

An illustration of three children climbing a large, jagged orange rock formation. At the top, a boy with dark hair and a white shirt is pulling up. In the middle, a girl with brown hair and a white tank top is reaching up. At the bottom, a boy with blonde hair and a black shirt is looking up. The background is a sunset with orange and yellow light over dark, silhouetted mountains.

SPARK TO FLAME

*A JOURNAL OF
COLLABORATIVE
POETRY*

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

How do you change? How do you change through the people you love? How do you change through your habits, your hobbies, your art? Do you recognize this change as it happens? How does it feel?

I recently attended a lecture on morality and accountability by the philosopher and artist CJ The X. During one lecture, they highlighted the following quote from the philosopher John MacMurray:

“The capacity to love objectively is the capacity which makes us persons. It is the ultimate source of our capacity to behave in terms of the object. It is the core of rationality” (Reason & Emotion, 1935).

This way of thinking about myself as relational and mutable through love is helpful to me, especially when, in the local and global climates I live in, I often find myself stuck by how *big* problems feel. How much of *everything* everything is. How heavy things can be.

Many of the poems in this issue deal with such heaviness—pain, loss, and unknowing. These are emotions that often make us feel alone or isolated. Yet, these poems are collaborations between two people: two of them were accepted as completed, collaborative pieces; for the remaining seven, the two authors, as strangers, took part in Spark to Flame’s anonymous “spark” to “flame” process. In this process, contributors submit fragments (sparks) and sign up to write a final poem (flame) from another person’s spark. It is wonderful to watch people connect through art and shared wounds. Not only am grateful to all who took part in this process, but I am also inspired to continue to make more connections and more art. And to love more.

Welcome to Spark to Flame’s sixth issue.

Kindly,
Katherine Schmidt
Editor-in-Chief

We Write What We Know

Nathan McDowell and Neal Allen Shipley

We have no business writing poems we didn't earn—
poems that have nothing to do with us,

the veins in our eyes too red
for all these tripe-trite niceties

we don't want slathered on anyone else's doorpost.
I get high and write, *I don't think this is working.*

I wrote an erasure to claim my shame, pretending
I am in charge while it leads me, glowing eyes

filled with anger like hunger. In the daylight
they shake my hand, act like they can bury hatred,

a hatchet in my back. My jaw's clenched, breath shallow;
we have been trying to disappear, make more room for them

to make-believe our problems are theirs to pontificate.
Free Palestine, obviously—but *is it too pat, saccharine, too late?*

I think with a few tweaks you really got something here.
There is a chasm our poems side eye—*this is definitely*

going somewhere—a brick in the bridge between our equally
deprecated selves: one of us dusts off his mother's old Haggadah,

a salve for historical dread, the other dances at Night of Noise, blending
with the gays and theys. We both believe change is in our back pocket,

behind us. Without it we are sentenced to repent
our histories—*or is it repeat?* But we do, we keep

coming back to the page. *I want more eyes on this*, I want
what I don't understand in us to be what I don't understand, *yet*.

Aurora

Sarah Watkins (Flame) and Louise Hurrell (Spark)

it is a new day, a fertilised egg cradled in the brown nest of winter,
and you were not invited.

the voice on the radio said to expect the aurora borealis tonight—
as if you would need to bring forward a gift;

but what could you bring other than Grandmother's pearls,
half-remembered horrors bundled tight in your throat

with all of the dark black threads you pulled from Papa's peacoat?
against the nuclear white expanse you are a catsup stain

murmuring an apology from a white Sunday shirt.
a chilly hand tries to bat you away with walls of wind and ice

but you stay. like a younger brother you stand as small as you can
in the shadow of a snow-covered peak

sorry yet unmoving as you eavesdrop on those brilliant green smatterings
against a purple sky. they rush in big swaths like your soda across the carpet,

Mama's tears down her face,
Papa's car out of the drive,

the slobbered words that you should just go on and get out—
those words that led you here,

face cold, hands empty,
staring at the sky's sacred dance

that waits for what you will offer it back.

2020 Vision

Sam Kerbel (Flame) and Michael Kellichner (Spark)

In a dark shoebox
The family sparrow lies
Like gold in spring

Clinging to the drift
Waiting for long awaited
Gifts to appricate

As if remembering
Burying its young self
Long long ago

Singing the little sparrow a song
She herself never knew.
Still, such songs always come.

If you were to ask me now, as autumn
Spreads mountain to mountain
Unmasking the false mirage of eternity

Summer long has mastered
As to whether the world indeed is
Slowing, or whether we simply must

Drink to keep pace,
I'd say we shine despite the fire
The heavy knowledge of knowing

Or knowing we're not going
Anywhere—not yet anyways.
We go on with living

Keeping our habit for light
On things, an eternity among
The rocks keeping our company.

Retrocausality

Michael Kellichner (Flame) and J.D. (Spark)

Lost in a liminal moment
already starting to fade,
the girl searches petrichor
for a way to dissolve.

Whether echo or eidolon,
impossible to tell: through
the squelch of sodden soil
beneath grass, the soft sinking,

forgotten, familiar memories
infused in those sepia days
after the series of summers
faded with stolen light.

Listen, little ghost of the past:
life is not all dampness and dark.
Light diffuses into color
after water saturates air.

I wish I could hold you, warm
chill-infused skin and whisper
the shadows do not claim us.
You will see when you become

me. Take this solace across time:
trust when I say these moments,
though they seem labyrinthine,
have an exit with you intact.

Ecdysis

J.D. (Flame) and Paige Groome (Spark)

You made me, Father.
You knew the pain I would suffer
in the name of being loved
by you.
Your expectations
were the wind beneath my wings
and the weight
bruising my shoulders,
overwhelming my every thought
until slowly, I forgot
even the color of my own eyes.

The sensory deprivation
of cold, pearly heaven
leaves the mind unsettled,
under-stimulated,
so it compensates.
Perfection is the nature of no one.
My wings compressed
in coils of iridescence—
sin bears true beauty.
Human nature is an insatiable itch
straitjacket perfection cannot scratch.

You made me, Father.
You love the angel you envisioned,
but I am the devil you created.
Your image betrays you.
I see what you are.
I see what I am.
I will shed this snakeskin
and cherish who I am yet to become
apart from you.
The fall looks farther from above
than below.

Brood XXII

Jennifer Schomburg Kanke (Flame) and Joey Price (Spark)

Oh, those nights out with the friends
who liked to fight and flirt.
We all were drinking for our own special reasons.
Some to forget and some to remember
and I to drown out the voices.
I, to keep the private sides private inside.
I, to keep those ugly motherfuckers
from starting their own funk band,
Dr. Jekyll and His Hydes.

No, not like the man who kept hearing a voice
directly behind him, telling him to go ahead
and finally hang himself. The man who eventually
found that one simple trick—an audio track
of all his best times in his own ragged voice
repeating over and over that he'd play
whenever the other voice got too loud.

No, my voices already scream my memories
of their own accord, reminding me
of all those things I don't want to say here,
even though I know good poems get their power
from their details. Maybe I'd rather be
mediocre than let those screams split me open,
rather than let you see all there is of me.

But maybe, just maybe, I'm wrong.
Maybe the screams are the
buzzing and ticking of a cicada's song:
Letmeout! Letmeout! Letmeout!
They are not trying to fuck it all up,
just trying to find the rest of the chorus,
trying to find all the others like them,
like me, like us. We have waited so long
in the cold, hard, silent ground
let now be our time
to scream, scream, scream.

Ganymede

Louise Hurrell (Flame) and Sam Kerbel (Spark)

after Pàdraig MacAoidh

Oh, don't mind me—
nobody else does—
scuttling about like a satellite
in this infinite dark.

If you focused a pair of binoculars,
or pressed your stare to a telescope,
you'd see me—twice the size of your Moon,
bigger than both Mercury and Pluto.

But you don't see me.
If you did, you'd think me cold,
yet my icy gaze hides a molten iron core.
I cradle oceans; my pockmarks tree-ring
the age of time. I rise above dust and gas.

You'd call me a moon, say I'm barren,
that I simply cannot sustain life
as you currently know it, but
not everything revolves around you.

I'm pulled in another orbit, that's all.
I could host whole continents,
I could mother beasts
you don't have the imagination to conceive.

See that woman there?
Dancing in the garden alone to a tune
only she hears? I like her jive.
I think I'll join her.

Liminal Light

Duma Lupe Davila and Renee Alexander

A meaningful pause,
A rest between notes,
The space between thoughts,
Here love can grow.

The whisper of rain,
Before pavement-fall,
The absence of feeling,
With emotion of all.

A bridge between worlds,
That spans the great void,
Your listening ear,
My heart overjoyed.

The space in between,
A door open wide,
Nor rejection, nor invite,
Simply... inside.

Contributor Bios

Renee Alexander enjoys weaving intuition, language and play into poems that seek to illuminate the quiet spaces where healing and transformation take root.

J.D. is a queer poet and author from the Midwestern United States with a love for language and storytelling. She is a recipient of KU's Gunn Center for Speculative Fiction Award.

Duma Lupe Davila is a professional translator and amateur poet who is, above all, a lover of words and their many subtleties and powers.

Paige Groome graduated from William & Mary in 2022. Originally from Georgia, Paige lives in Arlington, VA where she enjoys writing, sketching, and taking every opportunity to get outside.

Louise Hurrell is a writer based in Scotland. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Oranges Journal, Flash Flood, and The Waxed Lemon.

Jennifer Schomburg Kanke's work has recently appeared in New Ohio Review, Massachusetts Review, Shenandoah and Salamander. She serves as a member of the board of Anhinga Press.

Michael Kellichner is originally from Pennsylvania, but has settled in South Korea. If you ever run into him, he'd happily buy you a coffee if you want to talk poetry.

Sam Kerbel was shortlisted for the 2024 Oxford Poetry Prize. His first chapbook, *Can't Beat the Price* (2025), is available from Bottlecap Press. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Anthropocene*, *Cleaver*, *Lana Turner*, and *South Florida Poetry Journal*, among other publications.

Nathan McDowell and **Neal Allen Shipley** have been co-writing poems for over 10 years. Nathan is a first-gen American poet living in Columbus, OH. His work can be found in *Bicoastal Review*. Neal lives in Colorado with a modest collection of pets and an unhinged collection of plants. His work can be found in *Tough Poets Review*.

Joey Price (they/them) is a queer artist and writer from the Midwest, loving the romantic, horrific, and sometimes weird sides of literature.

An Arkansas native, **Sarah Watkins** is an educator by trade and a writer by necessity. She currently resides in northeast Arkansas with her husband. Her work has recently been featured in several publications, including *Menagerie*, *Moss Puppy Magazine*, and *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*. Instagram: @sarahwatkinspoetry

Cover Artist Bio

Sophia May is an illustrator and a student at Parsons The New School. She is from New Jersey and enjoys digital art, animations, creating interactive mutli-media artworks, and making children's books. Her Instagram handle is @sofa_.mayo and her website is: <https://sophiamay.carrd.co/>