though perhaps it is better not to stay there
too long.'

— George Orwell, 'Road to Wigan Pier'

Blackbeatles burrow
In that white house
With the white picket fence
Underground

Infest the nation's carpet

It's sticky
Sodden with marmalade

Smelling sweet
Like citrus
Like fried chips

Like rot
No
Like mam's love.

Hiraeth.
The small of Her back.
Glacial.
We're one flesh
But She holds me



Orla Sprosen

I know one thing and that
is that I'm not my mother





The shitter
is no place
to learn

The Reserved Black Woman

Charde Christian

I am angry.

I am not allowed to be angry.

So, I am quiet...sometimes I do not know if it is for them or for me.

I am allowed to be quiet.

I find myself at my table again, pen in hand, blank expanse before me.

So, I write to her,

the wise and the brave; the assertive and the dominant; the angry and the bitter;
the shy and the timid; the loved and lover

I write to her, and her, and her, and her, and her,

because we are not a monolith

I tell her that we do not need to be palatable. We do not need to be marketable.

We simply need to be.

Deny their damaging falsehoods.

Deny their attempts to cement a link between blackness and hypersexuality
through the commodification of black bodies.

Deny the notion that black women's inner lives and outward voices are not
valid, simply because they are far more nuanced than comfortably digestible.
Deny the perception that black women can only get attention or acclaim by
limiting the complexities and multidimensionality of their identity.

How dare they!

No longer do I choke down their lies. I retch and heave at their wretched lies. I
pause –

I return my pen to its holder and withdraw from the table,
and I hide.

For that is who I am.

Forever waiting for the day that I do not.

Ten to One

The Experience of One Woman at Cambridge in the 1960s

Henrietta Letts

I received an offer for a place at a women's college – there were no mixed colleges then of course – in 1965. The school was delighted; I was terrified. My father looked at his bank balance and observed that this sort of education was an expensive luxury if, as a girl, you were later to get married and look after a family. My mother said that I might meet a nice rich husband, especially as the ratio of men to women was roughly 10 to 1.

Of course, no such conversation with my perfectly nice, if somewhat bemused, parents ever really took place, but it does represent the prevailing attitude to educating women in the 1960s. Women were to be the supporters of men and the carers of children. They could probably benefit from higher education, but if they had a career it had to be fitted around the needs of their families and was secondary to those of their male partners. Nobody usually said this explicitly, but this was the prevailing myth. And myths are very powerful drivers of social influence precisely because they are not voiced, are out of dialogue in any serious way and therefore cannot be challenged.

My small seaside school was not an academic one – it mainly prepared young women to go on and train as secretaries. Some went into nursing and one who wanted to be a doctor left our school to do her A-levels in a different, more challenging, college. I had good friends there, and their kind response upon learning I was heading off to university was to observe that I had 'always been the academic one'. I did not feel academic at all, but rather sleepwalking into the unknown without any equipment or guide.

But there was another myth around: to be clever as a woman was to be labelled a 'bluestocking'. The Blue Stocking Society was originally founded in the 18th century by Elizabeth Montague as a group for intellectual men and women. She was something of an anomaly in the period, as she took control of her husband's property after his death, thus allowing her to have unusual power and control over her estate and, consequently, her life. The term bluestocking refers to the informal worsted blue stockings that were less expensive than the prestigious black silk ones.


Gradually though, the society was made fun of, presumably as it celebrated women's achievements. Some comments were overtly hostile. William Hazlitt, influential literary critic, social commentator and philosopher, said, 'The bluestocking is the most odious character in society... she sinks wherever she is placed, like the yolk of the egg, to the bottom and carries the filth with her'. Being tagged a bluestocking meant that you were unfeminine and unlikely to attract male attention, and that association persisted in the 1960s. My mother did once say (though was very sorry afterwards): 'you don't want to be like Auntie Blue Legs', a reference to my clever, unmarried great-aunt who went to LSE before the First World War.

So, here's the thing: you did need to be a clever woman if you were going to survive the three-year tripos, but that meant braving, accommodating, and ignoring the prevailing zeitgeist that to be clever was to be asexual and undesirable. And, with 10 men to 1 woman – men who were pretty much all from single-sex schools and anxious to find out about a new species called 'women' – the shame of being without a date on a Saturday night, alone in your college room, was not fun to contemplate. Another myth in the making: to be a woman, you need a man to desire you. Oh dear.

Girton was proud of its women undergraduates, and rightly so. This was a college founded in the mid-19th century – the first residential institution offering university-level education for women, and a bold step towards women's full and equal participation in political, social and economic life, though it took nearly 80 more years to become a full Cambridge college. Barbara Bodichon (1827–1891) and Emily Davies (1830–1921) were leading founders of the college, and key figures in the mid-19th century campaign for women's suffrage. Through two world wars, undergraduates not only completed their tripos studies, but reared pigs and grew vegetables to feed the college and participated in the Air Raid Precautions service. The local Girton Fire Brigade was founded by Girton students. So, here was a college with a wonderful track record of promoting women, at odds with a mid-20th century ambivalence about doing so. But the social tectonic plates were moving.

The Second World War and the reconstruction of Europe meant that Western survival was at stake. When you are fighting for survival, the inevitable result is a general philosophy of 'do as you're told, Mother knows best'. But by the early 1960s, economic prosperity grew, the populace had more to spend, and a kind of counter-cultural social revolution took place. Western society began to question the status quo and was more generally anti-authoritarian. In the US, there were (mainly peaceful) anti-Vietnam demonstrations protesting the US involvement in the Far East.

The Women's Liberation Movement was a political alignment of women and feminist intellectualism that emerged in the late 1960s and continued into the 1980s, primarily in the industrialised nations of the Western world. This movement effected great political, intellectual, and cultural change. Germaine Greer published her hugely influential book, 'The Female Eunuch', in 1970. Civil rights movements, initiated in the 1950s, gained momentum. There were the first stirrings of gay liberation at this time, though this really gained traction in the 1980s with the AIDS epidemic. In 1969, the Stonewall riots took place in New York, and there was a greater openness about sexuality and same-sex partnerships. The UK parliament passed an act decriminalising sex between men over 21 in 1967, though this happened much later in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This was the decade of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, of Mary Quant and the miniskirt ('Aren't your legs a bit cold, dear?', asked my Uncle Peter). Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones wailed 'I can't get no satisfaction', which was Top of the Pops for a time in 1965, and seemed to sum up the need for different, demanding countercultural voices to be heard.



But by far the biggest change for women was the prescription of the contraceptive pill. This was introduced in the UK for married women in 1961, but not generally licensed for unmarried women until 1967. Even then, it was well known to us women in Cambridge that Dr A would prescribe with no questions, Doctor B gave you a hard time, and don't bother with Doctor C – it wasn't worth it. A law licensing medical termination of pregnancy up to 24 weeks was also passed in 1967, provided certain conditions were met. This meant that unmarried women were much more reliably able to have sex without getting pregnant, and thus could determine their reproductive lives. Sexual freedom for women was undoubtedly liberating in the immediate sense, but it had a far greater indirect effect. If a woman could plan when to have a family (or not have one at all) then she, in the same way as a man, could enrol, develop and maintain a career. Attitudes had still to catch up with this transition, but it was a step change in the way women could view their independence. Anatomy was no longer destiny.

The Divorce Reform Act 1969 was also important to women's independence. This act reformed the law on divorce in England and Wales by enabling couples to divorce after they had been separated for two years if they both desired a divorce, or five years if only one wanted a divorce. Men and women could end marriages that had “irretrievably broken down”, and neither partner had to prove “fault”. Women (and men) did not have to remain stuck in a loveless marriage.

So, we '60s women who had set out on a comparatively sheltered, intellectual journey into adulthood were now challenged to engage with a much more open and liberated world. This, of course, was exciting, but it was not necessarily comfortable to shake off old parental and societal values, which carried a degree of certainty, to embrace the uncertain brave new world. Erik Erikson, an American psychologist, wrote about psychosocial development through the life cycle. He – and Carl Jung before him – were amongst the few psychologists who felt that early family relationships were not the only important influence on human beings, and that later life carried opportunities and challenges for growth and development. He formulated eight overlapping stages of development across the life span. The one pertaining to adolescence is couched as a dilemma for the developing individual – in this case, ‘Identity versus Role confusion’. He posited that the desired outcome for this stage is ‘Fidelity’ – or, put another way, that the adolescent develops an identity which is true to themselves within the context of their social world.

And being able to become true to yourself, being self-determining and released from old restrictive attitudes, was a huge gift to me and my peers. We sort of got through our degrees, some better than others. We started our careers – mine slightly stop-start taking account of my husband's career moves and punctuated delightfully with children and grandchildren. Things weren't perfect in the subsequent decades, but there was no going back. At a recent 50-year reunion, most of us were fulfilled in what we had done with our lives and felt overwhelming gratitude for an experience of being a '60s woman undergraduate at Cambridge. In my case I was conscious of a debt to be paid for the privilege of that education, in that particular decade, and only when I finally got a senior post, did I feel that I had given enough back to myself, to my college, and to those courageous enough to fight for change in the 1960s.

Feminism? Socialism.

Jo Bunkle

Women's oppression can find its roots deep within the development of private property and class society, whether in the feudal era or modern-day monopoly capitalism.

Within Tsarist Russia, where the absolute power of the Tsar was upheld largely by the Orthodox Church, it was ruled that women were the property of men, and even domestic violence was enshrined in law. Women were forced to carry out domestic labour in the home, and many were largely illiterate, which played a part in preventing political consciousness. Flash forward to Russia today: capitalist oligarchs reign supreme over the country, domestic violence was once again decriminalised in 2017, and a reactionary politics, such as the criminalisation of the LGBTQ+ community, is being brought to the forefront of the Federation.


The origins of such oppression can be found by tracing the history of women's oppression through the evolution of humankind's material conditions. This analysis was undertaken by Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Development in modes of production, from hunter-gatherers to agriculture, generated a surplus of life-giving resources. While this was a great step forward in human development, it also birthed inequalities. Some were fortunate to have more crops or animals, some not.

This led to the rise of the state as a means to manage and organise growing human society, alongside ideologies and forms of oppression as means to justify divisions between human beings. Work historically associated with men, such as hunting giving way to animal husbandry, allowed for the generation of surplus wealth and resources, so was given precedence in a society which increasingly prioritised accumulation of personal material wealth. Meanwhile, women became inextricably tied to domestic labour as it no longer took a village to raise a child, so were seen as an extension of property.

Forcing domestic labour into a private setting denied women their public character. But under capitalism, developments in the means of production allowed women to participate in both the industrial and domestic workforce, as machinery removed the lengthy training necessary to produce commodities.

This placed an even larger burden upon women's shoulders: they too could be exploited at the hands of the capitalist class in the workplace as well as in the home. Austerity has marginalised women globally by making domestic labour (e.g. childcare) financially inaccessible to most. Consequently, the average woman in Britain carries out 13 hours of unpaid domestic labour per week, compared to men's 6.5 hours (as of April 2023).

Global capital further undermines the material position of women, where in sweatshops many are worked to death for pennies on the pound. Also, despite 'laws' that prohibit sexual violence, the 1% conviction rate of rape accusations in our own country attests to the failures of capitalism in solving violence against women. This is attested by a TUC poll published in May last year that showed 2 in 3 young women had experienced sexual harassment, bullying or verbal abuse at work.



Most victims don't report it for fear of not being believed or damaging their working relationships and career prospects. So, although capitalism accommodated women's liberation movements for a time (universal suffrage being an example), progress has visibly ground to a halt. Bourgeoisie, liberal, and reformist attempts to end women's oppression are bereft of solutions. Overall, the outlook for women's liberation under capitalism is damning.

Failure to unite upon class lines has devolved many movements into infighting. An example is the divide that TERFism brings to modern-day feminism. The active exclusion of trans people from gendered spaces and crying out at the erasure of "womanhood" prevents us from seeing the forest for the trees. It is not trans people creating the misery faced by many women today, but capitalist austerity and its beneficiaries that continue to steal the material gains won through collective struggles.

One example is the systematic annihilation of the (already meagre and degrading) system of trans healthcare provided by NHS due to rampant privatisation, all while whipping up a moral panic against trans women by insisting that they are a threat to 'women's spaces'. Given that last year's census indicated only 0.1% of the population of the UK are trans women, statistically this idea is absurd. Ruling-class demagogues, such as Kemi Badenoch, may call themselves 'feminists' or sanctify their actions as protection for women, but only divide the working class as distraction from the real threats to their lives: capitalism and its cronies.

The 2018 women's strike in Spain exemplifies that aligning upon identity lines, as opposed to class lines, hamstring a movement's ability to obtain tangible victory for the people. The Spanish state failed to give justice to the victims of a gang of rapists calling themselves La Manada as, despite overwhelming video evidence, the men were not charged with rape. The mass response was to protest and call for a strike, but the movement's liberal feminist leadership insisted upon 'women-only strikes' and that the men should continue to work, minimising impact to the economy. This was largely ignored, as outraged male workers wished to show their solidarity, which women workers and students also encouraged. But the damage had been done. Confusion and disconnect between the mass movement and leadership led to stagnating energy and no radical change in either the sentencing or laws.

While infighting distracts, the material conditions of many women decline rapidly. A 2022 report released by the Health Foundation revealed that women's life expectancy in Britain was below every OECD country in the world, other than Mexico. The UK has the largest gap in healthcare outcomes for men and women in the G20, and the 12th largest globally. The Covid-19 pandemic pushed further burdens upon working-class women: research undertaken by the TUC and University of Sussex found over 70% of mothers were either mostly or solely responsible for homeschooling during the pandemic. Women with children were 47% more likely to have lost their jobs permanently during lockdown, and even women without children faced higher levels of unemployment.

But the women living in the wealthiest 10% of areas in the UK live 8 years longer than those in the poorest. While parents are going without meals to ensure their children can eat, women of the capitalist class are laughing all the way to the bank. The wife of Rishi Sunak, Akshata Murty, presided over companies that directly benefited from investments from the Futures Fund, a post-pandemic start-up, which they both conveniently forgot to declare. The distinction between quality of life for ruling versus working class women of this country could not be clearer.

So, what is the alternative? We can find answers in the first years of the Soviet Republic. When workers seized power in 1917, women entered both politics and the economy. They were no longer obliged to live with their husbands or accompany them if a change of job meant a change of house, were given equal rights to be head of household, and received equal pay. Attention was paid to women's childbearing role and maternity laws were introduced banning long hours and night shifts, alongside paid leave at childbirth, family allowances, and child-care centres. Abortion was legalised in 1920, divorce was simplified, and civil registration of marriage was introduced. In the words of Lenin: "In the literal sense, we did not leave a single brick standing of the despicable laws which placed women in a state of inferiority compared with men." And it was not just women who benefitted from an end to bourgeoisie dictation on gender roles and profit exploitation. Homosexuality was decriminalised under the Soviet Republic when Bolshevik leaders stated there would be no difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality under the law. Although Stalinist bureaucracy demolished these victories, paving the way for Russia's modern-day oppression, Sovietism demonstrates what can be materially achieved for equality under a democratically planned economy and the abolition of class society.

So, I ask: is your feminism one that desires not mere equality under the law, but material liberation for women and other oppressed people? Does it see the hypocritical dealings of capitalist women and self-proclaimed feminists for what they truly are: poorly hidden attempts to divide the working class? Moreover, are you willing to fight for such equality the only way you can: through the abolition of capitalist exploitation? If so, then you may be more than a feminist: perhaps a socialist, and, if I might be so hopeful, a communist.

To quote Rosa Luxembourgh, "the contemporary mass struggle for the political equality of women is only one part of the general liberation struggle of the proletariat, and therein lies its strength and its future."

WORKERS OF ALL GENDERS, UNITE!

KILL ANGELA

the painful discrepancy between policy and protection on a London night-out.

The London day-time veneer: shiny cosmopolitanism, glittering progressiveness, a bold forefront of openness and modernity. TFL is consistent with this brand. Sadiq Khan has plastered photos across the underground telling us that 'staring is a form of harassment', how to check that sexual harassment survivors are "OK", and occasionally you even see a feminist poem to skim through when your eyes drift on a mind-numbingly long tube journey. National Pub Watch has ensured that most female toilets have #askforangela posters stamped on every door.


This veneer, in all fairness, does not peel off for majority of the day. In the last 6 years that I have lived in this city, I have noticed catcalling becoming more sparse, perverted staring less palpable, and daytime groping a rarity. Don't get me wrong, I still carry a whistle on my keys, never wear mini-skirts on public transport, and have my location shared at all times during the day because while I feel safer, I am not delusional. My point is not that nothing has improved, but that policymakers have cultivated a shallow sense of greater security for women in London compared to previous years, and that this is endangering us more. So, when I advocate to 'kill Angela', I mean that we need to obliterate the illusion that these perfunctory policies promote: that a female Londoner is alright on a night out. Far from it: we are experiencing a subversive and grossly carnal form of harassment nonstop, and believing the illusion tempts us and our male allies to let our guards down.

Seeing the aforementioned exhibitionism about intolerance towards sexual assault made quite the impression on my pliable 17-year-old mind. Itching to finally get my ID in June, my only source of information about nocturnal London were other party-starved, freshly-18-year-old girls whose version of a great night out constitutes anything better than a half-empty house party.

So, naturally, I thought London nightlife was going to be liberating, titillating, and freeing, and that if sexual misconduct did occur it would be a brutal, violent form of assault that would imprison a man for decades.

Terrifying as that prospect was, I thought that at the very least it was avoidable: cover my drink, stay in a big group, no isolated alleyways, and all the other standard procedures instilled in young girls.

Then I turned 18! June 16th 2025. Within the first 5 nights out, the gulf between what I thought of London men and their true form expanded, and with it my sense of security dissolved. I began to understand why people cannot go clubbing sober, because aside from seeing people's endearing awkwardness with more clarity, sobriety scrapes the empowering veneer off with every passing minute. Suddenly you have to be tipsy at minimum to try to avoid noticing how many men are pressing up against you as they move past or gripping your thighs and waist. You have to be tipsy to pretend the men fixating on you are innocently admiring your body. You have to be tipsy to pretend that the men whispering inside your ear, or kissing your neck, are funny and not revolting. Rainer Maria Rilke in 1903 described his fear of a crude, carnal sexuality in men: "there is in his sense of sexuality something

A woman with glasses and a blue t-shirt with 'SOS' text is smiling and looking down. The background is dark and blurry, suggesting a club or party setting.

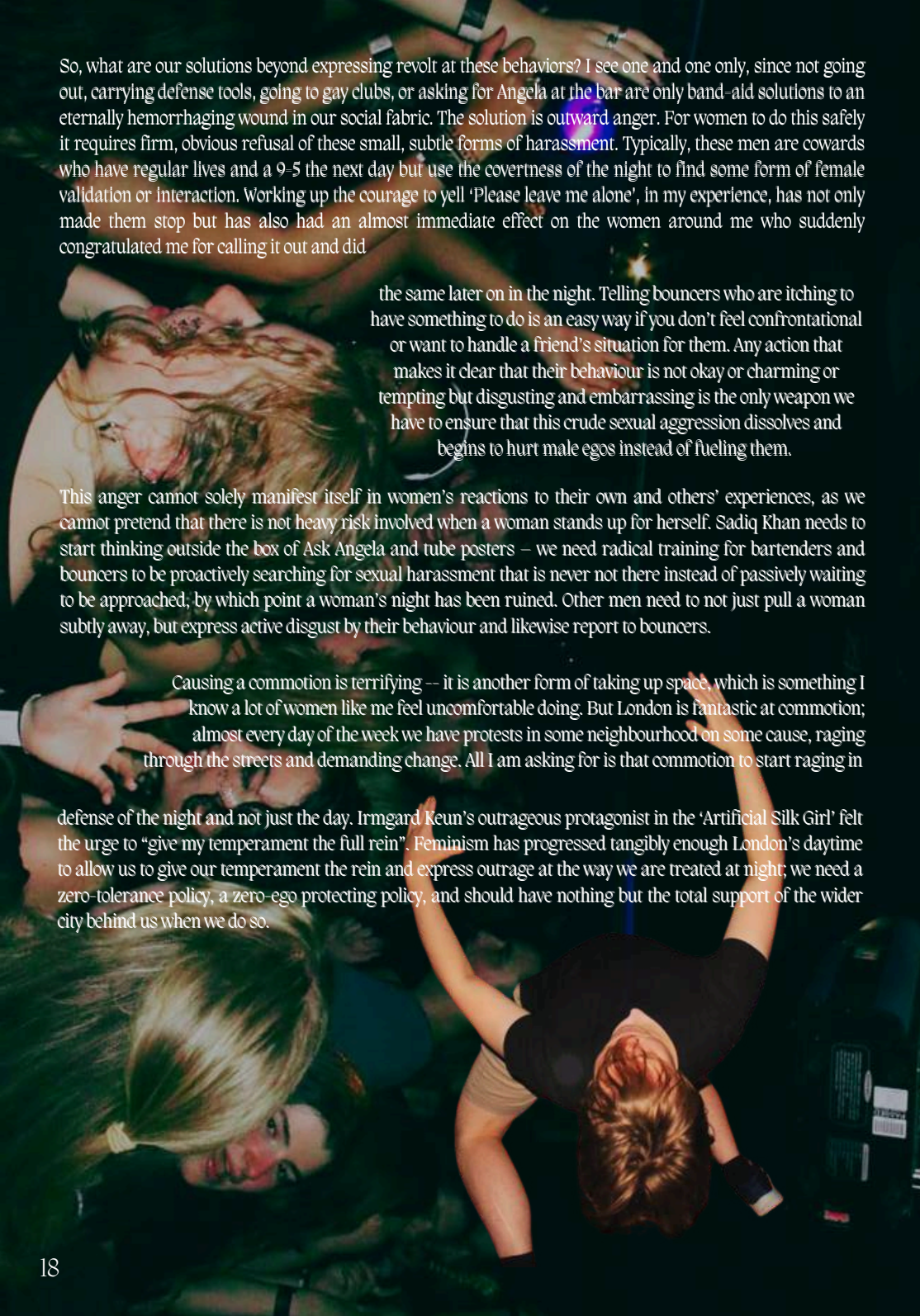
narrow, seeming savage, hateful, time-bound". 120 years later I see this carnality and violence in male sexuality emerge powerful as ever at night, yet women are being led to feel more secure in a London that has a persistent ugly underbelly. The underbelly is surviving precisely because these policies grant men immunity from actual behavioral change. We need to strip this veneer off and stop creating a false illusion that the 'savage' tendencies of male sexual expression are repaired. Redirection from performative policy is a necessary prerequisite to effective eradication of sexual aggression and bystander complacency in all spheres of London, at all times of day.

The reason the veneer fosters a social environment that is tolerant of such vile behaviour is primarily through the art of contrast; my friends and I felt so startled at the frequency of sexual harassment in the city's clubs compared to the relatively sound behaviour of daytime London that we were essentially paralyzed and did not know how to handle more covert forms of assault. This then becomes a cumulative effect – the more we were looking around and seeing other women's complacency with men touching them left and right, the more we started to limit our reactions to an eye-roll

or a slight clenching of our arms away from them. Suddenly we start to question whether maybe we ought to be enjoying the way they touch us, and maybe our sexuality is too conservative, and maybe we should 'let loose', as one man told me in one of these clubs.

Moreover, telling people about your experience in a city like London is self-entrapment because it typically goes one of two ways: either you are told that London is rapidly changing and these are just normal outlets for masculine, repressed sexuality, or people (male friends or partners in particular) tend to suggest that you stop going out altogether because you are 'asking' for these type of interactions (before they apologetically add 'not that it is your fault or anything'). Only going to gay clubs or not going out at all is not an adequate trade-off. I do not want to enjoy myself in a finite number of locations or to have to resign to the inevitability of men's behaviour. It is not inevitable, it is cultivated. With every act of complacency – regardless of gender – we are widening the gulf between what the catchy slogans on London's TFL promote and what women face night upon night when all they want is to feel unencumbered from the burdens of womanhood for a while.

Another reason the veneer fosters tolerance of gross behavior is by making people feel satisfied with the change enacted thus far. We hear older generations proudly parade how different the night out life is today from when they were younger. They did not have a code word to ask for at the bar, Angela did not exist. Now that she does, people are laying back and patting themselves on the back for what a radical change this is. Comparisons to a time when women had zero protection cannot be the standard because this prevents us from seeing the pitfalls of current policies; anyone who has tried to ask for Angela, as I have, will find that the lack of anonymity in the policy actually puts them at more risk of making a man annoyed, and some bartenders cannot even hear what you are saying in the club so all subtlety flies out the window.



So, what are our solutions beyond expressing revolt at these behaviors? I see one and one only, since not going out, carrying defense tools, going to gay clubs, or asking for Angela at the bar are only band-aid solutions to an eternally hemorrhaging wound in our social fabric. The solution is outward anger. For women to do this safely it requires firm, obvious refusal of these small, subtle forms of harassment. Typically, these men are cowards who have regular lives and a 9-5 the next day but use the covertness of the night to find some form of female validation or interaction. Working up the courage to yell 'Please leave me alone', in my experience, has not only made them stop but has also had an almost immediate effect on the women around me who suddenly congratulated me for calling it out and did

the same later on in the night. Telling bouncers who are itching to have something to do is an easy way if you don't feel confrontational or want to handle a friend's situation for them. Any action that makes it clear that their behaviour is not okay or charming or tempting but disgusting and embarrassing is the only weapon we have to ensure that this crude sexual aggression dissolves and begins to hurt male egos instead of fueling them.

This anger cannot solely manifest itself in women's reactions to their own and others' experiences, as we cannot pretend that there is not heavy risk involved when a woman stands up for herself. Sadiq Khan needs to start thinking outside the box of Ask Angela and tube posters – we need radical training for bartenders and bouncers to be proactively searching for sexual harassment that is never not there instead of passively waiting to be approached; by which point a woman's night has been ruined. Other men need to not just pull a woman subtly away, but express active disgust by their behaviour and likewise report to bouncers.

Causing a commotion is terrifying – it is another form of taking up space, which is something I know a lot of women like me feel uncomfortable doing. But London is fantastic at commotion; almost every day of the week we have protests in some neighbourhood on some cause, raging through the streets and demanding change. All I am asking for is that commotion to start raging in

defense of the night and not just the day. Irmgard Keun's outrageous protagonist in the 'Artificial Silk Girl' felt the urge to "give my temperament the full rein". Feminism has progressed tangibly enough London's daytime to allow us to give our temperament the rein and express outrage at the way we are treated at night; we need a zero-tolerance policy, a zero-ego protecting policy, and should have nothing but the total support of the wider city behind us when we do so.

Ceci n'est pas un mythe

Astrid Healy

a myth held close in my bare hands
the answer to a craving
fruit picked fresh from the tree
and pressed and squeezed
oozing.
a myth devoured
juice running down my arms –
a curse
this may sound like sin but it is worse
a myth like an absence
silence sour in your mouth – metallic even
like biting your tongue and keeping quiet about it.
see how i slip away from the first person singular
coward in my intimacy
shielded in the quiet
my myth an amulet, a web i spin
a lie, a fragile little thing
pathetic really
my myth a deception i indulge in hiding the pain
bulging in my chest
which i shall not call mine.
the pain lying subdued and small
which i pretend i don't recall.
my myth myself the love i expect to know
my myth renewed repeated to no
end – i must remain removed,
fabled fictitious a story to be told.
i know not truth nor salvation
only narration, spoken word and pen to paper
myth in the making making up for lack
something i lost along the way
something i long for earning back.
i know not roots only regret
only the exits and departures
one foot in one foot out
a brief return, remove myself
collect what's mine, moving out
i know not roots nor regret
only the exits and departures
one-way ticket, no return
dusting it off
a quick surrender.
i know regret i know remorse
yet all of this becomes an afterthought

and

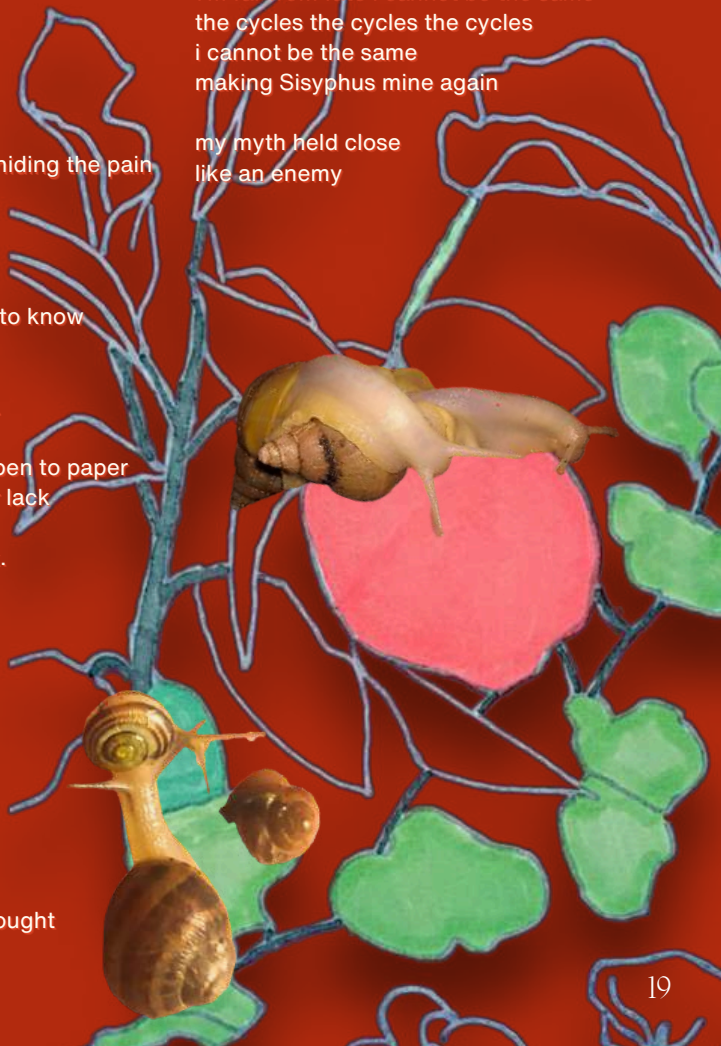
fragmented
fragmented
fragmented

like i am

like an absent father.
cleansed and distant and unscaled
seething from something unknown
my myth unresolved
my myth

i am new and clean i am distant and unfeeling
i'm far from fate i cannot be the same
the cycles the cycles the cycles
i cannot be the same
making Sisyphus mine again

my myth held close
like an enemy



A TRANSEXUAL SITS BEHIND A SMOKESCREEN, SO SULTRY AND ENTICING; AND THEY SAY TO YOU:

Picture this. Sat in my room, incense smoke drifting across my computer screen. There's tobacco littered across my desk with a few tendrils threatening to weasel into the keyboard. Luckily for me the webcam fails to pick up such information; all the doctor sees is a fresh faced smile. I've put in earrings for this call. A slightly pink gloss. All things that have been worn past 7PM, but at 10AM feel absolutely foreign. I can't think of any other condition where every minute aspect of the self is considered in its diagnosis. Gender dysphoria. In fairness, it's quite catchy – I like the 'y'. He asks so many questions:

Which parts of your body do you hate?
Which parts are too big or too small?
Do you like having a penis?
What sort of sex do you like?
And what sort of person for the sexing?
To penetrate or not to penetrate?
or are you privy to be penetrated?

...masturbation habits?

The incense smoke now casts my screen back into the 20th century.

I, the bourgeois transvestite sat in the psychoanalyst's chair. Maybe I would rather it was 1920; for £600 I'd much rather have opiates than a crude piece of paper saying, 'this male dislikes its penis'. And in these questions a certain image begins to form. They're all questions that denote a range of expected answers, and in their multitude, it is an image of high resolution. An image of what a trans person looks like, feels like, acts like. There is an expectation of what they should want and a focus on what they should hate. He says it is evident I have already started my transition (was it the earrings?), and I did get my diagnosis, but I still live with a strange sinking feeling as to the journey getting there.

For me, dysphoria is not the dominant theme. I'm quite lucky that I am nonbinary, that I give little weight to the nonsensical logics of gender as they reflect on the self. Euphoria, movement towards freedom, towards ambiguity and non-categorization, is the source of my contentment. And yet here in this setting, I had to gear my responses to fit within the mental snapshot he was trying to form from me. For you see, he was parroting one of gender's great lies. The idea that it is created in coincidence with the beginning of one's existence, that it is created in a singular moment. Never mind the childhood lessons that say perfection and love is to be found within beauty and youth. Never mind an adolescence filled with endless chiding and teasing should one wish to express an emotion beyond brute anger. Gender, as is with any social construct, is



created by its performance. It exists within space and time, engaged with within moments. This performance dulls when alone and is quickly heightened within interactions. And here he was trying to find my 'instance', asking me the specific moment and date I 'knew', as if a younger age would give more weight to my case, as if to always have existed in pain and discordance was the desired norm and requisite, as if a homogenous self is a self with a more pressing cause.

In the saddest way I knew to hide my aberrations. I like heels, I like pink, sometimes I feel ugly (true insanity) so it wasn't hard to talk in his terms. But for me, my truth is that I am simply not a man; no further extrapolations to be made. Movement away is what brings me joy. To explain my femininity – understand that in a system of diametric opposites – taking motifs from that which is posited as the other side is a powerful symbol of such movement.

Such ideas went very poorly with a previous therapist. Sat opposite each other in an airy room, comfortable cups of tea and all, she rebutted my need for hormones with a smile, justifying this in reference to her previous patients. Some of these were trans women from the 90's who felt broken and inferior on the deepest level. Women who felt inauthentic and insecure. For them, hormones would be the salve that made them real, biological, natural and innate. Inauthenticity would be sidelined and contained within the ritual of medication, rather than be evidenced on the skin.

And yet, I do not look at cis people and feel defective. I do not regard them as more 'biological'. What on earth does that mean. I have not had my cardiovascular system refashioned out of PVC piping. I understand that there are those in society who perceive the proportions of a cisgender body as reaching transcendental, as if something divine has been achieved in the combination of perfect narrative, ratio and order when one's shoulders are of the correct breadth alongside the correct genitals and a voice to match.

But these standards change across the ages. They alter across peoples. Aboriginal Australian trans women wear their beards without contradiction. And in contrast, in the west, we construct superfluous narratives atop the biology of others. Such fetish for catching egorisation! A large breast maketh the slut. Ridiculous, and even further these narratives seem to have been written with the goal of eternal war with the self, even if movement is made in the 'correct' direction of one's biology. How is it that a scrawny man is less of a man, unless he feels himself to be a woman, where in such instance it is now impossible for her to ever escape her previously questioned manhood? Ludicrous!



These ideas were brought to this therapist. I told her I felt a dysphoria of sorts, but that I was not particularly enchanted by the traditional notions of Man and Woman, that I saw no reason in internalising such an arbitrary system of aesthetics, logics and philosophies. Far too broad in scope. Far too narrow a range of acceptable behaviour and performance. Not too dissimilar to a religion, to a star sign. Born under the sign of Aries, I am supposed to be hot-headed, passionate, and warlike. And similarly simple logics are used in the creation of gender. Think of the reactions when a child is born under the sign of male, evidenced by his penis: 'Hurrah! He will exude strength and power!' (he is yet to walk), 'already such a heartbreaker!' (the only vagina he has ever touched is his mum's).

In short, she recommended that hormones were not for me. She was very wrong. I love them. I take them every day and they have brought me peace, contentment and an excitement for life, where previously such a spark was in dangerously short supply.

It does make me rather sad that in order to get them I had to hide a part of myself in that conversation with the doctor. In the pantomime of my renewed 'instance', my 'birth', my renegotiated star sign, I had to talk as if everything fit. A story of tragedy flowed from my mouth that related in part, but it was not really my own. I had to gender myself, give gendered performance, when I am nonbinary and gendered performance feels more suited to aesthetic rather than the denotation of an innate self. It's funny how transgenderism is painted as a contagion; this is pure mirror-talk. Gender is sticky, it clings to a body, yet people carelessly cast, spill, and throw it around. People, gender, skin, and flesh and organs: they sort bodies into narratives derived from centuries worth of media and literature and act shocked when the mind moves away from such serpentine constriction. They act surprised that people reject such archaic suffocation. I reject it in whole and I want no part in this play. For what reward one finds in assimilation, the loss of freedom and sovereign self is far too high a price to pay.

MILA EDENSOR

THE TRANSEXUAL LEAVES
THE ROOM, FINGERS
RUNNING THROUGH THE
BEADS IN THE DOORWAY.
YOU LOSE THEM IN THE
HAZE. YOU SEE A LIGHTER
FLASH INSIDE THE SMOKE,
HEAR CHIMES RING
AROUND THE ROOM. THE
CONVERSATION IS
CONCLUDED. LEAVE THEM,
THEY'RE GOING TO REALLY
ENJOY THAT CIGARETTE..



Psych

I promised myself to be a myth
whenever others couldn't surpass, I could
but then my heart took the
most of me - forcing me to show
devotion
and now I've let go of
a part that I loved most for
someone sensational
that did not even exist

it has never felt mythical since



Funny Little Things

Elise
Batchelor

A collage of various mushrooms and worms on a black background. The mushrooms include several small, light-colored ones with thin stems, a larger yellowish one, and two dark, hollowed-out ones. Several dark, segmented worms are crawling across the scene, with one worm having a small yellow dot on its side.

There's something funny in the way
I've successfully shaken my disordered eating
But I'll always quietly celebrate a drunk chunder
There's something funny in the way
The stares in the street
Turned from lustful leering
To quiet observation of my oddity
There's something funny in the way
the men who would ask for my number
disappeared when I turned 18
There's something funny in the way
I don't date and don't want to date
But I kept Hinge for a year just to see the likes trickle through
& when I cut my hair
And 20 likes became 5
I mourned the drop in my digital tally of hotness
And there's definitely something funny in the way
I wanted to write 40 not 20
There must be something about me
Something that wanted more than what I was
Something in me that hates what I've been
And hates what I've become

mindmapping myth

nikusia

I am doing construction.

One week after moving in I am already dismantling the furniture, struggling to heave the bed back from

Our wall, a glossy block of marble I now need to sculpt.

There is an urgency in this work; I found the flakes of the old pillars flowering the carpet yesterday.

So I am doing construction.

Experience has taught me to begin from the peripheries, to work inwards, use what you know,

the familiarity of black scrawl on white paper,

but god, this requires drastic action.

And so I slide a nail into where the last conspiracy I wove myself into had started to peel

and I de-shed, detach,

its tackiness I stick to the wall as plastering, extra padding

for the ensuing ruthlessness of authoritarian regime,

since upon us is a regime of cutting, marking up.

I dislocate the limbs of the story and lodge them into different corners; I remould parts of the

plot that I consider keeping; with a wet paintbrush I erase the torso of a protagonist I once had.

It wheezes as it is drawn into life,

long spindles drifting towards a centre of gravity,

arching towards a narrative.

My folktale transfigures itself from woman, to lover, to vixen, to beast, to god,

its cast a Pandora's Box of a parable

which I have welded together into rafters

of the fairytale my fingers are piecing together.

I am doing construction

and sketching the characters, chronology, climax, conclusion,

of the saga I have naively, bleary-eyed, day-dreamed into.

I am ghost writing

because god forbid I am made secondary, sidekick

and you do all the scripting yourself

When I one day move out,

the patterned trails of this wall will show

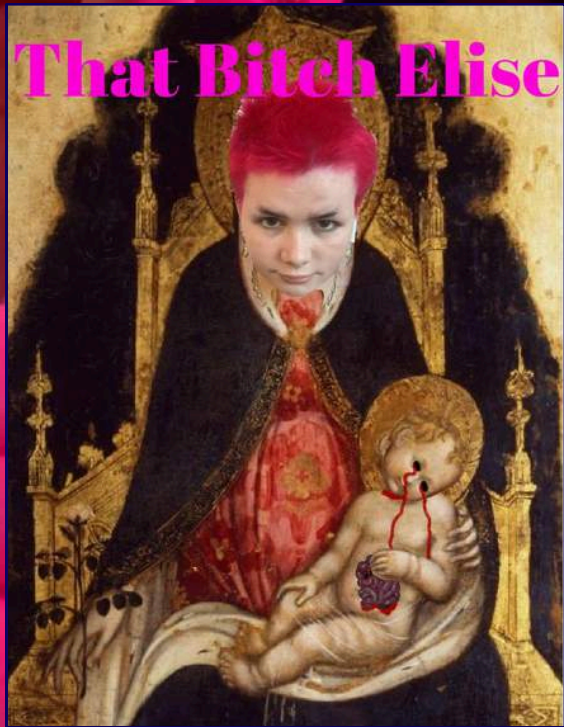
how I made remade us, over and over.

That Bitch

ELISE

Mothers who miscarry are demonised as bad women; they fail their biological duty due to their hostile poisonous wombs that repel human life. They are thought to be infertile due to their lack of femininity and inner gall. They are selfish and lead ungodly lives, smoking and drinking too much. In the modern age the barren womb becomes a reification of a hyper individualist society which is not conducive to child rearing. The bad masculine woman, and sometimes its inversion, the weak feminine man, takes the blame for the breakdown of communities under neoliberal capitalism. In *Fleabag*, Clare's vindictive insecure husband blames Fleabag for what he thinks is her miscarriage, calling it a 'goldfish out of the bowl situation'.

Can one imagine the vitriol that a woman would face if she miscarried the Messiah? I present the Myth of That Bitch Elise, my friend and editor of this zine, who had a blood clot so large that the only explanation was that she had miscarried a virgin pregnancy. A pregnancy that was meant to be the Messiah. Elise became the anti-Madonna, incorporated into the religious canon as she who doomed humanity with her antidepressants, cigarettes and bourgeois subversiveness.



Louis Goldberg



Esther Arthurson

DENTATA

The way they described it, I figured it must be dangerous, this thing they spoke of. It was my curse, after all, for what She did in the Beginning, and what I would have done, had it been me in Her place. A curse should be violent.

The original Implant lodged, firm and unshakable, an in-built time bomb. A mark of shame, of pain to come from within, our own fault, a self-inflicted blemish, our sin. Women were evil, corrupted by this thing that steered them and equipped them to corrupt others in turn – that much was made clear. Men were its victims, our victims, taken in by wiles and smiles, beguiled, innocent as a child until she had him where she wanted him, between her legs, in her very Curse, intimate as sin, flesh on flesh.

Not only would it damage men, this Cursed region, but, given the chance, it would maim the very women who bore it. Wayward fingers wandering astray in response to rumours like tumours that infected the female mind. They hoped that this Curse might not be so dangerous after all, but something in which they could even find pleasure – or perhaps some part of themselves they'd misplaced.

I don't recall if someone told me about the biting or if I inferred it for myself, but by the age of ten the image was firmly lodged in my imagination: this dreaded thing between my legs, intimate and intimidating, deadly and destructive and armed with the fangs of divine justice incarnate. That wailing and gnashing of teeth from Revelation was hidden in the folds and shadows of the body's crossroads, the X's shameful centromere, all-consuming always, poised to swallow you whole. Guard it with your life, the elders said, to protect both others and yourself. No-one will love you if you let them close enough to see it, they said. My imagination sketched a greedy, guzzling second throat, salivating in anticipation, lips pulled back in a snarling, frenzied grin as it awaits its prey. Pray for your immortal soul, they told me, that the corruption does not spread from your core. Keep a clean heart and a contrite mind and cling to purity – a purity so lofty and unattainable as to be fictitious.

DENTATA

And should a man skirt your defences, your skirt, then that too is your fault. This curse – this vulnerability and locus of weakness, this target bullseye, this bright scarlet letter – is ours to bear and to guard. If a man gains access, then you must have let your guard down, neglected your responsibility, or led him on with your shy glances and feigned innocence. Another inch on the hem of that skirt ought to do the trick, save them from you – although a muzzle would clearly be preferable.

I gleaned this information over a number of years, and while I now know it for the propaganda it was, the fear of myself lives within me still. Perhaps it always will. I dismissed the myths, learned to recognise the lies, but am haunted and charmed by the gleaming kernel of truth on which such grand fabrications are founded. For this reason, that part of me, my defining core for so long, will remain unexplored, at least by my own probing curiosity.

They were right, however, to fear it. Teeth or no teeth, its presence unites us, a powerhouse of solidarity and shared shame surmounted.

You see, the night I finally
lost my virginity, he cried far
more than I did; he bled far
more too .



'reflections on the witch that inhabits me'

an exploration of life with PMDD

Emily

every month, without fail,
a witch inhabits me.
i tried to call her a monster,
but failed when
i realised she was no less
me than i was.

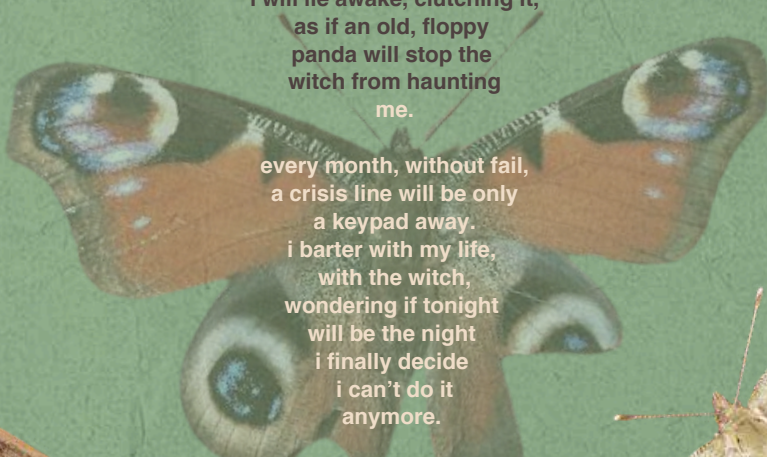
every month, without fail,
i will be reduced
to atoms, and
rebuilt from the weakest
tissue paper.
any breeze will crack me,
shatter me,
blow me away with it.

every month, without fail,
i will lie
awake at night, reaching for
the old teddy bear i cannot
part with.
i will lie awake, clutching it,
as if an old, floppy
panda will stop the
witch from haunting
me.

every month, without fail,
a crisis line will be only
a keypad away.
i barter with my life,
with the witch,
wondering if tonight
will be the night
i finally decide
i can't do it
anymore.

every month, without fail,
a girl inhabits my body.
i tried calling her a witch
but she laughed,
and ran,
and stopped to look
back at me.

'would a witch take your life apart, piece by piece, and make you
watch?'
i said no.
maybe she is me,
after all.



FRAGMENT

Basking in a clip top jar by the window
Of my mum's lavender attic,
I'm dunking the light
Weaving my
Heartstrings into love's lace.
Expecting all the right things
The way a child blushes the Earth
Threading sun into flowers.

In her girlhood pictures in boxes everywhere, mum's
Salting, incorporeal, flowersick,
Tender, cyber-breathing, glittered, finger-picked. Has
All of this expectation of scruzing atria torn like sandpaper,
Violet streaks crushed in knuckles.

Through the window I can see
My suncatcher butch melting
lazily into the young grass
of our wilting town. Hours past
Linens shimmered, unbuttoned,
shaken off apple-starred skin.
And butterfly kisses
trailed down breasts, down stomach,
Like free falling through heaven
In touches woven with
roses, and lilacs, and a thousand beady eyes
That cut the woman out of me with their glare.

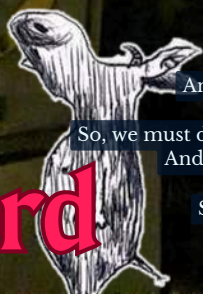
I reconstruct daughterhood in my ribcage
But not in the world's
As if fear of being all that you are
was born with you
And not made

My life will never be mine
Until my body is
That is true for everybody
I'm a baby in these boxes and
I haven't seen what there is beyond
being outside of the world
And locking it away.
Whittling our ribs into wind chimes
To make the sort of love people breathe in
To harmonise with the iron that weaves the cage.

Fate is a mother,
Yielding, for the sake of future lovers
Spidertrapping prisons
Only when the ground is smooth
And the water rushing sweet

I want our pictures to move
I want to be old and proud
And to do that, all I must do is breathe and
Never say anything.
So, we must depetal everything and decide we love us
And devote our lives to making them honest

Stars called love from the river to the sea

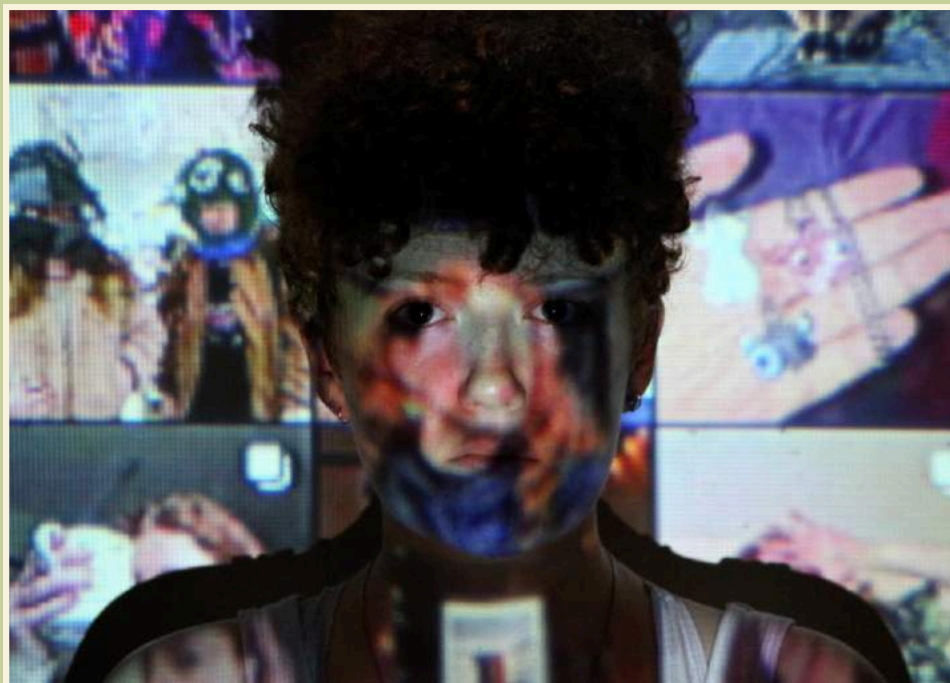


SARAH ANDERSON



This is a project I worked on in 2023 which comments on how social media is our way of self-mythologising. It plays with Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' from his *Republic*, in which he tells a story of men who have been chained up in a cave from birth and have only ever experienced shadows on the wall cast by objects moving behind them. They therefore think that these shadows are all there is to reality.

In a similar way, we, and especially women, can be led to believe that the images people curate for their social media platforms are their reality – leading to comparison which negatively impacts our self-esteem. I photographed three women and a trans man with their social media profiles projected onto their faces, to contrast how what they want the world to see them compared with how they appear to a viewer in an everyday moment. The use of the projector plays with the idea of the shadows on the cave wall but this time they are looking into the light and not at the shadows. This project was especially poignant for the trans man photographed, who was happy to let me use posts from before their transition to talk about the person they were showing the world verses the person they truly are.





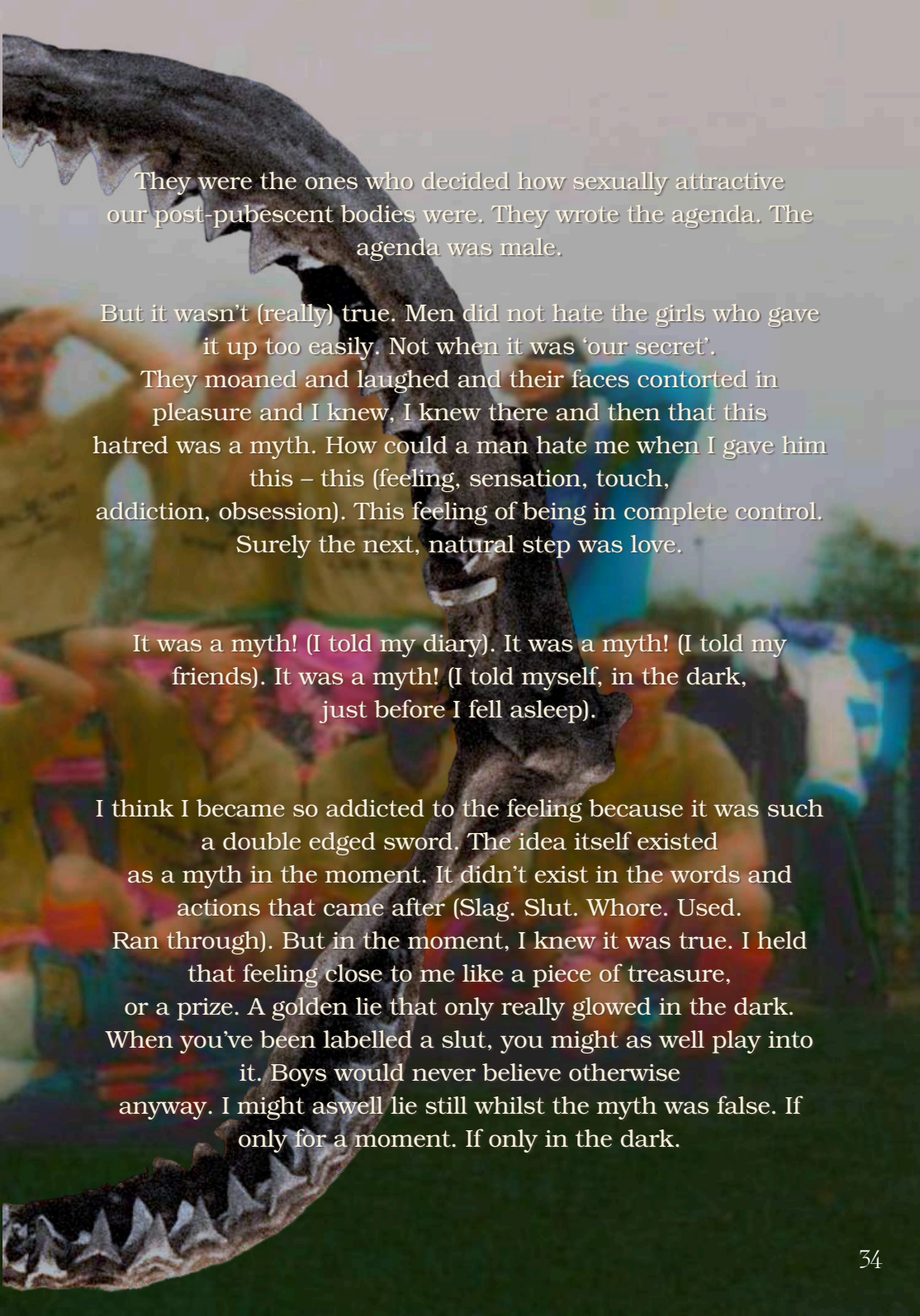
Katie Heggs

The Myth (of girls who give it up too easily)

When I was growing up, I thought that I had debunked a myth. It was a myth, a parable, a folk tale and a lesson. It said: 'boys don't like girls who give it up too easily'. And through experiment, force, and experience, I'd figured out that it was false. I did not know what to do with this newfound information in the short days following my discovery. Because the myth was

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R
E

Implicit within the myth were a number of things that seemed to line up with everything I knew as a 13-year-old-girl. 'Sex' (S-e-x) was something that women provided for men. Women did not have a sex drive unless as a kind of power to exert over men (boys). This had always seemed reasonable enough to me. When I received unsolicited pictures of men's penises I didn't like them. In fact, I more often than not felt repulsed. Men were always the ones who wanked. I discovered female masturbation by accident, and when I engaged in it, it was only because a man told me it was hot.



They were the ones who decided how sexually attractive our post-pubescent bodies were. They wrote the agenda. The agenda was male.

But it wasn't (really) true. Men did not hate the girls who gave it up too easily. Not when it was 'our secret'.

They moaned and laughed and their faces contorted in pleasure and I knew, I knew there and then that this hatred was a myth. How could a man hate me when I gave him this – this (feeling, sensation, touch, addiction, obsession). This feeling of being in complete control. Surely the next, natural step was love.

It was a myth! (I told my diary). It was a myth! (I told my friends). It was a myth! (I told myself, in the dark, just before I fell asleep).

I think I became so addicted to the feeling because it was such a double edged sword. The idea itself existed as a myth in the moment. It didn't exist in the words and actions that came after (Slag. Slut. Whore. Used. Ran through). But in the moment, I knew it was true. I held that feeling close to me like a piece of treasure, or a prize. A golden lie that only really glowed in the dark. When you've been labelled a slut, you might as well play into it. Boys would never believe otherwise anyway. I might as well lie still whilst the myth was false. If only for a moment. If only in the dark.

the mystic of queer relations

Anonymous

her soft silk skin melted into mine

my friend confessed 'I wish I was gay'

I suffocated as my first serious relationship was strangled
hiding from my family every time I saw her

The pain pierced through me when there was no one to share my happy memories with
Like a scorching hot sensation in my throat, my chest, my stomach
friends detached and disengaged
longing for a warm embrace from my parents – a smile from my mother when I could recount
to her our sweet moments

my mouth was slammed shut by shame

my parents aren't hate-criming homophobes but never could I bring my girlfriend home or
utter her name

I came out to my Mum and we didn't speak of it for a year

I told her about my girlfriend a year later and she was still stunned
a year later

she sent me a text but we did not speak of it again
when it ended

my mother found nothing else to say except clean up your spoon whilst
tears
ran
down
my
face

'you just look gay'

I always found this one so odd
did I just have a gay face?

A gay body

shit my hairy armpits must have given it away

what did people ever mean when they said this?

mostly it felt like stereotypical bullshit

'maybe I should get a septum and then people would know'

'no one would even know I'm gay'

queer love is not a fantasy nor a mystical utopia you can project onto me while I'm forced to
hide



This may come off as terribly bitter – maybe I'm just a bitter person
This is not a speech policing tactic – you can say whatever you'd like

queer love can be just as beautiful and destructive as straight love

and when I talk about queer love I just mean love between two queer people because I don't think there's such a thing as queer love – a love topical to queer people – rather we've been forced to believe that there is a fundamental difference
a difference that has been constructed – that's forced so many of us to go through life-changing experiences
a first kiss
sex for the first time – and no one to tell
there's no birds and bees talk – there's no warning signs because you couldn't get pregnant anyways so why would it matter

lesbian relationships are seen as this idealised heaven in which two women who love each other suddenly means

no manipulation, violence, cheating, heartbreak

maybe queer relationships are just not real enough or maybe women are just so wonderfully caring

this pseudo-valorisation of women by biologically essentializing them is ludicrous and reinforces gendered stereotypes that we should always combat

every cell of my body ached for the moment when my skin did not shiver when I held her hand in public
when I kissed her soft lips
when her body slipped into mine
hidden away from everyone



The Passions (I)

Amie Brian

But you didn't flinch away,
Hands covering mine, eclipsing trembling fingers
Cut through –

To reveal the blood and bone and show the world:

Is this enough?

Do you know me now?

Love me now?

I lay out my sinews and my sweat for scrutiny –

Crucify me then, because I will not

Resist the anxious habit, temptation of the soft, coxing voice.

to be weak is miserable

And to be nothing at all?

To reach inside myself and find no words, no letters.

Ordered and exact, precise and clarifying – *no*.

That hand that covers mine, it is the only clarifying air,

Cutting through the fog

And the world is clear.

You didn't flinch away,

Nor exact Pilate's vengeance for

The knowledge of that voice.

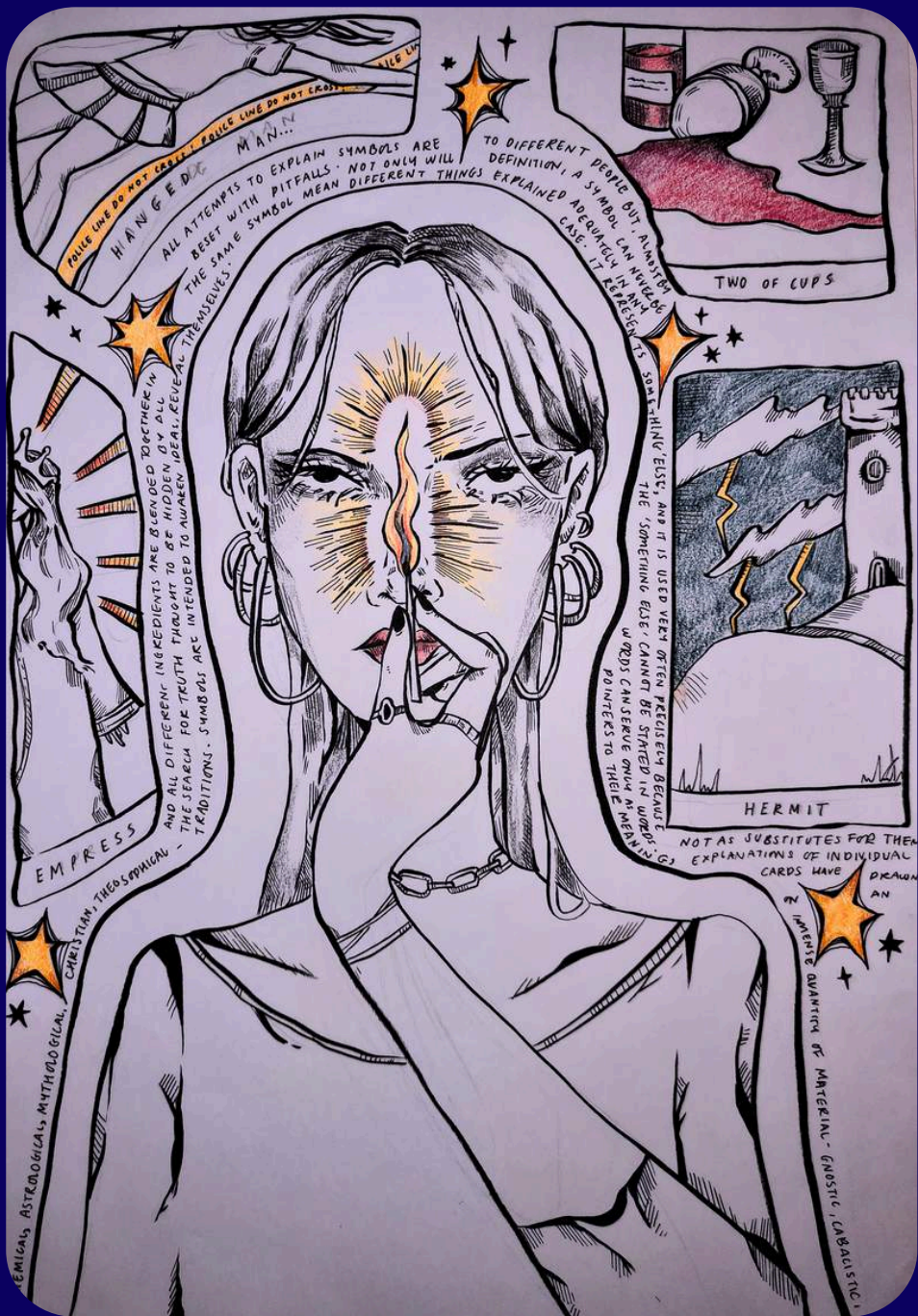
Fingers tighten between mine

And hold.

And steady.

And still.

Why then was this forbid?




The myth of the perfect man: queer identity and traditional expectations of masculinity

Reuben Aston

When we're young, we all have an idea as to who it is we want to become. For many it is based in large on the media we are exposed to. Not only can this be incredibly harmful in perpetuating stereotypical gender roles, but as a gay person who grew up in the 2010s, all that really existed was heterosexual-oriented media.

When you're at such an impressionable age and only just starting to come to terms with your sexuality, seeing characters with whom you feel like you can resonate as perpetually being the butt of the joke only grows the sense of self-hatred that you may be harbouring. To take a specific character, let's examine Damian in 'Mean Girls' (2004). He is mainly there for comedic effect, with lines such as "he's almost too gay to function" used for this purpose. Whilst this is not necessarily harmful, it does emphasise the attitudes that are faced in with, both media and in school. Conversely, when we look at the way that the straight (particularly male) leads are presented in teen shows and films from this period, we see that the womanising nature of these characters not only leads to them being accepted within their social sphere, but is seen as venerable. Leaving the overt misogyny expressed here aside, how are young gay men expected to view themselves?

We grow up watching James Bond (possibly the most egregious womaniser in pop culture) and then, in the media that is specifically aimed at our demographic, we see the exact same messages being perpetuated. We are repeatedly shown the male saviour who swoops in to rescue a damsel in distress. Or the one who kills all the criminals and then is surrounded by women towards the end of the film. In the James Bond franchise especially, we see very clear gender roles being assigned (especially in the earlier films), with the "Bond Girls" being these damsels in need of protection and Bond himself as a hyper-masculine archetype. Again, as a gay man, the idea of the sexual aspects that follow after the saving of the girl (especially overt in the final scene of 'The Man With the Golden Gun') were not only uncomfortable to watch but reiterate the kind of comments surrounding gay people that you experience socially: that you're not a "proper man".



To move away from the media, one stereotype that is not really discussed at great enough length is that of the "gay best friend". The very phrase makes the relationship at first seem as though it is based solely on the person's sexuality and, oftentimes, this is the way that you would then be introduced.

The need to publicly declare allyship is what I think this is related to, but the use of terms such as "yaas", "girl" and "queen" directed towards the friend by largely straight women (this is entirely speaking from my own experience) again serve to diminish your own feeling of masculinity. The stereotypes are extended further on a night out, for example, where you are expected to serve as both a protector style figure but also as "one of the girls" – seemingly both emphasising perceived traditional masculinity, like that we see displayed in films and TV, and at the same time diminishing it entirely.

I should make it clear that I do not blame people involved in these friendships whatsoever for the implications behind these types of comments, but it does become difficult to understand yourself when faced with two diametrically opposed ideas of what you should be. The confusion that gay men especially deal with when confronting the myth of the perfect masculine figure is furthered by widespread stereotypes that run rife throughout society. We must accept the fact that the perfect man that you can be is that which you already are. This takes a lot of self-reflection and difficult internal conversations, but the way to be the perfect man in my view is to unapologetically be the truest version of yourself and ignore expectations. That is the kind of strength that masculinity should be attributed and should be venerated for.

Mattea
Carberry

SHE.

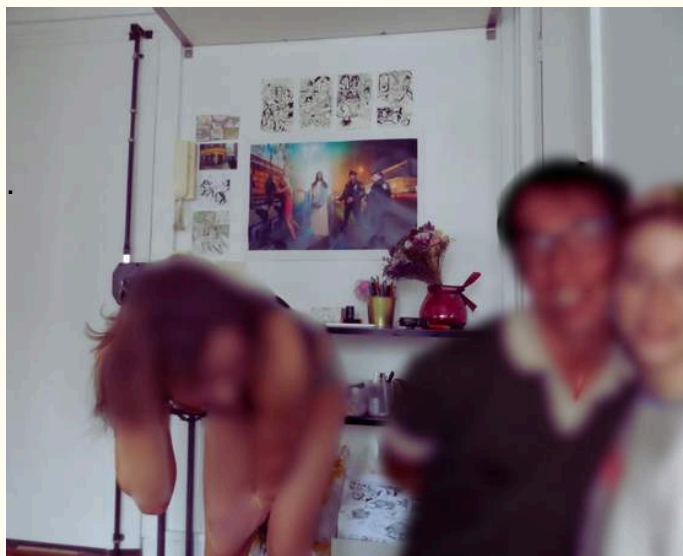
It didn't end in smoke and flames,
but it ended all the same.

It's funny, and a bit strange, to think
that I thought you were the one,
when now you are no more than no one.

Don't get me wrong -
I cried when it ended,
that day, but nothing more,
which scared me even more because,
how could I be simply fine?

Better yet,
I was more than fine -
I felt boundless&beautiful&myself.

But still,
then and now, a year later,
doubt edges its way into my mind.
Did I really love you as I so undeniably believed?



A cruel thought, maybe, I know.

But, you see,

it is difficult to come to terms with the I that is not I but still nevertheless I
and those feelings, which are my feelings but not, of a time gone by.

Was it all a mirage, a trick of the light?

No, of course not, I tell myself
for the sake of little me.

But really, I don't know,
because who was she?

She was me,
though I would not do now
what I did then.
I would not choose your love
nor give you mine.

But it is no matter -
I will still hold her,
whom I hardly and wholly understand,
until she herself becomes a memory,
a moment,
a mirage.



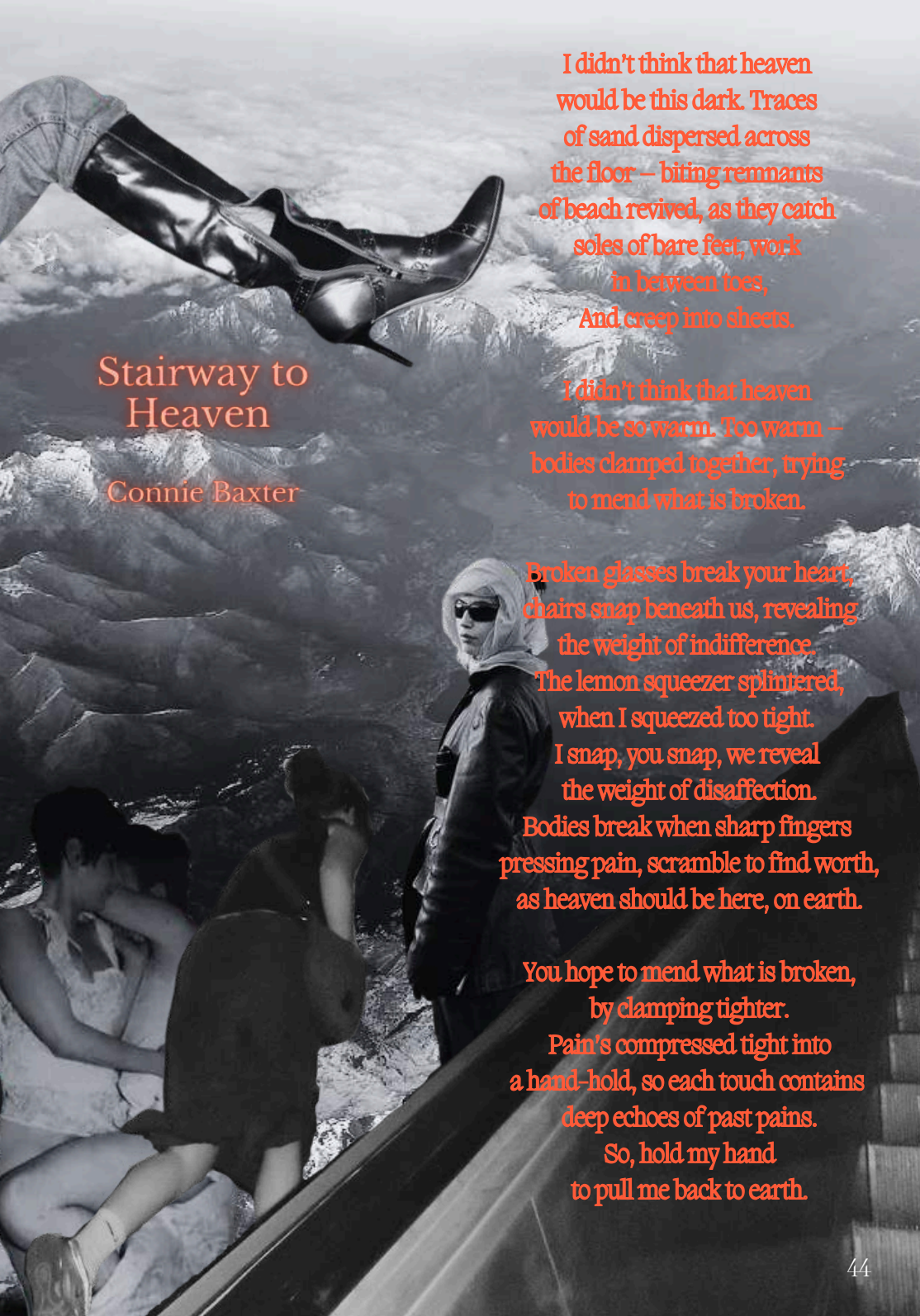
IPHIS AND IANTHE

Do you know the story of Iphis and Ianthe? It's in Ovid, but also older than that, in different forms, some ways the same, in a different place, Roman but Greek. Myths innit. It's the story of a boy and a girl, and of a girl who loved, and a boy who was a girl, and of masculinity, and lesbians, and scissoring, and men, and women, and it's the story of me and my boy.

Iphis was a girl, disguised as a boy, Shakespearian-like. Ianthe loved her. Iphis loved her back (lezza). Iphis wanted to be a boy, because then they could be together (or was Iphis already a boy? Or did they always want to be a boy? I don't know, and Ianthe didn't care). Ianthe loved them. Iphis prayed and Isis granted it. She gave Iphis a haircut and told him to "man up", so he was a boy now (Hurray!). Ianthe loved him. They got married. So, the girl boy lesbian man and the girl who loved lived happily ever after.

Jamie Chen

Sorry, I mean to say "live", present tense. I'm Ianthe, and Iphis is my boy. I read Ovid and I think, is Iphis a boy? Why is Iphis a boy? When is Iphis a boy? How is Iphis a boy? But then I look at my Iphis, and it doesn't matter. I love him. I love her. I love them. The myth doesn't talk about his soft hands, his babyface, his throaty voice, his coarse hair, his thick brow, his sharp collar, his pale thigh. It doesn't discuss his ideologies, his politics, his health, his acceptance, his passing, his pronouns, his deed poll. It certainly doesn't mention the kissing, the strap, the scissoring, the writhing, the fingering, the tribbing, the sucking. Goodness me! Why should it? This is the reality of Iphis, not the myth. We live the reality, him and I, Iphis and Ianthe. But I like to think of the myth when I kiss him, to make the myth into reality. The myth that says it doesn't matter when, how, where Iphis was a boy. Ianthe loved him, and that was that.



Stairway to Heaven

Connie Baxter

I didn't think that heaven
would be this dark. Traces
of sand dispersed across
the floor – biting remnants
of beach revived, as they catch
soles of bare feet, work
in between toes,
And creep into sheets.

I didn't think that heaven
would be so warm. Too warm –
bodies clamped together, trying
to mend what is broken.

Broken glasses break your heart,
chairs snap beneath us, revealing
the weight of indifference.
The lemon squeezer splintered,
when I squeezed too tight.
I snap, you snap, we reveal
the weight of disaffection.
Bodies break when sharp fingers
pressing pain, scramble to find worth,
as heaven should be here, on earth.

You hope to mend what is broken,
by clamping tighter.
Pain's compressed tight into
a hand-hold, so each touch contains
deep echoes of past pains.
So, hold my hand
to pull me back to earth.

the artwork on this page
was made in
collaboration with Black
Girls' Space at a GA
doodle event.



Deconstructing myths of black femininity with



THANK YOU TO THE COMMITTEE
OF BLACK GIRLS' SPACE FOR THEIR
COLLABORATION IN THIS ZINE



DANCING DEMIURGE

Lois Akinragbe

From dust you come and to dust you
will return.

An assertion of Divine punishment—
Our story the construction of a comedic creator.

Yet why are we made of the relics of old?

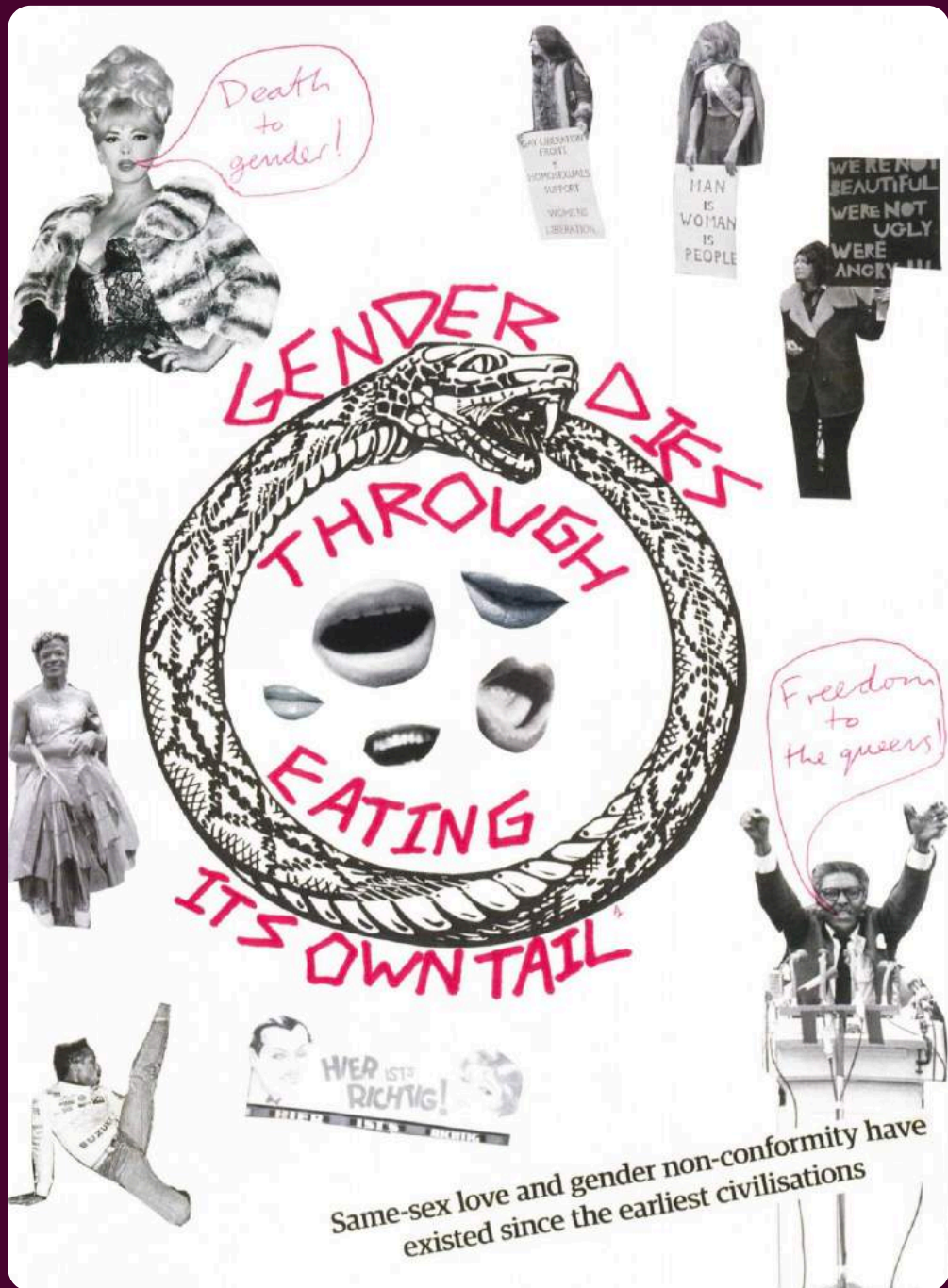
Stores of memory turned re-memory in temporary flesh.
The account of godly possessions, we sit like old worn out
boxes on a shelf—
gather dust.

Become the waste material of life everlasting.

Until we are picked up again and
blown outwards

Divine Breath is the tidying of heavenly shelves.

Silo Faith.



Sam Allen

Presenting **THE GOSSIP MYTH**

I firmly believe I was put on this earth to drink various lukewarm beverages on someone's carpet whilst talking so fast my words become a singular noise, periodically broken up by a gasp/laugh/cough/sob. The existence of essay deadlines is therefore heinous to me as they prevent me from reaching my full shit-talking potential; tea sessions (figuratively and metaphorically) must end before sunrise to enable the gaining of a degree (which I am constantly reminded by my mother is why I'm here). In my years of talking, I have become something of a gossip connoisseur. Whether this is due to having spent a decade in an all-female secondary and sixth form, or because I have Mediterranean blood I don't know. What I do know is if you say you have something to tell me, my life is meaningless until you do.

*I have something
to tell you...*

I have to believe I am not a horrible person. I'm not sure I'm a good one but that's a discussion for another time; however, I have been fed the rhetoric since childhood that gossip is an inherently evil, selfish activity serving to gratify the curiosity of those engaging in it whilst tearing down another's privacy or reputation. Whilst there is undoubtedly a nugget of truth in this, I believe gossip is an art form one can get better at, curating both the content of the conversation and method of communication to create a discourse that can have an important impact on relationships and actions. I should make a disclaimer about one of the key tenets of Gossip here: if all parties come to the conversation with a similar level of knowledge about the subject, the subject can henceforth be discussed at will. However, privacy must be respected and serious secrets kept, provided harm isn't caused by this. Gossip and guilt shouldn't go hand in hand – the only way to prevent this is mutual respect, both between the gossiping parties and towards the gossip subject. Didacticism over. Go forth and chat shit.

A GOSSIP-THEMED READING LIST:

'Women Talking' by Miriam Toews
'Embroideries' by Marjane Satrapi
'Reading Lolita in Tehran' by Azar Nafisi
Normal Gossip (podcast)
Binchtopia - 'Gossip: Women's Original Sin' episode (podcast)

my beautiful mother



Last term my supervisor set us possibly the greatest essay question ever constructed in the history of the English Literature trips: 'Is women's writing – or women's talking – necessarily feminist?'. I read this and almost cried with happiness; in a syllabus undeniably dominated by masculine, homogenous discourse I was being asked to talk about what I love most: women and talking. Part of our secondary reading for the essay was a film/novel called 'Women Talking' (I was obviously beside myself) by Miriam Toews, which I had already devoured feverishly and totally by coincidence a few months before. This leads me on to my thesis statement regarding gossip: inter-female gossip, if not inherently feminist, serves a feminist purpose – and so I will defend the tea-spiller until the end of my days. When my friends and I gossip – or as I prefer to term it, spread the gos[sil]pel – what we are actually doing is actively listening to and loving each other. Our gossip is golden; it's not malicious or cruel (i.e. she's so dumb for getting with him, and he's def punching above his weight) but genuine and nuanced (i.e. I think she's repeating patterns from her previous relationship by hooking up with him and whilst in some senses I think casual sex will emancipate her emotionally, I worry that they're not communicating effectively and that he is far more invested in the dynamic than she is). It comes from a place of interest and affection (most of the time, we're not saints); the oral tradition of female speech and discussion, in spaces entirely devoid of men, is so unbelievably important and perhaps the closest we'll ever get to transcending the patriarchal consciousness we're all unfortunately subject to. Sometimes when I'm talking to my friends, I can feel the conversations reverberating back through time and it makes my teeth hurt, as though I'm at once participating in every conversation any woman has ever had with another. In case you hadn't guessed, I'm quite an intense person to get coffee with.



fig. 2 Madeleine & Dora, 2023



All I want to do in this life is know people, and talking gets you as close to that as is humanly possible. We tell stories in order to live and all that – Didion was right in two senses, I think. Women have told stories to survive for millennia; spreading wisdom about their bodies, sex, pleasure, emotion, as well as rooting out male cruelty in communities via the sharing of experience and knowledge. We, all genders, also tell stories in order to live with ourselves; when I overshare, I am not doing so out of an inane need for spotlight and attention, but from a desperation to absolve myself, for someone to hear all the disgusting things that I have done and felt and tell me they love me anyway. My friends gossip and I love them. They're gross and I love them. Sometimes they do bad things and I love them for it. And, at the end of everything, we sit and talk, and through talking, we are also loving. We are saying you are worthy of my time and I will drop everything to listen to you and I trust you to listen to me. We talk about others because they have hurt us, or because we worry about them, or because sometimes people just act strangely and it would be unnatural not to notice and dissect! We talk and we talk and we talk, and we will do so until the end of time (or at least until a deadline beckons).

By MADELEINE WHITMORE

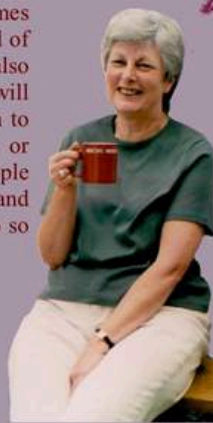


fig. 3 my mum & her best friend, 1992

Fellas, is it gay to be happy?

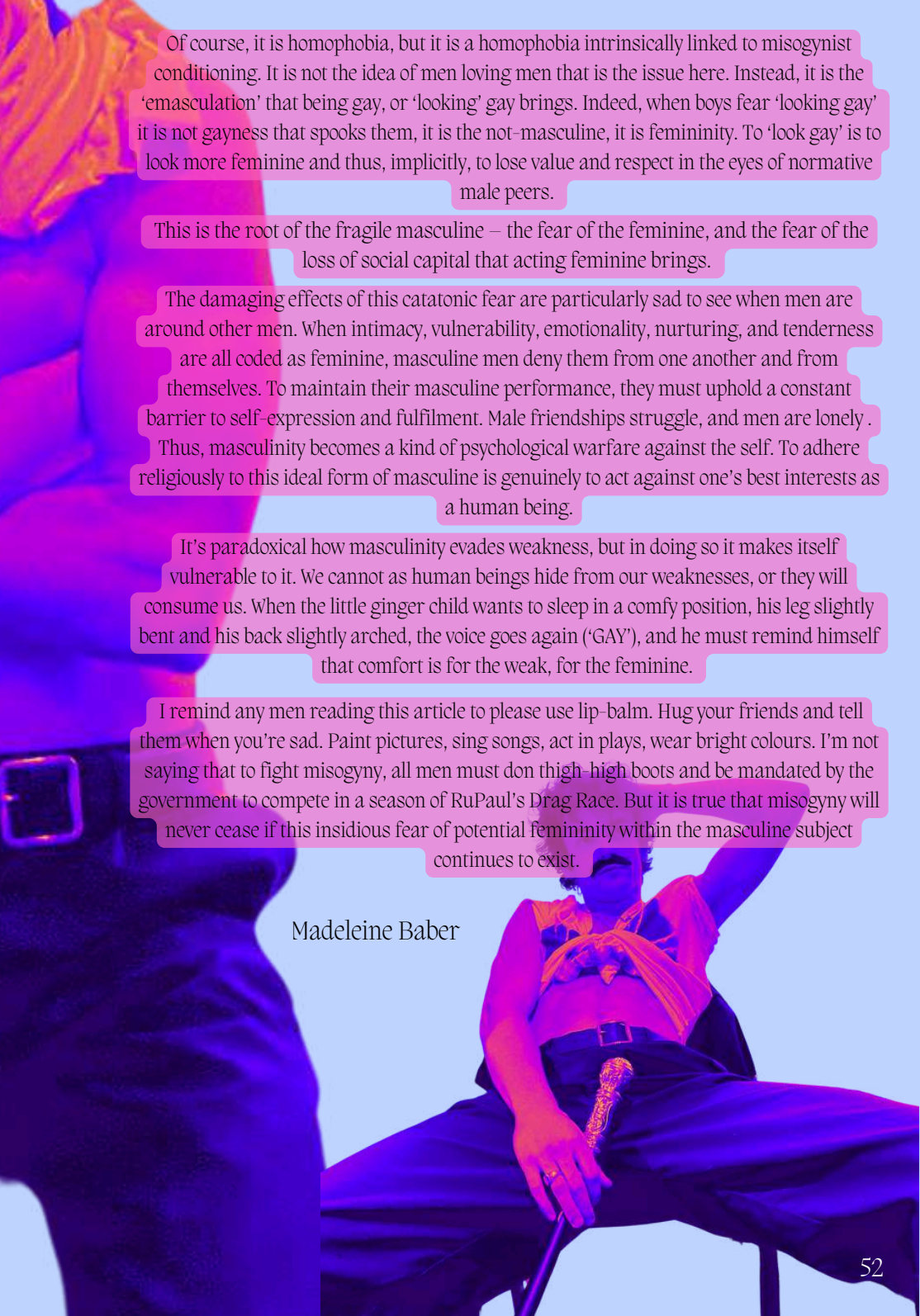
the fear of femininity and why it is crippling men.

On one of my daily doom scrolling missions through Instagram reels, I came across a strange video. An aggressively freckled little ginger boy performs miniscule mannerisms – from crossing his legs to putting on lip-balm. Each time his action gets a little too ‘feminine’, a disembodied voice shouts ‘GAY’, he is immediately reminded of the demands of his masculinity, and he adjusts his mannerism accordingly. The video is captioned POV: you’re a guy.

Whilst it’s ridiculous to open this essay with a reference to a random reel in the ocean of content that is Instagram, it did have like a million likes. So, evidently, it spoke some truth to the masculine experience. This silly kid, in his minute-long video, revealed how fragile masculinity is, how the internal experience of masculinity is like a walk through a minefield and all the mines are girly mines, painted pink and wrapped in coquette bows. When the mine explodes, it covers you in pink glitter, surrounds you with kittens, writes ‘FEMME’ on your forehead and ‘BOTTOM BOY’ on your arse. Put bluntly, you step on the mine, and you are emasculated, you are humiliated, you lose your social capital.

The masculine human has long been the default version. God did make Adam first, after all. This means when masculinity asserts itself, it asserts this position as the default, as player number one, as king. Often, then, masculinity is vulnerable in a way that femininity isn’t, simply because it must prove itself dominant. It’s as if one small lapse, one instance of proximity to the other, could bring the entire kingdom crashing down

In our post-*Gender Trouble* context, threatening others confront the masculine constantly. So, ‘alpha’ male dude bro podcasters exalt a version of hyper-masculinity. They look to their soy-boy liberal, potentially gay (but if not just vegan with an ear-piercing) ‘beta’ male counterparts as evidence of the downfall of society. This is because homogeneity provides masculinity with its strong foundation. It relies on men not allowing themselves to differ from one another. To appear differently is to reject masculinity’s normative coding, the ‘normal’ default. Because of this, male friendship groups create an echo-chamber within themselves. They are full of men afraid to express and to develop their emotions, their artistic sensibilities, their intellectual capabilities and their individuality. ‘I would wear jewellery/grow my hair out/put on nice-smelling perfume/write poetry/read Plath/sincerely love my friends, but I don’t want to look gay.’ The gay man diverges from the masculine social code. He undermines the pretence of the homogenous standard, and thus he threatens its claim to the meaning of the word. For the straight masc guy, proximity to him suggests that same rejection.



Of course, it is homophobia, but it is a homophobia intrinsically linked to misogynist conditioning. It is not the idea of men loving men that is the issue here. Instead, it is the 'emasculatation' that being gay, or 'looking' gay brings. Indeed, when boys fear 'looking gay' it is not gayness that spooks them, it is the not-masculine, it is femininity. To 'look gay' is to look more feminine and thus, implicitly, to lose value and respect in the eyes of normative male peers.

This is the root of the fragile masculine – the fear of the feminine, and the fear of the loss of social capital that acting feminine brings.

The damaging effects of this catatonic fear are particularly sad to see when men are around other men. When intimacy, vulnerability, emotionality, nurturing, and tenderness are all coded as feminine, masculine men deny them from one another and from themselves. To maintain their masculine performance, they must uphold a constant barrier to self-expression and fulfilment. Male friendships struggle, and men are lonely. Thus, masculinity becomes a kind of psychological warfare against the self. To adhere religiously to this ideal form of masculine is genuinely to act against one's best interests as a human being.

It's paradoxical how masculinity evades weakness, but in doing so it makes itself vulnerable to it. We cannot as human beings hide from our weaknesses, or they will consume us. When the little ginger child wants to sleep in a comfy position, his leg slightly bent and his back slightly arched, the voice goes again ('GAY'), and he must remind himself that comfort is for the weak, for the feminine.

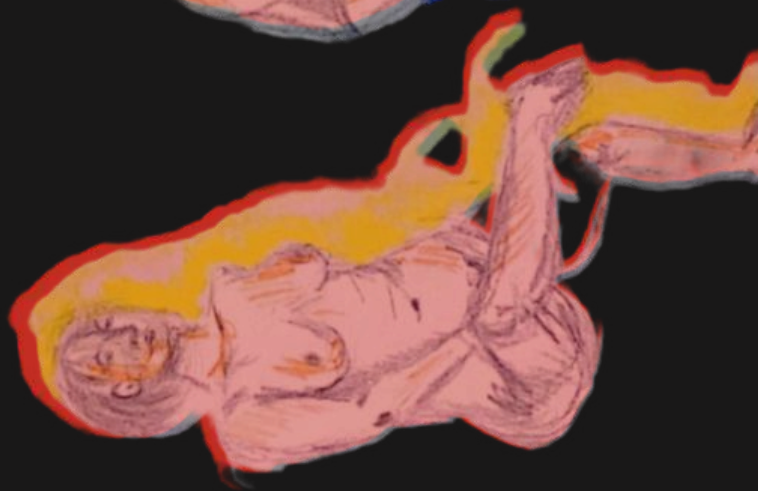
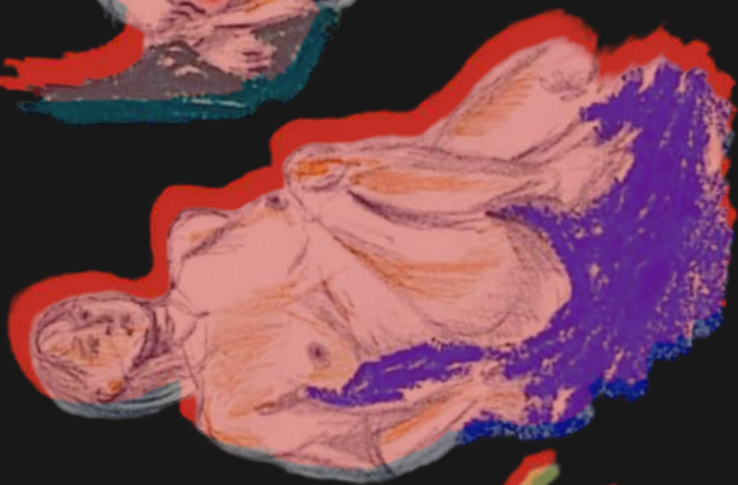
I remind any men reading this article to please use lip-balm. Hug your friends and tell them when you're sad. Paint pictures, sing songs, act in plays, wear bright colours. I'm not saying that to fight misogyny, all men must don thigh-high boots and be mandated by the government to compete in a season of RuPaul's Drag Race. But it is true that misogyny will never cease if this insidious fear of potential femininity within the masculine subject continues to exist.

Madeleine Baber

LOUIS WEARS MY CLOTHES

(again)





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