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Jenna Vélez is an emerging queer Latinx poet from suburban Philly. She currently runs the By Death, She Lives blog at Rhythm & Bones Press. Jenna has two microchaps forthcoming THE WHORE MADONNA LEADS THE BLACK MASS (Maverick Duck Press, July 2019) and BLOODY SPIRIT AND BATHROOM RITUAL (Bone & Ink Press, April 2020). She tweets @northernbruja, instagams @jennamv555, and can be found at jennavelez.weebly.com
So much of your work exists in the dark, the dirty, the ugly. Why does your work occupy these spaces? How do you leave those spaces when you need to?

My work occupies these spaces naturally; I don’t really have a conscious agenda to make my poems vulgar or reach some sort of shock value. But my experiences are sometimes gross and explicit, and they demand that the language describing them is too. Self-care is a big part of stepping outside those spaces. I write about feeling ugly, being violated, feeling unclean. So I take a bath, I paint my nails, I wash my hair, I put on perfume. These seem superficial but they help put things in perspective.

What intersections do you see between mental health and identity? How do you explore this in your writing?

Well as a bisexual I know our mental health and suicide rates are much higher than monosexuals. I know that Latinxs have worse mental health than their non-Latinx counterparts. I know that while more men may be committing suicide more women are attempting it. So I am triply fucked in this sense. My mental health can be really really shitty. Sometimes therapy just isn’t an option for me. The best way I’ve gotten through it is writing about it. So a lot my work is about my self-image, how I view my body and how it moves through space, how I think it’s perceived by others. And sometimes this can fuel negative thoughts but sometimes it can make me step back and think, it’s not so bad. But I have an obligation to myself to try and make sense of it. Because writing is healthy, and most of my other coping mechanisms have not been.

**What role does writing and artistic creation play into your healing?**

Writing is like untangling a knot. My mind, my soul, my heart is just this big mess of rope and I’m constantly trying to untie and untie until my fingers bleed or until I want to give up. But sometimes I get one knot undone, and it makes moving forward worth it. And that moving forward is poetry, it’s other forms of artistic expression I love like music or painting. If I can make some sense out of my feelings, to be able to create something that makes others really feel something, then all this jumbled emotional mess inside can serve a purpose. And thank god because my emotional baggage is not paying rent haha.
You don’t shy away from discussing sex and sexuality in your writing, often toeing the line between the erotic and the gross. What does this relationship mean to you?

Well my experience is that while sex can be this sensual, erotic, romantic, perfectly construed thing but most of the time it’s fumbling and giggling and being kinda gross I guess. My sex life isn’t like a fanfiction scene it’s very much accidentally elbowing my partner or laughing because fuck you queefs are still funny or mutually bonding over that nasty thing we’re both in to. It means I can enjoy a life experience without feeling like it needs to be presented a certain way. Nothing about my sexual themes in my work is artificial.

After being involved in the literary world for quite some time now, what advice would you give a younger version of yourself?

My advice would be to submit more. Write more and submit more. Always. Take advantage of those good mental health days. And stop comparing yourself to other people. You’ll never win when you’re looking at the runner next to you instead of the finish line.

Do you find that you separate your poetic identity from your identity? Do these voices speak separately or in tandem?

I don’t think I’ve thought about a separate poetic identity. She probably smokes way more cigarettes, has more tattoos, likes black coffee, has a cat, dresses cooler. But honestly I don’t think I fragment myself when I write. My poetry demands all of me, completely undivided. It requires Latina Jenna, bisexual Jenna, abuse survivor Jenna, ballerina Jenna, etc. etc. They are one voice with many echoes.

What kind of changes would you like to see in literary communities, especially in regards to mental health accessibility?

While deadlines are necessary to complete projects and organize, we’re also poets. We have all the time in the world. Our art form only demands an urgency of the heart to share and to feel. But as someone that has also worked for a literary journal editors and readers need as much of the mental care as writers do. They get just as emotionally invested as the poet is. I love the use of content/trigger warnings has become more and more commonplace. And while I believe poetry is best uncensored, I also believe in ethical language, one that is not defined by things like ableism.
What themes do you find yourself most drawn to? Why?

I see my body as a sort of tent with all this shit hiding under it. I like to talk about being a container for all the people I’ve met and the things I’ve been through. I’ve been exploring more themes or death and drugs, and being honest with myself that sometimes it takes everything in me to not take something I shouldn’t. Also, since being in a polyamorous relationship, this whole new world of what love can look like has been kinda tickling my brain to write about.

How do you maintain a work life balance? Do you ever find being a writer impacts your mental health negatively?

I appreciate this question because I work retail and no one talks about retail workers, minimum wage workers, food service workers, etc. and how to maintain that balance because our jobs are seen as easy or less than. Honestly it’s hard, I work 40-45 hours a week as a manager for a large store. I often find I don’t have time to write, and if I do have time I want to live and be out or just take a mental break and not put in the energy it takes to curl up in a corner and write some heavy shit for an hour. I’m still trying to figure out this balance. And sometimes being a writer means accessing the darkest and ugliest parts of yourself, so it absolutely takes a toll. But connecting with other writers in the literary community helps know you’re not alone. The writing community is the best community to be open about your mental health. We just get it.

What projects are in the works for you? Where is your writing taking you? Where are you taking it?

I have a digital religious erotica microchapbook coming out next month with Maverick Duck Press called THE WHORE MADONNA LEADS THE BLACK MASS. I also have my microchap BLOODY SPIRIT AND BATHROOM RITUAL coming out with Bone & Ink Press in April 2020. Hopefully I can write more and start compiling chapbooks and maybe one day a full length. I like to think I’m taking writing on a date to see some fucked up horror movie, eat our feelings, cry about how shitty our skin is, and then get up and make something out of it. That’s the sort of direction I see myself taking my little corner of the literary world.
Before you dive into Issue Three, we want to post a trigger warning. These are pieces about mental illness and how people cope or don’t cope with them. There was no holding back. There is mentions of sexual assault, self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, and addiction. If anything mentioned above can trigger you, we want you to think about yourself first. Your mental health is our first priority. Please read at your own discretion and take your time reading.

-your royal rose fam
It is starting! The curtain is rising!
The sky gets darker earlier;
My emotions get dark too.
“I don’t want to go outside!”
I think to myself.
I don’t want to do anything or face the world that is a stage
It is dark out.
“I have so much to do” is my first line.
This is my opening night of seasonal depression.
Winter hasn’t even come yet,
Let’s hope this is a short run.
Because there is hell in my mind,
I am closer to God.
Because there is ocean in my soul,
I am always drowning.
Bare as a field in winter,
I am searching for a man
To saw me in half. Oh dear
Doctor, erase me with your magic
Wand like white snow. Slice me up
Like a melon, a turkey, a peach,
I do not care which,
But slice me up so good
I will not look back.
Induce me a childhood,
An infant, a dream. Oh dear,
Carve the bad out of me.
Stuff my brain with shit like
You would a woman.
I'm a ruiner.
A problem imaginer
A fight-picker
An instigator
A self
A needer
A crier
An exaggerator
A complicator
A drama-maker
A make-your-life-miserabl-er
A fighter
Not a lover
A peacemaker
A hand-holder
A speak gentler
A walk humbler
A judge-not-er
A do-good-er
A we
A giver

A healer
A mender
A amen-er
A make-your-life-better-er
A lover
Not a fighter

Am/Am Not?  By Ana Lorenza Jimenez
Once, I was certain
I had overdosed
on liquid hydrocodone,
invited too much of it
inside me before laying
down to sleep & was caught
between craving both the end
& the sprint away from it.
The truth is that, at that time,
I had been inching my way toward
the edge of the cliff for over a week,
each night, opening the bottle beside my bed
& guzzling more & more of its contents
& waiting for the medicine to spread
like spores of pollen throughout my body
& begin the work of toggling me
between the realms of rest & consciousness.
I became enamored by the stillness of,
first, breath,
then, heartbeat,
then, the feeling of the buildings
beneath my bones being
boarded up & abandoned
as the drug consumed me,
but on that particular night where
I plummeted deeper than ever before,
I recall hearing a voice, at some point,
if not God’s then definitely God-sent,
who asked if I truly wished to drift
fully away into the black ocean of oblivion
& after a pause, I answered back
in a murky voice, No.
When I emerged dry-throated & groggy,
breathing in the air of a brand new day,
my innards felt gripped in panic
by the fear of having given the wrong answer.
Surrender by Spencer Merced

I spat in the face of healing yesterday.
fought tooth and carving nail...

frustration is the word.
the one I could wrap my lips around
after my head hit the floor
and with it came a mutiny.
thought after thought coiling through limbs,
dragging me down
as water flooded this room over days.

but I wish to keep this head above water.
I wish I knew how.
to know then what I know now.

today
the waves are waist high
and my daily dose shows in my palm
thoughts caged in three pills
they say,
"swallow or drown"

no matter how flawed

I know I will die if my head is not on straight.
so I will surrender to this pain.

I will write of worry,
of heartbreak,
of rage.
this is my route out.
this is the only way.

open the floodgates
for I will feel acceptance today.

so I toss them back,
these pills,
all anxiety and woe
because I will not be gutted by misery.
I will not let this end me.

so I close my eyes...
I swallow them whole.
Hollow by Taylor Gianfrancisco

I’m curled in bed like a butterfly
crushed in her cocoon. My cheeks
are cut raw as my fingers grip
the duvet tighter – in this hiding
spot, movement is a silent church
during a vigil for the saints. The depths
of darkness clouding my mind
until it bears a twinge of pain
and breathing has become whiplash
that deprives me of grace. I drink
cherry wine coolers and press pills
onto my tongue, wanting to dwell
in this midnight place for days.
Carry the moon in my smile as though
it is yellow enough for the crying wolves,
for the hunting owls to watch carefully.

Someone brings me to the hospital,
disturbed by my stillness, and the harsh
white glare of the florescent lights
barely reflects in my black irises.
Instead of announcing time of death,
they snake a tube down my throat,
pump the poison out of my lungs,
and tuck me under starched, thin bedsheets
where, when I wake up, I feel hollow.
My sister said she used to be afraid of me, of what I could do to her children the same way the kids in schools now run from stray bullets.

She was scared that I would steal their hearts and that I would vanish the same way our mother had.

But not the same way, because my mother swallowed pills and the scar on my arm screams that I'm a fan of sharp objects, a name tag announcing who I am before I introduce myself.

So, I was held at all times at an arms length away. As though my present absence could be a bullet proof vest.

I would remain long enough to say hi, here are your presents I love you but you don’t know me and I'm sorry I'm crazy. And leave again.

This happened for years especially after the hospitalization where they took the strings from my hoods, my pants, my shoes. Where stitches lined my arm.

"That was a scary time," my sister said. And I wonder

Who was it scarier for?
As I wish someone would pick me up by Francisca Matos

As I wish someone would pick me up
The woman at the desk calls my name and
asks if I will be signing the sheet myself
I am twenty-one, I say as I sign it but still take
the bi-weekly bill home. In rows of half-filled,
light grey seats of adult-phone-wait I am alone
and I don’t sit well with my sadness, that is
uncomfortable and which outstretches my
height and the height of those who sit waiting
for their kin. As I wish someone would pick me up,
and willing to believe in something,
I wish them never old enough to sign their name
for themselves. I trust their parents to do the same.
Therapy at twenty-one means you leave as you
came, all empty-handed and disoriented feet,
means no one to make sure you get in the taxi,
no ride home. You do the walking by yourself.
Doing the walking by yourself means it takes you
the same time to get to someone as it takes you
to get to class going to class, means you grew up
knowing the process and knowing the process
means you will arrive in time for dinner, leave the
envelope at the table and practice stretching.
She asked about my scars
firm touch
callous hands
rest on my thigh.

Coffee cup
a genie lamp
I couldn’t wish myself away

staring out the window
thanking the Universe
that mornings are so beautiful.

Mouth starting to dry,
I looked
into her tired eyes,
hard working girl

she kisses me
“It’s okay, tell me
when you’re ready.”
I said
I can't remember a time
when I wasn't anxious
it is like the ocean--
its giant loom
clapping with the warp
and weft of the waves,
lovely and rushing,
weaving jagged kisses
on the surface
and jittery rolls
into the sand,
water always ankle-deep
and hissing.

He said
I just worry about you
and he kissed my shoulder
I said
I know
I try to smile,
to reassure him
I am fine, the ocean
lives around me

inside my mind too
and I am used to it;
after all, I grew up
going to the beach,
my toes rooting in the sand,
its mottled streaks
dribbling down my arms
to make dripcastles,
and the constant call
of seagulls waiting for morsels;
onyx tangles of seaweed
littering the beach;
salt down to my bones
that ached from swimming,
from battling the tide.

He said
I love you
and I kiss him
so I can finally
pull him in.
Poem 62 About Anorexia by Lynne Schmidt

As long as I don't exhale,
I am okay.
So I tuck this breath in
the way you make a bed;
folded and neat on the corners
stretched to perfection along the mid
section before another body enters.
I am okay.
The pale ridges don't jut out.
They scream sanity
stability
softness.
But that soft comes away like shrapnel
that shreds me apart
with each exhale.
Because my stomach expands
And you need to inhale
to survive.
I look at the four letters,
all capital & collected
on the rectangular face
of the computer monitor
& see my assassin,
the one that I fear
will find me & finish the job
that began when I had
barely broken into manhood,
but what if I renamed the condition?
What if I substituted the letters in its name
or jostled them like a pair of dice?
Would it still feel the same,
still be the bitter bite of winter
burrowing through the taut meat
of my chest or would I be spared?
What if the act of labeling
something anew was where the magic hid –
the abracadabra that would allow me
to avoid the advent of my assassin’s bullet?
The trick that would permit me to shove
my shadows into the light & then, possibly,
run ashore of the good place, the Eden
that I’ve been yearning to find.
DERMATILLOMANIA by Susanna Arbuz

My hair is so dirty
As much as my soul
And the smell is disgusting
With the widening holes
I dig with my hands
As if it all had been planned
But it's despair that I carry
And the pain I can’t stand
All the blood that I shed
Handmade scenarios
And I keep on digging
Nails dyed red
But the smell intoxicates me
For as long as lasts the dread
For I fear, I fear something
I can’t even name
A powerful entity
Who controls what I am
And my hair is so dirty
As I dig the next
Despite the effects
My ragged soul
Nightmares
And they say it is called
Dermatillomania
Growing up, Autumn and Winter were my two favourite seasons. I loved everything about them, the burning colours transforming into a sparse sparkling landscape; the chill in the air, an excuse to wrap and pull loved ones closer; the promises of a new year. Then emetophobia struck and everything changed.

Emetophobia is a fear of vomiting. For many sufferers it is worse during the winter months when norovirus peaks. I am no exception. During the winter I often feel as though I am losing my mind. It is all consuming. It controls me

The fear started during childhood following a particularly nasty virus. Initially, I was just fearful of illness but this expanded. Sometimes I manage it better than others but at its worst I am unable to eat out or let others prepare food for me; I cannot touch door handles, escalators, anything that may contain germs; I will wash my hands until they are red raw and bleeding. My job, which involves an open plan office and frequent travel (public transport – all those people, all that bacteria), becomes a daily nightmare. I will sit, hands not touching anything and if they do I am in a state of panic until I can scrub them over and over, until I feel safe.

December, usually such a social month, becomes a time of near hibernation. The thought of being around potentially infected people is just too much. The anti-social nature of this illness has longer term consequences too – intimate relationships are virtually impossible. How could I even consider kissing someone? And even if I did, very few people will adjust their lifestyle to accommodate my fears. I would expect them to wash their hands as soon as they come into the house, to never eat anything that they have touched, to never put their hands near their mouth. How can I expect someone else to live like that?

Children are another issue – we all know how many germs they bring home from school. It is normal, it is natural and although I know this I am terrified of them. I’ve never had my own, I’ve never wanted them and on occasion I wonder whether this is related to the emetophobia – the risk of morning sickness always playing on my mind.

It is isolating. It is lonely and unless you have it, almost impossible to understand.
Bipolar by Ana Lorenza Jimenez

Something is wrong with me. I'm not normal. I'm different from everybody else. They say I'm sick. But the problem is I'll never get better.

What they would say if they knew. Whispers in the streets. A hand tightening the imaginary noose.

They say he's bipolar, she's bipolar. Do you even know what that means?

Don't tell me I just want attention. Were you there with me on the bathroom floor? Did you take the razor gently from my hand and tell me it was going to be okay?

That's what I thought.

No. You helped me count the pills. Three. Five. Ten. Twenty. You said it would be easy. Down it with the alcohol. Just go to sleep and then you won't wake up and it'll all be over.

But you. You don't understand. That's okay. You don't have to. There'll just always be that space between us.

But I, I want the world to know. I dare it to try and understand. Are their hearts capable of such empathy?

No. They've been shocked into indifference. It's a Campbell's Soup Can thing.

I just need you to look at me.

Look at me!
Brain Bugs by Melodie Jones

They live and they breed
inside the nest they call my head
Growing and eating
they overflow and exceed capacity
taking over my thoughts

Little uninvited guests. Parasites.
Feeding off the chemicals
Feeding off me
and they never leave
they rule over me

And my head fills with nonsense
Fills with constant buzzing
A steady, never ceasing hum
Growing despite the pesticides
doctors spray into my brain

Taking over me,
the insects live and never leave.
My blush turns from blush to scarlet
when I shift my hips in the el train seat to
accommodate a cute stranger because my
gifted designer handbag makes noises like
a drunken mariachi band, a terrified infant’s rattle,
when I only meant to shift a little, and suddenly
my whole pre-dinner plate is exposed. The stop
of the platform produces quiet and everyone hears
and though nothing is said, they all know about
my pharmacy cabinet tucked inside my flower-lined purse
with the huge pink bow on the front
and no one is fooled anymore.
Hear Me by Ana Lorenza Jimenez

Sometimes I get so angry because you're not hearing what I'm saying and then I scream because I think that will make you hear me better if I am louder because everyone's always told me I'm too quiet so maybe if I scream people will hear me now do you hear me but do you know what I'm saying is what's in my brain in your brain now or is it just an indistinguishable noise that means nothing except for get a grip on yourself Ana
My Depression is Giving Me The Silent Treatment by Richaundra Thursday

My depression is giving me the silent treatment. It no longer whispers suggestions like a gopro to a drunk fratboy. It doesn't tear down my carefully, wastefully created identities like they were the Kingdome. It doesn't ride my shoulder like a psychotic raven in an Edgar Allen Poe fanfiction. It doesn't say anything at all.

I feel it there, like a heat under floorboards, static electricity on door handles next to a fuel pump.

My depression now resembles a theme park ride, a master key, a self-driving car; I begin in one place and end up another and I'm not sure how I got there, Just that everything was fast and I'm too afraid to look back.

My depression has taken its greatest hits underground like a morlock or Fiona Apple.

My depression is playing hide-and-seek like a monster in the first act of the movie, Gaslighting me, every time I grab someone for help, They see nothing amiss and when they ask what it was like before,

I don’t know how to tell them that when Depression packed its overnight bag, It took so many of my memories in its toothbrush case. I know it has been bad: Choking, sobbing, vomiting, don’t cry for months, forget how to smile for yourself, Note writing then erasing, passion erasing, future erasing, Scream inside till there’s nothing left in the hollowness but the banshee wail bad, But the lipstick writing left on my psychic mirror reads ‘If you’re still here to complain about it, Can’t have been THAT bad, right?’

I know this because while the Orthanc eye of my depression is pointed somewhere else, I am scurrying across the logistical Mordor of trying to get support, So when it jump scares me in the upcoming sequel, My psychological pepper spray is ready and yes, I know I’m mixing genres, but you can’t convince me Gollum Couldn’t have been sorted with a liberal dose of mace or that dropping Supernatural serial killers into volcanoes is not a valid solution so just give me this.
I think my depression and anxiety are on a relational hiatus, 
Because they didn’t leave together. 
Instead of a not-coincidentally phallic panopticon fortress in my skull, 
My anxiety is a tattoo, in that it is just under my skin and feels like a marching drum beat. 
My anxiety is that friend/coworker/old white relation that claims they just "tell it like it," 
Labeled 'snowflake' by my subconscious, as it bungee jumps between telling me to suck it up, 
Get it done and chastising itself and by extension me, 
For using problematically ableist, sexist language even internally. 

I can’t tell if I miss my depression. 
Like a leftover ache of a binder or heels or steel toes that don’t quite fit, 
The post charlie horse strain of the missing familiar. 
Better the evisceration you know, right?

I keep having to tell myself I don’t need it, that I was too good for it anyway 
And look at all the shit I’m going to glow up now that it’s gone. 
I think my depression has blocked me on Facebook but I don’t want to ask it why 
For fear it will accuse me for being too clingy. 
The truth is, I worry my depression is a spawn camper, 
A corner jumper, a nightmare ninja; 
I search for its face in crowds, holding my breath, 
Never quite sure if my notification refresh is intended to reassure or reset. 

I haven't decided if I miss my depression, but I am quite certain, it doesn't miss me.
This natural thing
the rising/falling tidal pull
A friendly gaze made sour by
a year or two away, passing
like a ghost in mid-day through
the halls of mine mother’s old summer home
The air stagnant over its patient oak plateau,
panting but not yet perspiring,
chasing sand through parched desert air like
some operation of misfortune
Could I still smile at the sun on your face?
My solitary grace found in the artifact quality
of the language we speak—
As urgency to pursue or
for freedom to love
is there method to the way
you connect, you choose, you separate;
This horror is a window on a spring house
and
I am a locust with no wings, drawn
hastily on a tea stained page
as if by a child upon their bedroom wall
and it shatters——

little aching bits
tumbling around here and there and
clinking together like champagne
flutes in the sweaty palms of my dinner guests or like a winter wind chime hung with reverence above
a fetid old oil stain scrubbed inadequately
from a concrete
garage floor and a lazy breeze pulls past singing
the names of twelve street lamps in a row
losing power and falling dark and
it shatters.
it shatters,
all too completely.
UNTIL IT COMES AGAIN  by Susanna Arbuz

You cry again, the tenth time, right in time, today
You answer the questions, your very madness, in yet another way
The sore conclusions are gone; healed wounds are wide
Open for all to see, you sew them closed again
Your fingers hurt, your head still bleeds, your heart pounds and breaks
Your reddened skin, your arms so thin; you feed yourself with shame
And no one sees, and no one feels; you alone crawl away
And there you sit, about to faint, and write away the pain
Until it comes again
Issue Three Contributors

Ariel Kurtz
Laura Izabela
Ana Lorenza Jimenez
Christian J. Collier
Spencer Merced
Taylor Gianfrancisco
Lynne Schmidt
Francisca Mayos
Day Sibley

Sarah Etlinger
MJ Bain
Susanna Arbuz
Nicola Allen
Melodie Jones
December Lace
Richaundra Thursday
Greg Rudolph
From the Desk of The Editor:

Every issue, I am continually amazed and honored by the support. Almost a year in, and I'm still pinching myself. All three issues are important to me, but this was is close to my heart. As someone who struggles with a few mental illnesses, I thought it was important to use this platform to amplify voices just like mine. Thank you to the Issue Three contributors for allowing me to do just that. I am so very humbled you trusted me, our magazine, to showcase some of your most personal pieces. Thank you Annabel for continually being my right-hand man. I'm still learning and you are so patient with me. Kate, welcome to the team! You have been on the ball since day one and you have taken an enormous amount of stress off of my plate. Your interviews are so insightful and entertaining to read. Jenna, I've been a fan of your work before this interview and now getting to know the person behind the pieces has made me love them anymore. To everyone that follows us, thank you. Even with a thousand tongues, I wouldn’t be able to thank you enough. Your unwavering support is why we were able to publish a third issue. This is only the beginning, and I cannot wait to show you what else we have in store. Issue Four here we come!