



COMP LIT MAG

Winter Edition 2023

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Meet the Writers

Anushree Anand

Hi, I'm Anu (she/her)! I'm a second year in Comparative Literature and I'm one of the editors of the very first edition of the Comparative Literature magazine! My experiences definitely influence my writing, and I'm incredibly passionate not only about literature but also the way it intersects with social concerns. Outside of coursework, I love the classics (but you didn't hear it from me!), and I love making hyperspecific playlists!

Anainah Dalal

Hi, I'm Anainah (they/she)! I'm a 2nd year Comparative Literature with Film Studies student here at KCL. I've loved writing ever since I was a kid, and have loved pursuing it further at uni! I enjoy a good romcom, be it in movies, TV or books, and, coming from India, am deeply interested in exploring and celebrating Indian subcultures.

Shea Yeoh

Hi, my name is Shea (she/he/they) and I'm currently a 2nd Year Comparative Literature with Film Studies student at KCL. Growing up in Malaysia has definitely inspired a lot of my writing, be it academic or personal, as much of my work centres around Asian culture and literature. Outside of reading and writing (and writing about reading), I enjoy painting and exploring green spaces around London when the weather permits.

Jahnavi Modak

My name is Janhavi Modak and I am a second-year Comparative Literature student. My career aspirations lie in international development; namely in identifying and implementing methods of tangible change. I hope to use the knowledge acquired from this degree to inform my foray into this sector. I am especially inspired by the range of sources, taught in this course, that reveal narratives of trauma, colonialism and marginalised identity. They have helped me foster a strong sense of empathy for the complicated emotions present in these narratives. I hope to take this empathy into my future endeavours.

Kit López

Hi, I'm Kit López (they/them)! I am 19, I study Comparative Literature and I love punk, London youth culture, and queer history!



Editors' Note

What Even is Comp. Lit?

You may be wondering, “What even is Comparative Literature?” We wonder about that all the time too. Even self-proclaimed “comparative literature experts” will spend hours debating their own perspectives on it. It can seem too broad- literature from across the world, across time periods, across cultures- and is still not enough. Evidently, it is difficult to define, and yet once we think more about Comparative Literature, we learn that it doesn't need to have just one definition. It is a constantly changing, ever evolving field that keeps broadening its own scope and becoming more inclusive. It means different things to different people, building a community of diverse-minded yet goal-oriented individuals. For us, “Comp. Lit.” is constantly broadening the scope of what we consider “literature” to be limited to- not nations, not boundaries, not languages and not specific forms of media. This means considering even films, art, music and plays under the umbrella of literature.

Understanding what comparative literature can mean for you, means joining the community of academics and students as we explore the field in all our varied and diverse ways. You don't have to be at university or study literature - simply have an open mind to all the literature and media you encounter. Then we can look at how various other fields interact with global ideologies and their effects.



We believe that the best way to adequately explain the discipline to you is by posing to you a challenge- compare two pieces of media from the given list, and see how your perspective changes when you have to look not only for differences, but also for similarities among them. We hope you find as much joy in experiencing these works and discovering your own idea of comparative literature.

Our Recommendations

Films

How to Have Sex (2023, dir.
Molly Manning Walker)

&

Past Lives (2023, dir. Celine
Song)

Books

Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake
Dating (2021, Adiba Jaigirdar)

&

Looking for Alaska (2005, John
Green)

Plays

The Importance of Being Earnest
(1895, Oscar Wilde)

&

A Day in May (2022, Colin
Murphy)

Albums

Danger Days: The True Lives of the
Fabulous Killjoys by My Chemical
Romance (2013)

&

This is It by The Greeting
Committee (2018)

Why We Fight

by Anushree Anand

My war paint has arrived in the mail. It comes in the colours of the rainbow. It comes in red, black, green and white.

There's something soothing about putting it on, and letting the intensity of the fight wash over you. It eases the ache in our hearts.

We bleed for our cause. We bleed for the loss of the lives of people we don't know, because not knowing them isn't a good enough reason not to avenge them.

There are opportunities you get in your youth to fight. There will always be problems, causes, issues that make life unliveable, that people will fight for. When the opportunity comes by, don't let it wash over you. There may never be a better chance for you to take an active stance on your life, instead of remaining passive in the face of strife, struggle and survival.

Books remind us, over and over, of the price of ignorance.

The Hunger Games. *Don't forget what they did to us.*

Fahrenheit 451. *I hate a Roman named Status Quo!*

The Handmaid's Tale. *Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.*

They remind us of the price of our ambivalence.

Our middle-grounding of their struggle. Our "I'm not political" response to their suffering. When did human rights become political? When did someone's right to live their life on their own terms become a debate?

The paint cracks under the sun, under exposure. Our resolve breaks under weathering storms of irreverence for our actions. But we keep weathering them. We persevere, in the stead of people who cannot.

Somewhere down the line, protesting became the only way to demonstrate your disagreement, and your dissent. It became a manageable task – something easily controlled and quickly resolved. The brunt of the impact relied on strength in numbers. Protests are profound in the way they portray their power. The calm, unrelenting low tide causes fewer shockwaves than a tsunami, but it causes its own impact regardless. It leaves its mark in the shapes that it carves into stone, immortalises its own ebbs and flows.

We share our impact across millions. There is solidarity in it. There is comfort. There is grace, and the potential for a reckoning.

The fight we fight is not just for the people who suffer in this moment. It's for the guarantee that the rights we have will not be considered cannon fodder.

But why did anyone ever fight at all?

No Justice



It seems, the essential of the human experience is to resist. Resist conquering, resist change, resist poaching- a medley of immovable objects meeting unstoppable forces.

Humanity has historically spent decades, even centuries, resisting each other. It took millennia for us to reach every milestone of tolerance, every new success basking in the warmth of the failures behind them. Failure is intrinsic to fighting – you never know when you might lose, but you cannot guarantee success. You fight despite the failure; you power through it. You do not quit until you succeed.

For some people, quitting is not even an option.

Protect your siblings. Ensure that they are safe before you leave your own home. There is nothing more important. Spend hours into the night talking about how far you've gotten into the same show. They threaten to spoil it for you. You threaten to shave their eyebrows if they did.



Pour swathes of your salary into your parents' retirement fund. Make the landing easier for them. Call, text, and let them know that you're okay, every day. Ask them to teach you how to cook. They tell you that the oil will splatter, and to be careful. You tell them that you will be.

Send small comforts to your friends in the forms of memes, of painstakingly curated playlists crafted around all you know about them. The playlists are hundreds of songs long. The memes devolve into absurdist representations of what was once an intelligible joke to strangers but is now a piece of your own interwoven tapestry.

Humanity works endlessly, to find its place amongst other humans.

Humanity works endlessly, to find its place against other humans.

Dance. Hours spent alone, sweat pouring, repeating the same movement until the tensing of the muscles is second nature, until it is perfect. There is determination in the repetition. There is resilience.

Music. Feeling strings press into the pads of your fingers in an echo chamber, leaving crescents and the smell of metal on you for hours. There is solace in being overtaken by the same melody, and stubbornness in refusing to settle for mediocrity.

Art. Experimenting with paint, charcoal, and the fine stroke of a brush on paper, or on a screen. Hunched over projects as night breaks into dawn, hands and spine carrying the evidence of human labour within them.

Human beings love. That is why we fight.

We fight with all the strength we can muster in our hearts, scrounged from the losses of years past, scars and blemishes notwithstanding. We let ourselves feel empathy for everyone who cannot fight for themselves. In our youth and in our naïveté, we feel. Chests cracked open and bleeding, we are capable of achieving beyond our own comprehension. It is natural, to us, that our love be all-encompassing, in this way.

We fight not only for the ones who cannot, but for every past generation who had to choose their own lives over their love. For generations who could not feel the same unbridled love, who had to choose their futures over their passions, for generations who could not afford to feel the same empathy that we can. We take over the helm of the people who were able, and remember those who were not.

Where does that leave us?

Flecks of paint rubbing off onto our palms, as we continue to resist ignorance. We will not let them believe that no one disagreed with them when they played roulette with our futures. We will bring the torch of our visibility, our humanness, and our determination to a hundred more people. Thousands more. Even millions.



Tales of Transgender Lives: Three Stories of Queer Resistance

by Kit López

Addressing the official 2023 Conservative Party conference, Rishi Sunak received applause and support for his statement that “A man is a man and a woman is a woman” stating that he will not allow people to be “bullied” into deciding to identify as a transgender person. In the last few years, we have seen a huge spike in transphobic rhetoric, attacks, and prejudice against genderqueer people, many arguing that transgender identities are merely a part of a ‘woke’ liberal agenda that has only begun to grow as a product of the 21st century. In truth, history can easily open our eyes to the many people who have rejected the gender binary and lived their authentic lives as either men, women, or something in between. Whether it be amongst the tangled streets of 17th century London, the gilded halls of French 18th century palaces, the hospitals of 1800’s South Africa or the bars of 1970’s New York.

Mol was born Mary Frith in 1584 on the Barbican Estate, London. Although their tale has been often changed, distorted and politicized particularly to make them more aligned with royalism of the 1610’s, what is clear is that they disregarded any type of gendered categorization. They were known for wearing men’s clothing and presenting as what we would now call trans-masculine for their whole life, a bold choice when the Sumptuary Laws of the era made abandoning strict dress codes for both gender and class segregation punishable by law. In the fictionalized play written on their life, by Middleton and Dekker named *The Roaring Girl*, they write how Mol was “woman more than man, Man more than woman”. They are recognized by every other character as someone beyond the gender binary. Ironically, it seems that their life as a swindler and petty thief often causing controversy for riding horses around London in men’s clothing and hijacking playhouses to play and sing songs.

They are described as ‘mad Moll, or merry Moll, a creature so strange in quality, a whole city takes note of her name.’ They were an entity of the city, almost like the figure of a lovable rogue within the play that reflects on how they were understood by their society at the time. Even within the play, their gender nonconformity is in the end not something villainised, but something left alone even if it isn’t understood. And this isn’t just fictional, we can see debates of the time clearly in the pamphlets *Hic Mulier* and its counterpart *Haec-Vir* published in 1620. The former had an argument against what the anonymous author saw as a growing amount of crossdressing and transgender people. Surprisingly, the second essay was published as a counterpoint, advocating for freedom of dress between all the sexes, however they wanted to present. It seems that this debate has only continued in the 21st century, and is yet to know that it has a legacy in the distant past, proving that gender nonconformity is not a product of Generation Z.

From Rouges to Royal spies, Chevalier d'Éon was a trans woman born in 1728, assigned male at birth. Her birth name was Charles Geneviève Louis Auguste André Timothée d'Éon de Beaumont. Articulate and intelligent from a young age, she was hired as a spy for King Louis XV, and then as French diplomat to London as part of the French Dragoons after having fought valiantly in the Seven Years' War (1765-1763). She was a vital part of negotiations between England and France, simultaneously plotting a plan of revenge on the British on behalf of the French King. Whilst she was in London, she published a secret diplomatic document called *Lettres, memoires et negociations* in which rumours about her real gender began to first circulate. But Chevalier was more intelligent than to let gossip get the best of her.

Although she was born a man, in her autobiography named *The Interests of the Chevalier d'Éon de Beaumont*, she began to weave the narrative that her father, desperate for a son, had raised her as a boy so that she could inherit the familial wealth, but that her true gender was female. By 1771, she had practically become a celebrity, and yet the price of this notoreity came at the cost of her military pension. Now at risk of becoming destitute, d'Eon spent the remaining part of her life living as a woman, making money through performing fencing shows for the public which today feature in many prints, engravings and pieces of art . Only at her death was her secret revealed, after having lived peacefully as a well-respected woman at the heart of French high society.



Mary Frith



Moll Cutpurse



In the 20th century, transgender and gender-nonconforming people had become fed up with hiding amongst society in order to be accepted. Trans women in particular became some of the leading forces of the first wave of queer resistance, fighting for the rights of everyone within the LGBTQ+ community. One of these figureheads was the famous activist Marsha P. Johnson, born in 1945, New Jersey. She was known within the community of 1970's New York as a kind and caring soul who always stood up for the plights of others. She created the STAR charity (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) with her transfeminine friend Sylvia Rivera, which helped support trans and gay individuals who were left homeless because they chose to live as their authentic selves.



Marsha P. Johnson

As a Black trans woman, she suffered some of the worst discrimination on account of her race and gender identity. And yet, she never apologised for being proudly and joyfully gender nonconforming. She stated that the 'P' in her name stood for 'Pay it no mind', never adhering to the judgment of society. She was nicknamed 'Saint of Christopher Street', after she was recorded as playing an active role in the Stonewall Riots of 1969, in which after a police raid on a gay bar, people were detained for simply showing their sexuality in the privacy of the club. This led to queer people revolting and resisting arrest, marking the beginning of a new wave of gay rights activism in the era. To much grief and sadness within the LGBTQ community, Marsha went missing for six days in 1992, after friends reported she had been harassed by a group of thugs. Her body was found six days later, and to this day it is seen as a tragic death of one of history's greatest queer activists. She has since then become the face of the sadness, struggle, but also joy of queer resistance in America and around the world, immortalized through photography and art like Andy Warhol's screenprints of her in a collection named 'Ladies and Gentlemen'.

These are the stories of gender nonconforming people that our Conservative society would rather forget. But the fact that we still have reference to them in so many forms, from plays and art to records of medical achievement, is a testament to the fact that queer resistance against cisgendered-heterosexual norms is a radical tradition that we as genderqueer people carry forward into the future today.

Future Present: Speculative Art and the Bodies of Tomorrow

by Shea Yeoh

For as long as mankind has walked this earth, he has looked to the future. This preoccupation has been the driving force of rapid technological and social development into the 21st century and its breakneck pace of development has informed the fictions (and fears) about the future for years. From the classic authoritarian dystopias of Albert Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, to the filmic depictions of megacities in *Bladerunner 2049* and *Minority Report*, visions of 'The Future' have constantly evolved with global culture and its concerns.

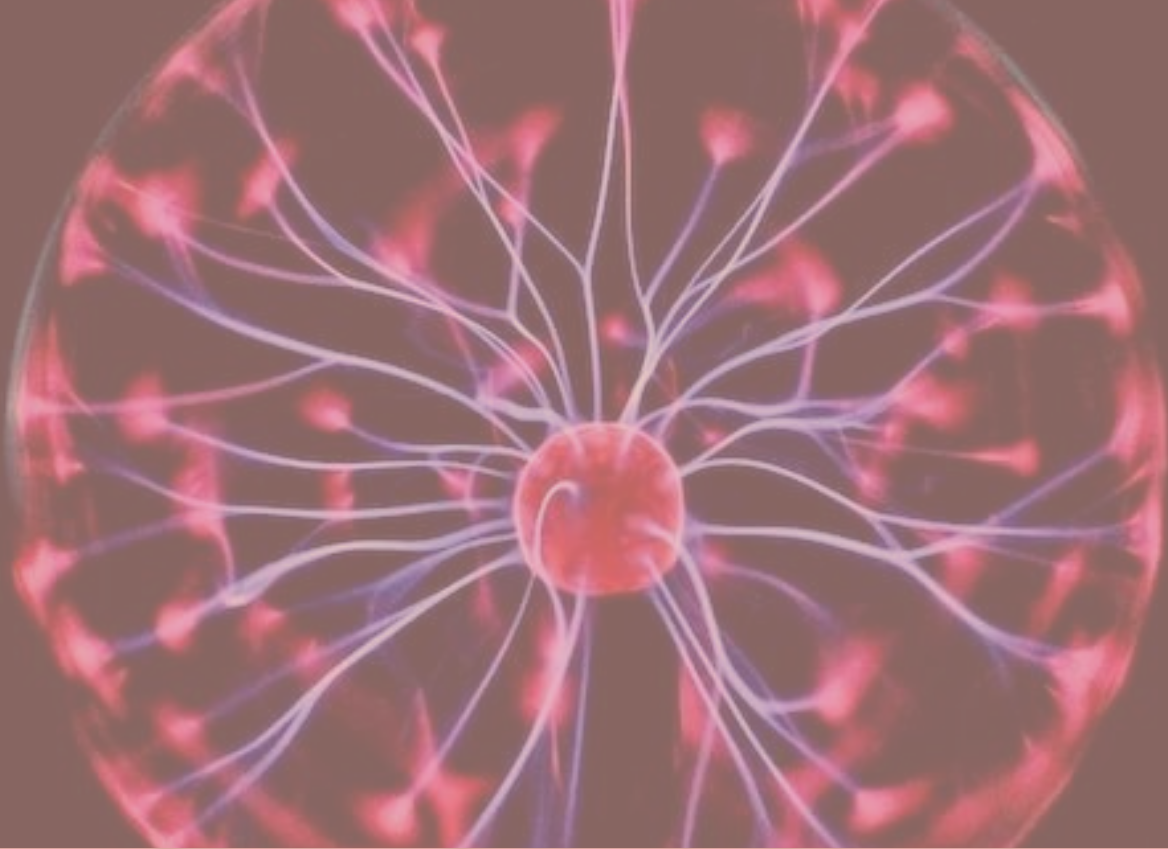


“What happens when current global crises are left untreated?” When imagining the future, the most common landscapes we tend to envision draw their inspirations from ongoing problems we have in the present. That question of current crises extending through each generation fascinated Dougal Dixon in his speculative science fiction book *Man After Man*. The book, which is formatted like an encyclopaedia, details the evolution of humans 5 million years into the future. Following the decline of modern civilization due to climate change, overpopulation and decimation of natural resources, humans are forced into outer space as the earth heals. Yet, some are left behind on our desolate planet, and through a series of genetic engineering and evolution, a new species of “posthumans” emerge from the debris of the old world. Phillip Hood’s illustrations for the book hinge on the bizarre, as human faces are plastered onto fur-covered bodies with impossibly long limbs or scaled creatures who look more alien than person.

Despite explaining much of the science behind these visuals (and this science is questionable at best), each new evolutionary branch of man looks more detached from anything that could be visually recognised as “human”. Ultimately, even the posthumans are doomed to repeat the sins of the past and each civilisation eventually crumbles to give way to a new species to continue this cycle of rebirth and destruction. While the uncanny illustrations are a highlight of the book, Dixon also poses a genuine critique on colonial exploitation. As each wave of spacefaring entities attempt to terraform (ironically, the act of transforming other planets to resemble our own) Earth and its inhabitants to their own benefit, a collapse of civilisation becomes inevitable in the following pages. The “native” populations of humans that inhabit it also always bear the brunt of these changes, whether that be to their natural environments or even more literally by being rendered into nothing more than labourers.

Mapping onto the history of colonial projects undertaken by empires throughout human history, Dixon merges the past with the present with the heavy technological focus his narrative takes. The 1980s weren’t known as the “decade of decadence” for nothing- amidst a new space era and the birth of the early internet, humanity had begun taking steps into infinity and beyond. *Man After Man*, which was published in 1990, unsurprisingly comments on this greediness for a more advanced future where technology could hypothetically allow mankind to play God. While he approaches the future in a purely biological and scientific lens, it is difficult to ignore Dixon’s warning of the consequences of this exploitative human activity on our earth as it morphs, twists, and distorts our physical existence.

Since the publication of *Man After Man*, the idea of space travel and genetic engineering has become less farfetched. With increasing global temperatures, an ever increasing global population and growing political instability, the landscape of the 21st century is becoming unnervingly similar to Dixon’s prediction of our planet’s inevitable apocalypse event. Yet, images about ‘The Future’ are still constantly evolving. Unlike Dixon, cyber artist Lu Yang’s vision of the “post-human” human exists entirely within cyberspace. The artist’s fascination with the final frontier of human existence is evident throughout their entire body of work and its deconstruction of the restrictive nature of our biology. As such, Lu Yang draws on their Buddhist faith to imagine the soul transcending beyond material constraints in works such as their 2012 short film *The Beast* and 2017’s *Electromagnetic Brainology*. This idea is taken to its breaking point in their 2021 *Digital Descending* exhibition through the creation of their digital avatar Doku. By undergoing multiple detailed face scans in the process of creating their avatar, Doku bears striking visual resemblance to Lu Yang. In an interview with *Metal Magazine*, they liken this process to a form of “digital reincarnation,” in which they are “transferring the production of [their] brain into the digital world.” (Lu Yang, 2022)



Lu Yang frequently distorts the line between physical and metaphysical, but through the act of rebirth into the digital realm, the spirit is able to inhabit multiple different bodies altogether. This development of Lu Yang's work is hardly surprising. With the rise in popularity of VR technology, digital avatars like Doku have been prevalent in contemporary discourse. From the early days of role-play in online RPGs, to VTubers and the Metaverse, virtual stand-ins for the human body have been a constant part of the digital era. And it's not hard to see why. Digital bodies can be easily customised and configured to whatever specification its user wants, transcending what would be physically possible. While there are still limitations with the actual technology behind creating a digital 'self', this notion raises questions about the extent to which these artificial bodies can even be considered an extension of ourselves. Will the day come when we are finally able to leave behind the physical body all together?

The temporal distance 'The Future' has with the present is precisely what has allowed our curiosity to speculate as to what its arrival may look like. There is comfort in knowing though, that these are fictitious realities and not the inevitable trajectory that we are barreling towards (even if elements of these realities may already be found in our own). Dixon's posthumans and Lu Yang's cyber bodies don't concern themselves with answering the question of what the future will look like- rather, they aim to deconstruct very current concerns. With the proliferation of digital forms of existence, will we go from being chronically to permanently online? As our climates, societal structures and technologies change, will we be able to constantly adapt or will we eventually be replaced? Ultimately, with the breakneck pace that the world is changing, will we be able to recognise the humans of tomorrow?

A Love Letter

by Anainah Dalal

*“Address the letters/To the holes in butterfly
wings”*

(hope that ur ok by Olivia Rodrigo)

Ever since I was a child, I have been writing about lines. About lines that are people's lives, about lines written about love and the ones that draw us apart. I started collecting lines from books, songs, movies and television shows. They're all tucked away in a little notes page on my phone that I open whenever I want to remind myself of the love and pain that exists in the lines of our lives. Here, I open that page to show you what matters to me. This is not an essay about literature, it is a love letter to it.

“I'm unprepared/for my loved ones to be gone”

(Only A Lifetime by FINNEAS)

“It's all alright until your friend runs a red light/And you watch his car burst into flames”

(Love is Pain by FINNEAS)

I address this letter to my loved ones, the ones who songs such as these invoke and leave everlastingly imprinted in my mind. I will never get over the fear of losing a loved one- friend, family and friends who become family. That's why I write next to a poet, who wrote so carefully about love and death, she both worsens my anxieties and puts them at ease.

*“It was not death, for I stood up,
And all the dead lie down;
It was not night, for all the bells
Put out their tongues, for noon.”*

(It Was Not Death- For I Stood Up by Emily Dickinson)

Emily Dickinson writes about Death as though it is some great, big, vast unknown that she wishes to pick apart while she was living. She wishes to know what would happen when she died or when anyone would- and we pick her poems apart as though they can tell us more about her and death, rather than love itself. A lot of Dickinson's poems about death start to make sense, when you think about the fact that her mother was dying right in front of her eyes.

Why then, wouldn't it be natural to wonder what happens after death? Why wouldn't you want to know if your loved one was going to suffer or be at peace? Why wouldn't you extrapolate your love into suffering? Take it from someone who never knows what to do with grief- I am grateful for the words you, Emily, lend me when I don't know my love from my sorrow.

“सबकुछ कहकर ही सबको बताना ज़रूरी है ही क्या?”

(*Aise Kyun*- Anurag Saikia, Raghav Chaitanya, Nikhita Gandhi)

And now we enter the part of the letter where I worship literature, for giving me words I could never come up with myself, but can use and misuse for my own benefits.

“*You have to find a job that makes your heart feel big, instead of one that makes it small*”
(*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*- Taylor Jenkins Reid)

“*It's a big deal. But it is OK*”

(*Book Lovers*- Emily Henry)

There are so many more of these tidbits from books I have read across the years that stick with me, and in just this small demonstration I lay all my cards bare for you to look at. Books have given me royal flushes and empty nothings, and yet in each I find a piece of me and the world I can play with. Each hand has shown me a different love, a different pain, a different life for me to contend with- and in the literary casino I become a mastermind. Literature allows me to pick and choose what I can pick up to keep and what I should discard, when to gamble on life and when to save my pennies, where to reveal my secrets and where to form lies. In the words of others I become me. I choose a field that makes my heart feel big, and when something big happens I learn to let it pass, and when grief happens I learn to let it be, and when love manifests in so many places I allow it to happen, and when life becomes the same I love... literature and all else it gives me. Now- the only words I have been able to come up with myself for this love letter and its subject, saved for the very end.

“I am obsessed.

Why?

- Because I am in love.”

My letter is small, not because my love is. But because sometimes, in literature and life, things can just be- as they are.

Signed,

A.D.

Resurrection

by Jahnavi Modak

Days were tacky like the back of an old magazine, flat, faded,
2d,

I hoped for them to grow taller, brighter and technicolour,

With rhythm, spicy chicken and sand-tangled hair flying
loose in the wind, my bare feet running free,

I think of the cool of the oldest tree and the distant hum of
birds only noticed when absent,

I think of interlacing fingers, two hands knotted like poorly
woven shoelaces, stuck hour after hour,

Like the slight sweat on my arms after a long day of running
through the swampy village fields and the single pesky curl,
I blow off my cheeks,

Like the shoulder that I don't turn to check is there when I
lean for rest,

I crave a life I can touch, feel and caress,

Stretch the seconds like kneaded dough,

And savour the succulent taste of every prick, heartbreak,
nudge, song, breathe and breeze,

All wrapped in the air of your presence, seeping into every
room, and tapping my back
Telling me to turn, step out of the walls

And see,

Savour each shiver in my spine,

And know that with you,

I can be.



Credits

Photos:

<https://www.pexels.com/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52981395>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Moll-Cutpurse>

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/09/08/mary-frith-a-diamond-in-dog-shit/>

<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/the-gender-fluidity-of-the-chevalier-don>

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw217942/Chevalier-dEon?LinkID=mp57121&role=art&rNo=0>

<https://www.them.us/story/james-barry-ej-levy>

<http://fred-de->

vries.blogspot.com/2016/08/review-dr-james-barry-woman-ahead-of.html

“An Army Surgeon’s Career”, article dated 1910 found in Dr James Barry’s personal file. Catalogue ref: WO 25/3910 at the National Archives

Literature:

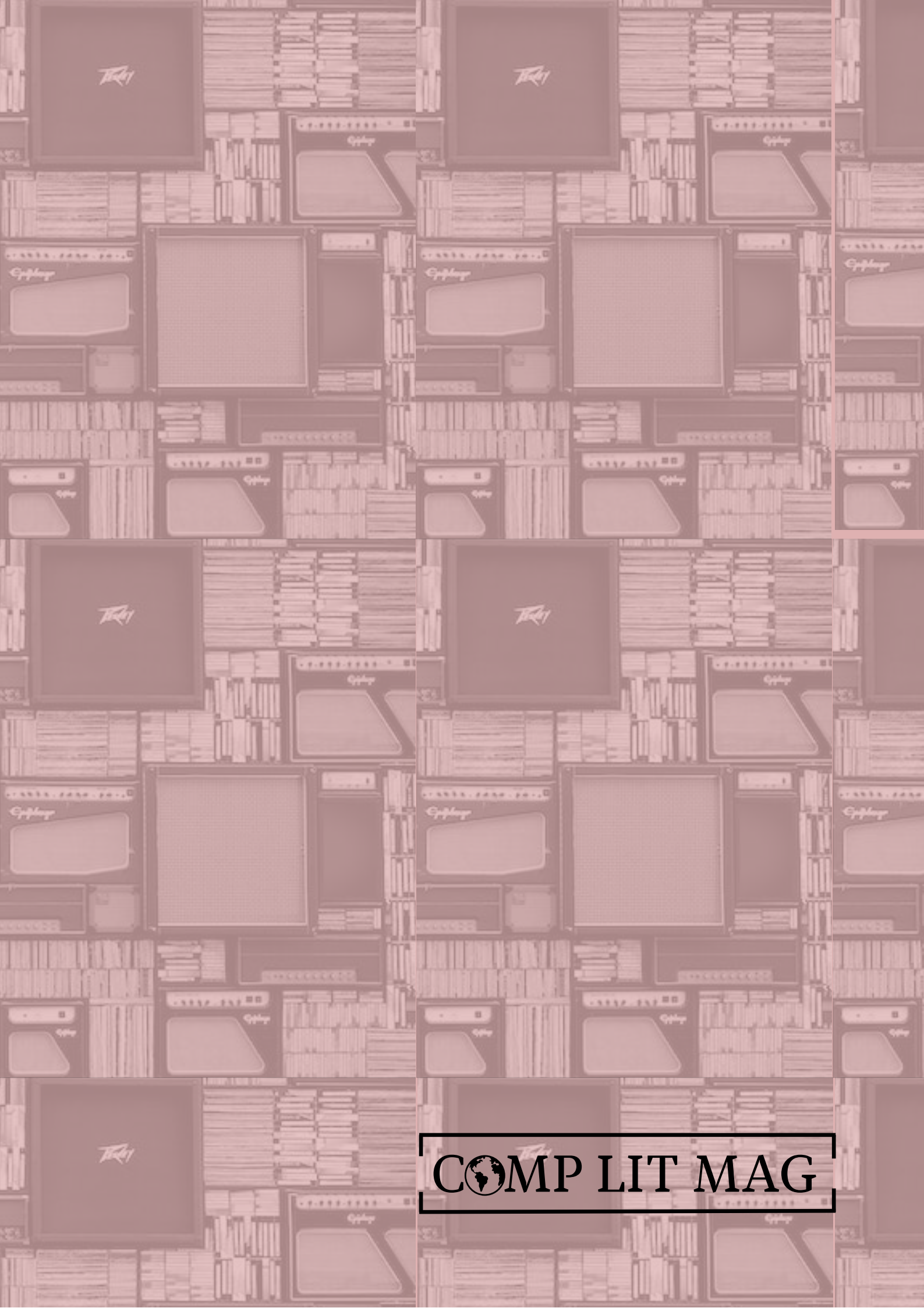
The Hunger Games: Suzanne Collins (2008)

Fahrenheit 451: Ray Bradbury (1953)

The Handmaid’s Tale: Margaret Atwood (1985)

The Roaring Girl and Other City Comedies: Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker (1611)

Metal Magazine (2022)



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