

NoVA 

Prism Center

-PRESENTS-



The Lantern

Issue 04





Foreword



As I sit down to write this letter and reflect on how far we've come over the past year, I keep coming back to how far we still have to go. NoVA Prism Center has seen dramatic growth since we published the third issue of *The Lantern*. We've moved to a new (and much larger) facility, launched our community fridge and food pantry, expanded our programming and our library, and have expanded our hours of operation to provide greater access to all of our services. Our community has grown with us, supported by the incredible people who give so much time, passion, and effort to each other and to the Center.

And yet so many of us are physically and emotionally exhausted, and every single day feels like another challenge that we must overcome so that we can continue to choose to live as our authentic selves. Violence against the LGBTQ+ community has continued to escalate, and the undercurrent of fear is unmistakable as basic rights to healthcare and dignity are increasingly stripped from the transgender community at large. This letter, and the zine you are now reading, take on a different light. These, too, are acts of resistance and resilience. This zine is the culmination of countless moments where members of our community chose defiance in the face of overwhelming fear and chose to share their stories, to celebrate queer joy, and to take strength and power in community.

Each of us already knows what it feels like to be faced with a decision between authenticity and compliance, with safety hanging in the balance. Every work in this issue of *The Lantern* is, at its heart, a glimpse into the moment where someone chooses a path to take. This zine could not be made without the efforts of our contributors or the donors who helped bring this zine to life through preorders, so to all of you, we extend our sincerest thanks.

Finally, always remember: when you shine a light, you just might see a rainbow.

With love,

Leon van der Goetz

Executive Director
NoVA Prism Center & Library



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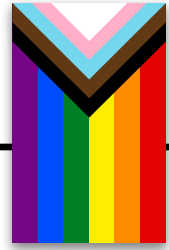


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We Keep Us Safe

CJ Mandell (they/any)



This piece represents an experience at Manassas Pride in combination with the spirit of various community members in Virginia against hateful groups and a political climate that denies freedom of expression. The magic and safety permeating community spaces through organizing is an effective means of showcasing the strength of our community, resiliency, and the power we have collectively to reject fascism. The monstera leaves represent my personal experience still growing and finding roots in the community while the colors in the background indicates the environment of Northern Virginia. Having separated colors to me shows the various obstacles we must overcome, one major one being a feeling of separation from one another outside of community spaces (which are limited in itself). One important area that I want to highlight is increasing the connection between older and younger generations of LGBTQ+ community members in NoVA.





sweet tooth / rotting gums

Casey Kendle (they/them)



I cut my mouth on a popsicle stick.
the blood mixed with the red syrup
dripping down my chin
to form a sweet metallic taste
in the back of my throat,

reminiscent of when I
kissed you for the first time.
Your lips tasted like red 40 and
the fear that your mother would find
out about us.

Do you still think about me?
When you bite your cheek and feel
the trickle of tart cherry
coat your tongue.

Do your hands still long for mine?
Or have they forgotten that too.



The Scent of Tiger Lilies



Izzy Tyack (he/him)

You're stoned.

You spend a lot of time that way now,
now that you are you and not the girl your mother named
and put into dresses.

Not her but the boy that became a woman first, lived as a
woman for far too long
before ever being able to stand up
and say to the world that you were a man all along.

This you is happy now,
so happy times become happy stoned times - not the sad
stoned alone hours of college.

And you're happy as you walk along the blacktop path,
following after your love,
two beloved dogs in your hands.

You're walking back to the home you share
and the world is small and close.

You think about this moment,
this gloriously mundane June night,
and you think: thank you
as you inhale the scent of tiger lilies.



In Bloom

Zenia deHaven (they/them)



As I spend the awkward but obligatory seconds waiting outside my shower for the water to heat to a blissful scald, I realize why I got several pointed stares over the past few days.

I frown at my mirror. Because I enjoy bathing at the temperature of an imploding dwarf star, the glass has already fogged from the rolling steam. I'm half-blind without my contacts; I have to remove them pre-shower or they'll dry before I even reach the conditioning phase. With the side of my hand, I wipe away just enough of the fog to frame my heart-shaped face. I stoop over the sink to look closer, the cool granite biting into my hips. At last, I see it. It's faint, like a ghost phasing between dimensions, but there, on the small space between my lip and my nose, is a mustache.

Societally, I'm not supposed to have a mustache. I was assigned female at birth and am femme-presenting, even though I drown in gender envy seeing mundane things like shirtless college guys playing cup pong. I haven't undergone any gender-affirming care. This is mostly because I'm not interested, but I'm also indecisive. I've debated changing my haircut for the better half of a decade and, spoiler alert, it's the same.

Regardless, I'm happy with how I look for the time being, though I dream of rocking a magnificent undercut.

I admire my mustache, turning my head this way and that to absorb its full glory. I typically shave it before it's noticeable, but I must have been too busy to realize. A passing glance in my direction wouldn't reveal much, but

anyone speaking to me would have remarked on it. Pursing my lips, I ponder the interactions I had in recent days. I could have sworn that people, from lifelong friends to passersby in grocery aisles, had shot some curious looks at me. Or was I thinking too hard about it? Admittedly, I was procrastinating laundry and thus pieced together some questionable Please Don't Perceive Me outfits, but was my mustache the culprit?

I'd left the water on too hot. The heat clings to my bare skin and dribbles down in warm droplets of sweat. At that moment, I don't care about the potential havoc I'm inflicting on the water bill. I'm looking at my face, my large, brown eyes reflecting my concern, and, not for the first time, consider letting the mustache grow to its greatest potential.

But I know I won't.

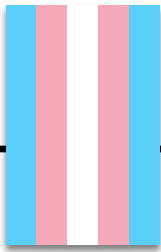
I can't verify how many of those odd looks I garnered were from my budding mustache. Maybe all, maybe none. But it doesn't matter. I don't want to stand out, especially not for any negative reasons.

I live in a Virginia suburb that's fairly diverse and open about different sexualities and gender identities. But even then, if I were to forgo shaving and sport leg hair and a mustache to-be, I doubt I'd make it to the gas station and back without a slur or two screaming my way. Sometimes, I imagine a mythical place where non-binary people can be beautifully and entirely androgynous without fear of ridicule. Though I've never been there, I imagine that place is Portland.

But I live in Virginia, not Portland. And if the thin hairs on my upper lip were enough to earn me some unpleasant side-eyes, I wasn't about to test the limits. I'll continue shaving, probably nick myself a few times like a fool, regardless of my technique, and hopefully pass under the radar. Maybe I'll even do my laundry so I don't have to don felt-lined Crocs and a wrinkled hoodie with the name of a college I never attended.

But, who am I kidding! My hamper isn't overflowing *that* much, and I still have somewhat socially acceptable articles of clean clothing.

Maybe Virginia will become the new Portland, and I can get the half-shaved haircut of my dreams and be showered in praise, but until then, the 'stache will have to wait.



Shifting Lanes

Amaris Coleman (she/her)



In collaboration with Rodney Cobbs (He/Him)

This short film is based off my story of coming out as a trans woman. While not a 1:1 retelling, it captures some of the same feelings and efforts I had coming out.



I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Likes Me at the Very Least)

Jarrod Campbell (he/him)



Memory plays cruel tricks when we try too hard to remember.

Spurred on by songs popular on the radio, songs of love that weren't for me, I still did my best to come close to even a semblance of what these top forty hits promised other boys my age. But those nonsensical boys wanted to fake these promises with girls foolish enough to believe in promises carried over airwaves. So I watched in vain, waiting in pain for a heart to share my heart instead of tearing it out, ripping it apart and stomping what remains into the ground.

The list of boys that broke my heart is too long. Focus zeroes in on various experiences creating a whole with no regard to individuals.

At the skating rink, just like in the halls of school and the city mall, the search mattered just like the method of the hunt. Signs existed then, if I only understood where or how to look, and roles were practiced whether I knew it or not.

The mysterious motions came naturally and without comprehension. An ancient song and dance routine innate and terrifying. Fear of the unknown lurked in every encounter, threatened from behind trees, lurking in kind eyes, and murderous in the form of words. But greater than any fear was desire – for knowledge, for experience, for at least a pound of flesh.

What I wanted remained off limits. Adding to the suffering of no physical outlet for desire, I found no positive representation of that desire. For all I knew at the time, that

form of carnal expression led to either a punchline or death. Enough to scare a weaker kid straight. What I wanted remained a source of shame during the day but an endless source of pleasure at night.

With my door closed, lights out and stripped down to my underwear, what I wanted was always mine. The need for any form of practice never lost importance. Approach still mattered, even in fantasy. So did behavior, attitude and proposition. Most fantasies were escalated extensions of uninteresting interactions from earlier in the day or week. I wanted to be prepared just in case the real situation ever presented itself in the locker room at school or while walking laps around the mall on a Friday night.

Channels of desire remained closed off until I understood more about the mechanics of our fraternity. Constant exposure to guys my age and older gave me awareness that I wanted them but I lacked the know-how needed to complete the mission if the opportunity arose. There was no widely available sex education for boys with my disposition. I understood the gist but not the gestures. And the hilarious ways guys picked up females inspired scenarios even more laughable and doomed to fail if tried out on another guy. I've always wanted to know if the straight, cis-gendered male approach of flirting and seduction would work on themselves. Probably, since they seem dumb enough to believe their methods could actually succeed.

Like most of my sexual education, what fantasies didn't provoke by way of invention, then a composite of learning

experiences pieced together formed the bedrock off all I knew. Intuitive comprehension from my buddies' straight porn stashes gave me a wealth of ideas thanks to that outside influence. On the other hand, a sweet tooth devotion to chewing gum and lollipops unknowingly prepared me for other avenues of success. Erotic mathematics prepared me for action and for years I waited, poised for proposition. But geography and Jesus made sure that part of the Bible Belt choked out the most modes of desire possible. So much love and lust to give a man but with no man willing to open their arms and legs wide enough to receive. Too many hands stayed closed in praying formation and too many legs barely had enough strength to walk or even stand on their own.

Dance routines incorporated more aspects of my life with the hope that I'd become a beacon for male desire, a lighthouse in turbulent times and climes for wayward and wanting men. Solo struggles assembling material from NY magazines and films filtered through LA lies built a machine always looking, and doggedly DTF. After self-searching deep into my holy soul and a relationship doomed to fail from the very start, I finally had the understanding and mustered the strength to convert myself into what I always wanted to be. I not only had the audacity and my own permission – I also had sacrosanct illumination.

And in that light I could become delirious, unfettered, ever so harmful to myself, delusional and gloriously blind.



Ornament

OPB (she/her)

Anastasia is eleven years old when her father removes her from the royal school of ballet and she watches her skirts and slippers burn in the fireplace. The message is clear in the dark smoke: there is no room for her heart, not in leisure, not anywhere in the palace. When she is caught peeking at the older girls practicing, hiding in the back of the dark room, she is given a piano and a cross-stitch sampler and another pony.

What prince will marry a dancer, they tell her? It is improper, unattractive. She exists for one reason, and that reason has nothing to do with the reasons she enjoys her existence.

She screams. She flings open her windows and throws out the sampler and bangs on the piano, casting a harsh, discordant noise out into the spring air. Without the ballet school, there is nothing for her to enjoy. Horses defecate where they stand and eat, and anyway it humiliates her to need two men merely to get atop one, and then she must be accompanied at all times.

Ivan and Avgust ride out together, just the two of them, unencumbered by such restrictions.

Sometimes she sits and watches them train in the yard. They all take their courses together with a tutor, but it is they who get to train, spar, with magic and with their own bodies. Valeria practices with them, the only girl in the military academy, but only because of her family name, the one she loves so much for what it affords her, the one her brother Avgust resents with equal fervor.

Anastasia does not want to go to war, yet sometimes it sickens her to see them enjoying the fresh air while she is shut up inside with stuffy books or her cursed sampler.

It is only when Avgust sits and reads inside with her that the ache fades. Together they talk about magic of ages past, of lost civilizations, of the great queens who commanded armies and built dynasties and rode their horses astride.

She wonders if he sees the envy on her face, in the cold glint of her eye when she thinks about what the tiara means for her. There will be no crown, no army. Only jewels, ornaments. It is a busy future and an intolerable one. Balls, pleasantries, heirs.

She vomits the day she meets a foreign prince for the first time. She dislikes the way his eyes linger on her, and how quickly they leave her when her father speaks.

He does not speak to her.

“Wasn’t he charming,” Ivan says when the boy leaves.

“Not in the slightest,” says Anastasia, turning away, skin crawling.

One day she runs into Valeria as the girl comes inside from training, cheeks flushed. Her long, dark ponytail is still perfectly straight, neat, even though the sweaty hair around her face is a wild halo. Valeria’s grey eyes flicker with annoyance.

She has disliked Anastasia for a long time, since Avgust began neglecting his training for books.

Anastasia forces the hostility in Valeria's face away, mentally commanding her to look pleasant, to smile down at her.

It does not stick. The dark sneer returns the second Anastasia frees her from the magic. Her eyes linger as Valeria walks stiffly away, boots thundering across the floor.

She likes that sound, the way the girl marches as if there is nothing that could stop her.

It starts to disappoint her when Valeria is not at their lessons, and when she walks by Avgust, Ivan, and Anastasia playing cards in the library, and when she dances with a boy from the academy at the summer ball.

And when Avgust walks by, tall and dark haired and pale-eyed, and for a moment she thinks he is his sister, for they have that same brisk, self-assured stride, they look so similar, and her stomach catches, until he turns his head or greets her.

She does not understand this dismay.



angel of change

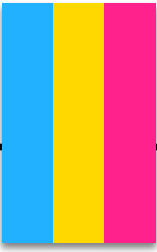
Razi Rupert (they/them)



Well, I wanted to make some art. I felt lonely; I felt like a tired nonbinary Jewish bitch; I felt the itching in my fingers; I needed to make something. Something to put on a T-shirt or show off to my parents. To me this is the angel of change the angel of twilight, the angel of transition, and on their shoulders it says:

rolling light away from darkness,
and darkness from light;
גולל אור מפני חשך
וחשך מפני אור

From the Ma'ariv Aravim
Because you are beautiful, because you are trans; because
you can be anything you want to be.



Water

Heaven Hall (she/her)



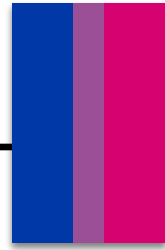
Lyrics:

Your mother told me I wasn't like another
But I find it very hard to believe her
These recurring thoughts make me suffer
Thought I was better
Water, can you save me like no other
Can you help me save the sweat for later
Can you save the body for a lover
For a lover
I only speak for what I see
Doesn't matter what people tell me
It doesn't make a difference for my needs
Thought I was better
Water, can you save me like no other
Can you help me save the sweat for later
Can you save the body for a lover
For a lover



After Yusef Komunyakaa's Facing it

Allison Ashton (she/her)



Facing Abraham Lincoln when your family was mostly on the wrong side of a war and you want to do better next time.

My gaze catches the angles of his marble face, and I'm not sure if I'm looking at him or there are shadows of history looking back at me. He's taller than any man, his words better than most.

With malice toward none, with charity toward all... I'm sorry, in this economy, it stings because my heart doesn't beat at that rhythm and I want to be good.

I look left. *The world will little note, nor long remember...* Yet here I am, surrounded by people, trying to stand up straight under his gaze. The tourist family next to me doesn't seem to have it in them. No judgement.

There is no hush here, no silence, So many voices, so many footsteps on cold stone.

Light falls on the oculus and sticks to the wall, putting the government of the people into shadow. I've never been a fan of prosecutors either.

In this temple, as in the hearts of the American people for whom he saved the union the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.

A giant father's hands on those curved knees, his watchful stare and displeased expression.

Me too, Bro.

We both want to tell America to stand up straight even when no one's looking.

I want to hear him say that exhaustion isn't a failure. He felt despair too, he made mistakes. Only one person in this memorial suspended habeas corpus and he's the one carved into marble.

The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.

The Almighty has his own purposes.

A tourist drops a soda can and it bounces down the steps like gunshot. I flinch, no one else seems to catch it.

"We walked all this way. Can we get ice cream?" a child says. Which, fair enough. My legs are longer than hers and I want to press a cheek to the cool marble.

The stone itself is breathing slow, deliberate. He's still waiting for us to admit. There's so much more to do.

I turn away and carry the words with me. I hope the little girl gets her treat.

The world is hard enough.



Him-ness

Taylor Johnson (she/her)



I get distracted, sometimes, looking at
his lovely smile,
his beautiful green eyes
his long curly hair -

It's still strange to me, sometimes,
the *him*-ness of my person.

Searching, combing the ether with my delicate hands,
I always thought he'd be... someone else. I figured
I'd find some girl and settle down,
find a place,
build a life. We'd be
the nice couple down the hall,
those two ladies - "are they roommates" - "uh, *no*, not
quite" -
And people would either have a Conversation with their
children
or steer them away,
and whatever, we'd hug each other
and make it through.

And while the *him*-ness of him
doesn't change the queerness of *me* -
It's still strange to me, sometimes.

But when I joke and summon that lovely smile,
when I trace the lines beside those beautiful eyes,
when I run my fingers though that gorgeous hair -
when we hug each other,
trembling at this crazy life,
making it through -

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter
if people see us as the normies down the hall,
if people look past the multicolored glint on me.
Because
more than him being *him*
he's *mine* -
we're *us* -

And I am still as rainbow sequined glittery as ever
and he's still my person.

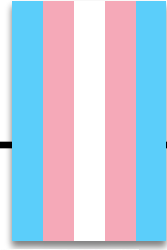
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When I was first dating my boyfriend, it was a bit of a surprise to both me and my family. I called him "my person" because "boyfriend" felt weird. I think I'm still getting used to it.



to be trans

Drew East (he/him)



It's scary to think that I will be trans for the rest of my life. I make a lot of trans art, but this one is particularly emotional for me. I will never be Cis, no matter what. it's difficult to live with that fact, but it's something that has beauty to it.





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