desire lines

encoding queer digital futures



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desirelines issue #1

desire lines: encoding communal futures explores a future digital world that dreams wilder and exists louder.

the magazine is a joint project by queer arts collective and the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

seven artists share their visions of digital liberation, spanning from early internet-coded yearning to escapist steamy chatrooms and seed-laced battle suits for revolution.

How The Internet Gave Me My Name

by Juri Kalyx A. Cunanan

Trends was how I found out about myself.

During the pandemic, everyone was hooked with labels and their online identity. Everything happened on the internet then. Even meeting new people. I can still remember what I would say for my introductions when I joined a new discord server or a new group chat. Using fake names, adjusting your age to something slightly older, highlighting your pronouns.

“Hello, my name is Wendell, you can call me Wendy. I'm turning 15 years old and I am pansexual and genderfluid. My pronouns are her/him depending on the day and I like frogs, sharks, anime, gaming obv, and cookies :3”

Looking back, the friends I made before that claimed they were gay or bi, non-binary and genderfluid, were now cis gendered straight people who saw their “phase” cringe now. They left that part of themselves as if it was a disgrace to look back on. As if the very thought of them doing that in the past was an insult to their name–their dignity. It made me confused, because how can you be ashamed for something you were so serious about before? Everyone was moving on as fast as the fleeting trends, and I was still stuck trying to look for myself.

But there is one specific conversation that made me truly scour for myself.

It was the summer before face to face classes. I was talking to my friend on call a few weeks before classes started. I was on my bed, and we were playing while talking about the possible changes in school and our classmates.

That was when she asked me the questions that made me overthink the whole school year. “What name are you gonna use to introduce yourself?” and “Are you still gonna wear the girl’s uniform?”.

I felt my mind go blank as I watched my character in the game fall and die because of the question. It was hard to answer, because even if I said what I wanted to do, I would not be able to do anything. I was a middle school student in a Catholic School. It was not even an option.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled blankly, suddenly losing the will to play the game. “We don’t have to talk about it, school’s still a few weeks away.” I added, dropping my phone to my bed. After that, I ended the call with the excuse of having to do chores. In reality, I scrolled through tiktok and stared at the wall. When school starts again, would I lose the person I was slowly becoming? Would I lose the me I have not even fully found? I was not even out to my parents at the time, and my school was not open to people “like me”.

Scrolling through tiktok, my for you page was full of gender dysmorphia. How catholic school made them get out of the “gay” phase. How they feel trapped and confined. It made my heart plummet to the ground—what if they strip me off my name right then and there? I did not want my real name to pass like I was just another trend that grew old.

And my fears came true.

Everyday, I felt like I was losing myself. Every morning, I check the mirror, and the person I see becomes more and more distorted, until it all becomes a blur. And I had gotten so used to students not taking me seriously that I did not even bother correcting them when they called me by my dead name. I had become what I feared: a fleeting trend.

Until I saw her—I meant... him. He was just like me.

He had his skirt pinned, showing his denim shorts underneath, and he had pins with his pronouns showing proudly. He did not care about how the school forced him to wear the girl's uniform, because as long as he knew who he was, nothing else mattered. It was a rebellion in my school that felt like it unlocked the chains restraining my soul.

Now, I do not study there anymore, nor does he. But even if that time felt like hell, I do not think I am able to explain how I got confident with who I am without mentioning that school at least once.

That senior made me realize that I should not be able to be put down so easily just because the system said no. I should not have lost myself because the trends contradicted everything about me. And I should not have just let myself give up because I could not face the person in the mirror.

I think if the present me and the little me meet, he would not believe that this is who I have become. He would probably be so amazed that he became so loud and relatively more confident with his appearance, voice, and smile. Knowing how I was so anxious and shy back then, it is sometimes hard to believe that I evolved into the person I am now.

Now that I am not chained by judgement, I learned to not care about the current trends or the clothes I sometimes have to wear. Because I know who I am, and I know who I want to be. And as cheesy and cliche as it sounds, it is my truth. And that is no trend.

Before I end this, I just realized that you only know my fake name. Now, I can finally introduce myself to you. Not a fake name—my name.

Hi. My name is Juri Kalyx, you can call me Juri or Xander. I'm turning 15 years old in November and I like reading, writing, comfy sweaters, and me.



Juri Kalyx A. Cunanan is a young Filipino writer studying Creative Writing at Bataan High School for the Arts.

Ever since they were a child, they found comfort in reading and the worlds written by authors. Growing up, becoming a published author has become their life goal, aspiring to bring comfort and wonder to other people similar to the literary works they read.

a butch is a receptacle until told otherwise

by mk zariel

i rarely received your anger, your scorn, your untidy
perfect scrawls like graffiti on the edges of your mind
like the room-full-of-crazy in a cheaply made film—like
the incomprehensible mirror writing i adored
when i was three. instead i was your brick wall, your easy target.

won't you cut me off—a second time, a third time, changing your mind
over and over (and over)—then suffer publicly, as if daring me to reach out
your hollowed-out face an engraved invitation, clean lines mocking me
like your collection of blank phrases echoing

like a ghost learning to network. i hate that i can't care for you
with your voice flattening to the shallow hum of a chatbot
a 1am conversation with ChatGPT because a conversation
with you is somehow more extractive, a hallucination—
a string of nonsense with correct grammar.
and today i had a crisis of faith and pretended
it wasn't about you—because i apparently can't feel close to Eris
until i feel close to a repressed teenage guy with a martyr complex—
and that is the worst logic i have ever encountered, even in a faith
that prides itself on disorder. i found religion the night

you almost left me for the first time

editor's note: this is an excerpt from a longer piece



mk zariel {it/its + masc terms} is a transmasculine-lesbian neuroqueer theater artist, Best Of The Net and Monarch Award nominated poet, movement journalist & staff reviewer at the Anarchist Review of Books, and BashBack aligned anarchist. it is fueled by folk-punk, Emma Goldman, and existential dread.

the author of VOIDGAZING (2026, Whittle Micropress), DIFFERENT WITH HIM (2026, Rockwood Press), and BOY APPARITION (2025, Vinegar Press), it can be found online at https://mkzariel.carrd.co/, creating conflictually queer-anarchic spaces, writing columns for Asymptote and the Anarchist Review of Books, and being mildly feral in the great lakes region. it is kinda gay ngl.

Mermaids

by Emily Rita Roche

I used to think children believed anything.

Gigi, my sweet girl, soaked in the shallow half-bathtub with her damp white curls and the brown eyes of a newborn calf. She looked more like me than I did.

Gigi believed in many things, even things she couldn't see. The evidence was in the reward—a crisp five dollar bill for a lost tooth, a glittering bundle of presents, a scattered rainbow of delicate plastic eggs. I wonder now if that's all there is to it. That anyone, children, grownups, will believe anything, any promise, if it ends in a reward.

I gave Gigi one last bath, the night before I left for my sapphic siren, and promised that if she was good I'd bring her beautiful seashells and a kind starfish to befriend. The nanny usually covered bath time, but I promised myself I'd give that life one last effort. See if there was anything salvageable. Yet as the bubbles popped, I could feel the pang of each one like a keen tooth piercing my too-human skin. I had to live with that feeling. Gigi splashed in the clean water, marred only by the ring of purple left from my misuse of Manic Panic. She asked me why my hair changed.

"All mermaids have purple hair," I told her. "When they're in love."

"That's not true," she said. "Mine is pink, it matches my tail."

She flopped her chubby feet and I smoothed the downy edges of her hair. It was so soft, more like unwoven silk. Gigi was still so new. She didn't know about multiplication tables or how to fry eggs or the difference between fantasy and reality. If she said something, it was the final truth. She was a mermaid. Mommy was too.

"You love Daddy."

I nodded, Yes, but said nothing.

Even if she didn't have the words, Gigi knew what a bad marriage looked like. She felt her father's ever-widening absence, always away on a church mission in some off-beaten corner of the Earth. I'm sure she noticed my lazy addiction to the computer.

That's why I hired a nanny. To let her care for Gigi while I spent hours playing Bubbles online.

Bubbles was more than a game. It was an infinitely customizable role playing adventure. You could be a whale, shark, jellyfish, mermaid. My avatar had green eyes and a pearlescent tail and was perfectly topless, nothing but a few dreadlocked strands of purple hair to keep me honest.

While Gigi and the nanny watched cartoons and ate microwaved dino nuggets, I became a mermaid, traveling to distant seas where other like-minded creatures chatted in ocean terms. Call me on my shellphone.

Seas the day!

Find your porpoise.

I was told my purpose was to be a god-fearing wife and doting mother. As the bathwater grew cold and Gigi's flesh raised in prickly little bumps, the Bubbles theme music filtered in through the blank, white bathroom door. I knew once and for all that I was all wrong. I didn't belong there.

"Look Mama, I'm growing scales."

My neck tightened as I ran more hot water. I wanted to return to my life, the one that really fit me.

The best part about Bubbles was that I wasn't alone. People won't warn you that motherhood is so, so lonely. Each child only has one mother. Seaofluv1989 assured me she got on fine without one at all. She played as a siren in the game. That's what drew me in—the ancient musing of her digital body, the breezily sapphic poetry in her messages. She promised we could run away together, be together.

I knew my husband would never allow it. He didn't have to be there for me to believe that. So the next day I'd entrust Gigi to the nanny until he arrived home that evening. Gigi asked all night where the nanny was and I'd run out of excuses. She asked again—I answered with silence, instead spooning the thickening water over her head.

It fell like a velvet curtain. I wished it was one. I didn't want Gigi to see me. I didn't want her to remember this, to remember me at all. I'd preferred I never existed, not as I was. I wanted to be new. I scrubbed pills of dead skin from her back as she rubbed her eyes.

"It stings," she said.

"It's just soap, baby. Hold on."

I licked my thumbs and swept them across her forehead, over her eyes. She looked at me like she'd never seen me before. This newness, it didn't feel like I thought it would. It felt fraught and cluttered. I couldn't swim through it.

Gigi's eyes hardened then, like she knew I wasn't really there. Like soon I would pop too, leaving nothing but a sticky remembrance on the side of the tub. A scum that could be washed away quickly and with ease. She put a little palm up to my face, as if forgiving me, before sucking in her cheeks. She wanted a fishy kiss.

My phone chimed. The ringtone was a lilting siren's song.

I wiped my hands on my holey t-shirt and turned the screen toward me.

I can't wait to sea you, the message said. I smiled.

Seaofluv1989's Bubbles avatar appeared in place of a contact photo. A blue pixie cut, cherubic face, fins for ears, a Grecian tunic, bare feet.

Gigi asked who I was messaging.

"A friend." I said.

"Best friend?"

"Something like that." I wouldn't look at her.

She squirmed. Water splashed me and the phone—I wiped the slick screen, but Gigi wouldn't settle. She raised her arms, reached for me, and the phone slipped into the water. My pain escaped in a long wail and I shoved my hands into the tub. I navigated the toy boats, the dense plastic fish, all sunk to the bottom. Gigi cried and cried.

"I thought I was your best friend," she said.

"Stop moving." The edge of the phone emerged from under her and I yanked it from the filthy water. I pressed every button, then all of them at once, but the screen just spit my own face back at me.

I looked older and younger all at once. My brown eyes red at the corners, purple hair frizzy from the wet, bath time air, mouth hard and downturned, cheeks prickled with thin veins. I sucked in my cheeks and I didn't look like a fish at all. I looked like a frightened woman. I glanced at the bottom half of me—still legs, no fin.

I threw the phone back in the water, let it sink to the porcelain bottom.

"Take it," I said. "Take everything." My voice echoed loud across the tiled room. I flinched as it bounced back onto me.

"I'm tired," Gigi said, now startlingly calm.

"Me too." I rubbed my temples, a few bubbles latching onto my baby hairs. Then I wrapped Gigi up in a fresh towel and carried her off to bed. She was tired; she didn't even need a bedtime story. It was all over, and I retreated to the living room, to the computer and its pixelated ocean. I got lost in that ocean, and I never came back.

There were many women after seaofluv1989. Some were mermaids, others people. Many made me very happy, even fulfilled. But I was always a message in a bottle, floating away to some abandoned island.

Now I live alone, in my studio apartment, where I can hear the ocean always swelling outside. It's just me and the bed and the computer.

I use my computer to stalk Gigi's many accounts. When I see her, even through the screen, the scent of grape shampoo fills the air.

I messaged her, once. She'd just posted a photo of herself at church camp, tight roping over a white cord high above an endless forest. She believed in something unseen, that it would carry her across that rope. I wanted to comment, to say something memorable, something that would remind her of me. Truth is, I hardly remember her. She doesn't know me.

So I started with Hello. She didn't respond. But after a few days she posted again—a picture of her and her father with two oversized picket signs.

Losing my husband was like ditching a cement block. Losing Gigi was like abandoning ship, leaving her vulnerable to pirates and scoundrels and her father.

So I sent her a seashell and a star emoji; there was no starfish. Then I shut my laptop and laid on the floor. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to look at my empty room, at anything. There's joy in the reward—five dollars for a tooth, freedom for a daughter—but no one warns you about the missing piece. That the piece is no longer yours, it might even hate you for losing it, and there's nothing you can do to replace it.



Emily Rita Roche is a Las Vegas native now based in NYC.

She holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Southern Oregon University and is a Writing MFA candidate at Columbia University.

You can find her work in Bullshit Lit, Troublemaker Firestarter, heaven magazine, and Text Power Telling. She has received support from the Yale Writers' Workshop and Bread Loaf.

Hypo-text

by S.E. Hack

Text that does less
The irreplaceable original
Anti-hyper-text

Imagine that it comes from nowhere
That it isn't there when you look for it
Redacted, unformed

Digging deeper into itself
So far in it becomes a hole
A consuming nothing

A pocket universe between zero and one
Infinite room for all you have to say
As multitudinous as loquacious as you like

Beyond word images, past twisted captcha
Prove to me you're a human
By breaking a rule



S.E. Hack is a poet and a scholar transfixed by the practice of writing and the medium of text. He writes about desire in the post-apocalypse and the tumultuous nature of time and memory.

He enjoys nothing more than the texture of words in the mouth and their geometry on the page. His poems have been featured in Tomorrow Archive Vol. II, perhaps, and in two self-published collections: generator, and I can't pass the time alone.

The Bermeja Island

by Alf Bojórquez

Luisa opened the jar. It was full of coins and bills, the proceeds from the concerts they had organized to take food and medicine to Cuba. She was a girl covered in tattoos, wearing a slightly torn SSD t-shirt, a nose ring, and a thick chain around her neck.

Next to her bed was a pile of books and records that reached almost to the ceiling. Careful not to step on any, she crossed her room and went into the bathroom. After urinating while listening to Cel Ray, she started packing.

Since the economic blockade against Cuba had been tightened, she and her friends had held concerts. Throughout 2024 they had practiced with several events in support of Palestine. Even before that, Luisa had organized impromptu, disruptive noise concerts for Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street. So she had all the encrypted information, everyone used pseudonyms, and they kept changing the few accounts that received money through transfers. They tried to keep everything in cash. With the money they paid bails and lawyers to get people out of jail.

She put Mariana Enríquez's Our Part of the Night in her suitcase, jackets and rain shoes, several skirts and tops, three bottles of sunscreen, a map of the American continent, one of the Caribbean, and another of the Gulf of Mexico. She ate old kale chips that she found in the refrigerator and heard a horn. Adalberto's pickup. He was a tall, dark-haired boy, dressed with his shirt buttoned up to the neck.

Adalberto had had a difficult morning. At his house he had 36 cats. Each had the name of a different revolutionary. His favorite was Thomas Sankara, a black cat that seemed to

have some kind of green ribbon across the ribs. Before going to pick up his friend, Adalberto had to organize with his friends to take care of his animals. So in his cell phone he had several Signal groups to coordinate them by day and even by hour.

When Adalberto put his frog legs and suitcase in the truck, Thomas Sankara meowed at him, imploring him not to leave. The animal scratched the suitcase and was about to break it when he took it down from his pickup.

"Ready for the adventure?" Adalberto asked when he arrived for Luisa.

"I think so, and you?"

"Yes. I think so."

They hit the road. The sun rose between the trees.

When they arrived at the dock, they parked the car and two people greeted them from a distance. They took the suitcases to a small boat, where they were waiting.

"Are you ready to put up with me for more than a month?" Adalberto asked as he gave them a hug.

"I was born ready," Rodrigo said. He was a middle-aged man, a little bald and dressed like anyone else.

"Can we play the quiet game sometimes?" Lucía, a smiling girl dressed in plain clothes, joked.

They burst out laughing.

Luisa first connected with Lucía during the Black Lives Matter protests, as she had provided speakers for their noise concerts. But there was no time to catch up.

Lucía and Rodrigo explained to them that the boat had four engines: two installed and two more spares in the hold. They showed them how to start the engines, they raised the anchor, they released the moorings, and they kicked the dock. And so the small crew sailed from Savannah on a sunny morning. It was the summer of 2026.

"Did your suitcase break, Ada?" Lucía asked when she saw how he was covering it with one hand so his clothes wouldn't fall out.

"It was Thomas Sankara," Adalberto answered.

"You look too young to have fought in the revolutionary ranks of Burkina Faso." Lucía stopped carrying her luggage.

"No, no. That's my cat's name." Adalberto laughed.

And so they spent a week sailing off the coasts of Tamaulipas, Veracruz, and Campeche, until one night a heavy rain started to fall.

"Friends, I hate to scare you but apparently the weather conditions changed suddenly." Lucía looked at her cell phone, worried.

They hunkered down in a dry corner trying to shout over the storm.

"What do you mean 'suddenly'?"

"Before we left we checked and everything indicated we'd have the best weather, but it seems this storm could become a hurricane." Lucía was trying to throw a tarp over the other corner.

Adalberto fell to the floor as waves hit the portside, even as Lucía and Rodrigo tried to give him a hand.

"What do the apps and the radio say?" he asked as he got up, as if nothing had happened.

"That we stay close and in communication." Luisa turned up the radio volume.

Rodrigo and Lucía, worried, took out their phones and saw the maps that indicated weather forecasts.

"Tortuguita vessel, Tortuguita vessel. Here trying to establish connection from Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche. Do you hear me?" A serious but friendly voice could be heard a little choppy through the radio.

"Yes. Here Tortuguita vessel. We left a week ago, we were heading to Cuba," Lucía answered.

"Cuba? Impossible, friends."

(...)

Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo. Santificado sea tu nombre...

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?" Lucía floated in the middle of the sea.

She didn't know how much time had passed since the shipwreck. The Atlantic churned beneath her feet while Lucía bobbed in her life jacket. Lucía was afraid. She was trembling. She thought that maybe this whole idea of saving Cuba was just Luisa and Adalberto exaggerating. Maybe it wasn't necessary. Or at least they didn't have to be missionaries saving the world. Why did Americans always want to be the heroes of the story? Lucía just wanted to stay alive. Out at sea, all that activist nonsense sounded stupid and capricious.

Lucía drifted like that for hours, but suddenly her feet felt they were stepping on muddy sediment.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" she shouted several times.

As the tide and the sky started to calm down, Lucía could see a white strip in the distance and started paddling in that direction. She passed hours, shouting and paddling. Her stomach, mouth, and face hurt from all the crying and shouting. The mud was hardening as she approached the strip.

First her shoulders and then her waist came out of the water. Slowly and painfully, she kept walking. She couldn't distinguish if there were palm trees or people in the distance, but some shapes inside the white strip seemed to be moving. Maybe they were arms, perhaps branches, or just leaves.

"Friend, is that you? Are you okay?" Luisa shouted.

"Yes, friend. Are you okay, can you hear me?" As soon as she got out of that sandy mud, Lucía started running.

It was an island. A huge island where the sun beat down fiercely in the middle of nowhere.

(...)

editor's note: this is an excerpt from a longer piece



Alf Bojórquez is a Yucatecan travesti writer. Her first novel, Pepitas de Calabaza (2023), was published by Fondo Blanco. She was the winner of the Moving Narratives Award (2024) from the Prince Claus Fund and the British Council.

Her second book, a lyrical political essay, No Dam Can Hold This Furious Ocean. Power, Joy, and Anarchism, has just been translated into English and published by Ill Will. She will be touring the US with this book soon.

Pepitas de Calabaza has been recently translated into English by Desvelo and is searching for a publisher; a chapter will soon appear in Latin American Literature Today.

New Fashion for the End of the Old World // Project Runway: Hazmat Suit Edition

by Sky Nolan

We belong to always. We've used various words to accessorize our souls across time, but one feature remains consistent: our stubborn and glamorous commitment to freedom
— Alok Vaid-Menon

Where the challenge is to create
the first, last piece of clothing to exist.
Survival chic, street wear meets riot gear,
versatile: think turnout coat-ancestral quilt
hazmat suit-wedding gown.

Into the seams I'd sew sky,
the bluest blue, weave
its wide open through
the bodice for breathing room.

Across the chest I'd stitch
the name of every martyr,
& every martyr's mother,
in silk thread. The same silk
used in sutures to sew wounds,
scaffold new tissue, as in the names
will not just be worn by the body
but will be absorbed, becoming the body,
stronger than steel and uneraseable.

A freedom fighter told me he keeps
metal bottles in his backpack
so the cops bats don't bust his ribs,
I'd reinforce the ribcage
with a bulletproof vest
stamped fuck the police.

In indigo ink I'd print
a map of earth's waterways–
springs to streams to rivers to seas
–so we won't go thirsty
from a lack of memory.
Wool from cumulous clouds
and feathers shed from
not extinct yet birds
would insulate the lining, warming
and cooling, floatable, downy.
At the hips I'd set river stones
to keep the path land bound.
Tailor a waist that contracts
and expands in rhythm
with a shifting body,
a full and empty belly,
make a belt made of rue
for protection.

The suit would have pockets
that Emily would be proud of—
a pocket to store seeds:
    Hanoun, Faqqua Iris, Okra,
    Mallow, Maiz, Quinoa, Cedar,
    Cacao, Calendula
plants to make medicine,
to build fires, to brighten scorched soil.
A pocket
    for the hair locks of loved ones
    for lost poems
    for all the new worlds waiting to be born.

The model would be trans.
The body would be trans.
The future-past, and past-future, trans.

And as they strut down the runway,
through the smoke
of a ruined empire,
lit by a breaking dawn,
dazzled by a few humble
stars plucked from night,
they would know
what to carry
and what to release.

The judges wouldn't have a goddamn thing to say, would break their contract, walk out of the tv, weep at how well it was woven, as if the fabric of time
had never been broken, as if beauty
is never separate from survival.



Sky Nolan (they/them) is a queer writer, producer, and transplant living on unceded Ohlone lands. Their creative work explores the dynamic intersections between internal and external environments, ecological kinships, and emotional landscapes.

Nolan's first chapbook For The Compost won the 2022 Flume Press Chapbook Contest judged by José Antonio Rodríguez, and their work has been published by Arcturus Magazine, GirlsRightTheWorld, Leopardskin & Limes, Scribendi, and by Humans and Natue Digital Press.

Their poems appear in the anthologies In The Garden: Community Storytelling on Food, Ecology, and Place published by Torrey House Press, and Distilled Devotion: A Trans Poetry Anthology.

Caution: there's lemons in this one! aka, discovering queerness, desire, and endless transformative possibilities online through fanfiction

by Shubham Kaushik

"This work could have adult content. If you proceed you have agreed that you are willing to see such content." A bright yellow box blinks on top of an unassuming-looking screen.

I'm 15 and supposed to be reading about electromagnetic fields to finish a physics assignment. Instead, I find myself on tumblr staring at an artwork of two men locked in an embrace. One of them could hardly even be called a man because he was actually a biblical angel possessing a man.

I'm 15 and dizzy with the need to see them kiss, maybe more.

Below the artwork, a link promises more. My innate nature of being a horny freak wins over my need to be responsible, and I click 'proceed' - and the world is never the same again.

***

Growing up in India, with a family deeply uncomfortable with discussing sex, queerness felt distant. Despite not having a language for it, I remember feeling slightly off-center from everyone else around me. Like I was standing five steps away from the spot marked 'X' that everyone except me seemed to be able to find. I could see the mark, but a force-field was holding me in place, stopping me from closing the distance. Far from exploring the possibilities of queer desire, I was still using the word 'gay' to mean bright and happy.

That didn't stop me from becoming curious about sex, queerness, and desirous for connection, care, touch, pleasure, and community. Desirous for desire in all its capacities and forms.

***

When I was 16, the Supreme Court of India overturned a High Court decision from three years earlier that decriminalised homosexuality among consenting adults. The intervening three years hadn't really changed people's views on homosexuality. Queerness wasn't visible around me, and when it was, it was a slur being hurled at a classmate or my parents claiming it to be 'unnatural'.

Trying to discuss it with my parents was of no use. When I asked my mother, a science teacher, about sex, she said it was to make babies, and involved injections and medical procedures. The few glimpses of sex on screen in movies, that my parents rushed to fast forward, were enough to make me doubt my mother's words. My eyes were drawn to everyone in the general mishmash of bodies, moans, and movement - gender be damned. When my parents brought home a bootleg DVD of music videos, I remember staring at the beautiful, if scantily clad, women dancing on screen, my own breasts becoming vastly more interesting to me at that moment. This was much to the horror of my parents who found my self-timer nude photos on the family computer a few days later (promptly deleted, to my dismay).

Stories had always been my solace and shelter, from books to TV and movies. Although I did not go looking for queer desire and representation, it found me. And the internet supercharged my journey towards becoming a self-avowed horny freak, with fanfiction.

Fanfiction - written fictional works by fans of movies, TV shows, video games, and sometimes even real people - has a long history intertwined with the queerness. Modern fanfiction originated when women in the 1970s wrote, published and distributed stories about Kirk and Spock from Star Trek being involved in intimate relationships. Today, Archive of Our Own (lovingly referred to as AO3), the go-to platform for various fanworks but especially fanfiction, hosts over 17 million fanworks across more than 70,000 fandoms with 11 million users - and is always growing. According to a 2024 demographic survey, most users are queer, and the 'ship' with the most fanworks is Dean Winchester/Castiel from Supernatural – the same pair that got 15-year-old me to abandon my physics homework and spend the evening reading incredibly smutty stories.

It's not hard to see why young queer people flock to and exult in the existence of fanfiction when our stories have been historically overcensored, ridiculed or denied representation in media. The very purpose of fanworks is to break the canon, take nothing as gospel and write the narrative on our own terms. Rightly referred to as 'transformative' work, fanfiction encourages people to be more than passive consumers of media. Instead, they are led to see all possibilities that can exist in a universe, and if even that doesn't work, they can change the universe itself.

I've been reading fanfiction since the days of LiveJournal and the citrus fruit rating for explicit content (more sour means more explicit content), seeking out the ones with the most 'lemons'. At 15, having only watched or read stories entrenched in basic boy-loves-girl heteronormativity with female sexuality largely depicted as thin, white, reluctant, and coquettish, I was immediately drawn to a medium where none of these narratives seemed to be dominant. Characters written to be the peak of white masculinity were fat, queer, steeped in grief, swapping genders, and really into riding - the fun kind.

With one click, my world cracked open. I was dazed at the possibilities that existed, which people were writing about with care and passion. Soon, I was devouring everything from femslash to smut, angst, porn without plot, porn with feelings, to long 150,000 words slowburns exploring a character's trauma.

All of a sudden, there existed innumerable ways to love, to desire, to want, to gaze, to fuck, to connect, to exist. Perhaps not the most well-informed start, but fanfiction became my introduction to the various ways queer desire can manifest - soft and yearning, hard and nasty, and everywhere in between and beyond. Most importantly, I could exist somewhere amongst it all.

It felt revolutionary to me that there seemed to be no room for shame and no desire that could not be explored through words. The radical acceptance and wild creativity seeped into me, and I pivoted from guilt straight into being an active member of the community - a very unlikely occurrence for an anxious teenager whose personality was built on a foundation of guilt.

Importantly, a lot of this was taking place on a platform like AO3 which was birthed in 2008 because other profit-driven platforms were razing fan communities to the ground without notice, and censoring queer and seemingly 'dark' content. Fans realised that they needed a space to archive and protect their creative work and culture - an archive of their own, perhaps. AO3 is, and always has been, a non-profit, volunteer and fan-run, open-source platform with no ads.

It mattered that I wasn't being shown stories of a certain kind by an algorithm because it would make a corporation more money. My data wasn't being sold to third-party marketers without my permission, and I wasn't being shown ads. In fact, AO3's interface is rather bland, which let me get away with reading fics on the family computer for years (very important for a budding freak in a conventional Indian household).

Fanfics also led me to community - other queer people around the world driven to seek stories and worlds kinder to them than reality was. I commented on my favourite fanfics, wrote long litanies about what I loved, and would get even longer replies from authors. I introduced one of my best friends to queer fanfics of a show we watched together, and a few months later, she came out of the closet. At 17, I ran a semi-popular fanfiction blog with friends I made online through fandoms, and the three of us made our readers' wildest dreams come true by writing based on prompts we received - everything from soft cuddles, period sex, to BDSM. Our relationship wasn't just limited to fandoms - I met one of them in person when I moved to Europe, received birthday videos and presents from them, and even exchanged long letters.

Having access to a queer community online, unshackled by the censorship, surveillance and shame that surrounded me in my life, was essential to my existence as a lonely person living in a queerphobic context. Not only did it probably save my life by showing me I wasn't alone, it led me to be confident in my queerness, open to all possibilities, and protective of my curiosity about how people live, love, fuck and connect. It showed me that the tingling between my legs, the quickening of my heart rate, my fat body, and cavernous desires were normal and welcome.

In a way, this queer microcosm of creative writing, breaking and re-shaping stories, connecting with one another and exploring our queerness represents some of my hopes for the future. A future of endless possibilities, free from the constraints of extraction and profit-making, where we can unfold ourselves to meet all our desires, are supported by structures that allow us the power and space to write our narratives, on platforms owned by us and built for us. So that another horny-curious lonely teenager avoiding their homework can be transported into, and transformed by, our stories, love, community, and our beautiful, vibrant, creative and resilient existence.



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this series is an effort to uncover artistic visions for collective liberation in the digital age. what does it look like to dream beyond policy and technosolutionism? what can we envision if we imagine the digital world outside the stifling forces that shape our ecosystems? what comes to the surface if we make space for play, nostalgia and joy?

the queer arts collective and EFF are thankful to all artists in this issue for their contributions and their fearless, intimate visions for queer digital futures.



the **queer arts collective** is an initiative to nurture transformative collective imaginations in the social justice field. QAC uncovers pathways for resistance and liberation by reconnecting with desire, pleasure and joy in the creative reconstruction of our worlds.

the **Electronic Frontier Foundation** is the leading nonprofit organization defending civil liberties in the digital world. EFF champions user privacy, free expression, and innovation through impact litigation, policy analysis, grassroots activism, and technology development. EFF's mission is to ensure that technology supports freedom, justice, and innovation for all people.