

## ***After projects the resound***

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By KIMBERLY ALIDIO  
Black Radish Books

## ***What Weaponry***

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By ELIZABETH J. COLEN  
Black Lawrence Press

## ***The Old Philosopher***

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By VI KHI NAO  
Nightboat Books

## ***even this page is white***

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By VIVEK SHRAYA  
Arsenal Pulp Press

## ***(A)Live Heart***

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By IMANI SIMS  
Sibling Rivalry Press

## ***Sad Girl Poems***

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By CHRISTOPHER SOTO  
Sibling Rivalry Press

It's easy to conflate identity in poetry with narrative, with story—but to say poetry that investigates identity is “about” its author, implying ties to that writer’s biography or sense of self, keeps us safe as readers from asking how that poetry is also about us. Identity is necessarily constructed, in part, by stories, the ones we’ve lived, the ones shared as memories by loved ones, the ones given to and imposed on us by the larger communities and cultures we inhabit. Some of these are similar, almost the same if we don’t look closely, but they layer up inside of us, and we wear their delicate mesh of visible, invisible layers as we navigate the world. The theme of identity links several new collections by poets who blend craft, culture, and experience, and who offer their readers a textured, often fragmented, often violent, and still very beautiful world.

Religion, mythology, and archetypes populate these poems, although these ancient and venerated stories are often revised, interrupted, and in some cases, rejected. In the surreal, sutured space of Vi Khi Nao’s *The Old Philosopher*, the speaker inhabits the world of the Bible with as much authority as Jeremiah or Mary Magdalene, and Canaan’s fields, rural Vietnam, and the painted trees housed in a modern-art museum are equally likely to serve as

landscape. God is an active presence, even a character, in these poems, who “superimposes his imagination” onto the speaker’s body (“Snow”), and the speaker, in response, is full of irreverence as well as belief. As the poem’s title might suggest, sex is the subject of “Biblical Flesh,” but Nao pushes past the easy clichés and crafts a hallucinogenic orgy: “Your toes shake their heads like guests at a one-star hotel You book one night in the Promised Land of the Israelites and wait for your 3<sup>rd</sup> lover to arrive.”

Placing the poem in what is now Israel and Palestine, and beginning with “What is torture?”, Nao raises, but doesn’t answer, the questions of consent and complicity that inform the necessary tension for her speaker’s kink, and simultaneously raises them on a larger scale, posing them to her readers. She ends the poem, “Then you turn to Lot’s wife and ask, “Was the view worth it? Is it still gorgeous?”

In her collection *(A)Live Heart*, Imani Sims also explores the tensions and pleasures of reclaimed knowledge and story from western narratives. These lyric poems don’t shy from naming the sources of black queer women’s pain and anger (prison, hunger, violence), and evoke transformation and magic as sources of resilience. Sims re-visions the Medusa myth, which, as she indicates in a footnote, was itself repurposed by the Greeks, who incorporated and subordinated older traditions’ goddess worship into their culture. In “Medusa Bone,” it’s the speaker’s heart that turns to stone for survival:

Original medusa, turned goddess,  
All snaked ventricles swinging  
Between ribs,

Writhing fortress.

Women’s bodies in these poems, often portrayed in fragmented syntax, are both “chest / full of fists / and uninterrupted tears” (“Little Red”) and “unflowered bud, dry smoke / high, rolling laughter” (“Kumquat”). For these witches, the very things that break them, rebuild them; their lives provide the necessary ingredients for spell-casting.

Language often edges toward incantation in Kimberly Alidio’s expansive book *After projects the resound*. Alidio investigates both the cultural history and the lived experience of her speakers’ queer Filipina identity through etymology, politics, and pop culture. The language of these poems carries a frenetic energy—this poetry does not aim to engage readers, it confronts us. Take “AKA” and “Fermented AKA ferment,” list poems of different words for annatto (typically used for seasoning and food coloring) and ketchup, respectively, which appear early in the collection. Organized by country of origin and/or ingredient lists, the poems wind their way through colonization, submerging the dominant word or recipe in a cacophony of difference.

Throughout *After projects the resound*, the poems’ speakers challenge the legacy of western colonial practices with humor and anguish. This is most arresting when the poems address the speakers’ complicated positions as women who are aware of institutional oppression, but unable to operate outside of it:

LOL YOUR PINAY SELF  
LOL YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS DECOLONIAL

INDIGENEITY  
 LOL RECOVERY AS AN ESCAPE HATCH FROM  
 REAL NEGOTIATIONS  
 LOL CARING THAT WHITE PEOPLE THINK OUR  
 BODIES ARE CHEAP  
 LOL THINKING ONLY WHITE PEOPLE THINK OUR  
 BODIES ARE CHEAP  
 LOL THINKING WHITE POETS MATTER AT ALL

These lines, part of a much longer list in “All the Pinays are straight, all the queers are Pinoy, but some of us,” are powerful because of their self-directed anxiety, heightened by the text-speak and all caps, which builds with every scorned emotional and intellectual defense against oppressive violence.

The very fact of whiteness as the assumed dominant racial identity is taken to task in Vivek Shraya’s *even this page is white*. Here, skin is the subject, and the speaker explores the reality of living brown and queer in western culture, while pointing out the limitations of white identity. Some poems incorporate found language from book titles, social media, online petitions, and celebrity quotes, to touch on everything from #oscarssowhite to the literary canon to Kanye West.

“The Origins of Skin,” a long poem in the book’s second half, uses the frame of a creation myth for human skin to mark the divisions between a brown speaker and a white “you,” who sometimes reads as one person, sometimes as any and all white readers of the poem. From the opening lines, “would you believe me if i told you the purpose of skin / is not utility but unity?”, the speaker attempts to connect with “you,” but the awareness of physical difference always marks a boundary: “you said the word *my* followed by *skin* / you felt nearest and furthest from / me.”

Shraya makes a similar move, grounded in contemporary questions on the “invisibility” of whiteness and cultural appropriation, in “the one thing you can do.” The poem is dedicated to Yi-Fen Chou, the pseudonym of Michael Derrick Hudson, a white man whose work was published in 2015’s *Best American Poetry*, and who claimed to use the pseudonym to improve his chances for publication. “use your name / name your colour / over and over,” the speaker instructs; “white is not poison / just your disavowal of it / over and over.”

Christopher Soto’s poems deftly chart personal longing and grief and the connections and losses shared by those labeled as outsiders—by family, by the police, by well-meaning allies. In his chapbook *Sad Girl Poems*, the speaker mourns the suicide of his lover Rory while mapping the larger landscape of his life as a queer latin@. Backslashes and brackets erupt throughout these poems, drawing attention to punctuation as a boundary and simultaneously interrupting and emphasizing the language that overflows its limits:

The night he died // I went to the beach. Waves beat  
 statically  
 Against the fins of mermaids.

I tried to call his cellphone [but he didn’t answer]. My  
 body was  
 A match // His memory was a flame. (“Crush a Pearl  
 [Its Powder]”)

The implied, painful redaction of “[but he didn’t answer]”—the potential for this loss to disappear from the world—is

echoed in Soto’s use of brackets across the collection. In “Home [Chaos Theory],” brackets denote blunt truths from the speaker’s experience of homelessness, an experience that is rendered invisible within the category of “the homeless,” even to his friends, “As if I had never been homeless. / [As if I were not sitting // directly beside them].” When the speaker observes San Francisco police harassing a woman they believe to be homeless, the brackets reinforce the danger of silence in that moment:

& the tourists watched

[As the police walked towards her]  
 [As the police went to grab her]  
 [As the woman continued yelling]

Soto builds a forceful refusal of invisibility crafted in a hypervisible text. Elizabeth J. Colen employs a similar strategy in her claustrophobic novel in prose poems, *What Weaponry*. The book catalogues the destruction of a couple’s relationship in a town whose inhabitants aren’t welcoming of the couple’s fluid sexuality. Like Soto, Colen draws attention to her text to render the unsaid, said. Bolded text appears throughout the poems, a kind of ghost poem that forms slowly and heightens the tension building between the lovers. Through these fragments, Colen maps the internalized violence of alienation and othering: “And it takes me a minute to remember what we’ve talked about. *The dead*. It’s always the dead. I don’t know why any of this should make you smile, but **your face breaks open** like a crowd at a sporting event” (“Shot-Silk Effect, No. 3”).

These interruptions are most jarring when the words in bolded text are themselves fragmented, built by half words and letters that form an insistent undercurrent within a poem. In “Inside the Night Museum,” this emerges as a disjointed, strangled repetition of the word *still*:

Century-old storefronts explode like Roman candles,  
 white smoke lines townie lungs, water flows uphill from  
 spent hoses, slickening the streets, throwing street light  
 back at the sky . . . How to spread even after everyone’s  
 seen. How to still warm. Coffee circle over one yellow  
 square. Stain on grape applique, auburn oblong like  
 blood or chocolate or mud from some tiny fist . . .  
 Scream in the woods like some rush to forgiveness.  
 Creak in your arm, pulling splinters.

This broken language, straining toward meaning, occurs most often when the couple is directly confronted by their hostile environment, and as that hostility becomes so pervasive it infects every living and non-living thing around them. The attempt to push through and find connection asserts itself again and again in this novel of dissolution—something that can be said of all the collections reviewed here. In this moment, when it’s clearer than ever that our identities, when framed by others, can be used as weapons against us, this group of writers shows us a different way, creating their own narratives around identity, building community where it’s been denied.

—Heather Bowlan

# CONTRIBUTORS

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