THE GENDER AND SEXUALITY CENTER PRESENTS:

Exhale
Identity Series
Acceptance
Exhale Identity Series aims to utilize storytelling as a means for building connection on our campus. By tying personal narratives back to one shared theme, Exhale brings into focus commonalities across a variety of lived experiences. This program is also poised to center accounts which are often denied, dismissed, and/or entirely excluded. The goal is to provide a platform in which vulnerability, self-authorship, and validation draw Carls to share out and discuss important topics relevant to the community. This year's theme focuses on Acceptance.
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Read This Backwards
Tori Aguado '24

Ask me in twenty years
of the bells that hang in the trees
and the short-lived, perspicuous shadows of you and I and
them and us.
Perhaps then, I’ll learn to grasp how I ended up here,
rearranging the drawers each time you forget to to call.

Remind me in the late hours to
softly simmer the cardamom with the sweet potatoes and
apple slices
For a heartbeat after an overdue laugh with
the person you least expected.
Maybe then, I'll listen to
the bottoms of my bare feet designed by the humour of cloudy
moss

Ask me 10 years ago;
What made me cry? If I preferred the warm spot on the floor
to...
the branches too high to climb paired with a few blank pages?
Ask me what crossed my mind
When I first met the person I least expected.

Read this backwards
It is tender to turn on the light.  
The bulb builds a stolen moment  
Hitting everything in sight  
And nothing further  
You aren’t with me here.  
Diffuse flickers of you don’t hold a match  
To my foggy days and faggy ways  
In your arms the lights are always on  
   Where is the switch?  
   Where will we end?

My love is a decadent meal  
My love is naps at three in the afternoon  
My love is a final coat of mascara  
   and a sigh  
My love, I fear  
You will tire of me.  
Once the jokes run dry,  
we exhaust our star charts,  
RuPaul’s Drag Race is cancelled once and for all.  
   When our chaos halts,  
   I will be extraordinarily boring
Still in the light of our dying glow.
Sex can only do so much,
    I can only do so much –
I need to need me more than I need you

So breathe with me.
Today will be today
The sun will set, the clouds will come
We’ll cry alone together
Until we don’t.
We will never know that day–
I will never know that day
Except as the light alone in my room
Reaching somewhere, ending somewhere
As I pick up my clothes,
Make my bed,
And turn the light off.
"These are the words I heard after I came to terms with my identity. These are, clearly, not words of acceptance. I find acceptance with my close friends and with my personal faith, both of which give me the strength to move forward."

Unshaken
Maya Strike '24
Sana Sana Ama
Ale Cota '22

Mijo. Orgullo.
Mi niño, primer nacido me dices

First. Is the day rent is due. The fire under your pot crackles; as my blurry morning vision made you young—again,
for a moment.
First. The sun rose with her smile,
upper lip stained by our bitter cafecito

But behind our shared glimmer and glamor,
it was the slowing of her pulse that gripped me with fear.
this insidious interruption of our shared laughter about my misfortunes with once-held romance, leaves my knotted throat in inquiry on the deadened, thick silence between us now:
Has mi ama ever known the bliss of rest, the shine of hope, or the solace of peace?

It’s the first.
she says, with her smile
tenderly tucked away within her realization, y with ojos cansados, which now betrayed her earlier grace.
First. I recall my mother’s glory
she was a healing warrior, her palmita her
sword y her mouth her shield.
Her healing le cuesta.
The lines carved into her stubborn, motherly
palm are no longer hers, every sanada
took a piece of them into her.

The sword that my frente remembers in fevers,
the Buñuelo-making hand but also as
the hand that slapped me,
the hand that covered her shield to hide the sobs,
the hand that let him hurt me.

La palma de mi alma that I will never forget;
the body that showed me what it feels to love
a queer, trans body,
her healing is almost gone,
we both know what I am,
in our worn eyes with the pot now cold, I witness
the swirl of doubt, confusion, and yearn

how does a mother grieve an unborn son,
how will she heal and love a dead son?
her new first: me.
Embodiment

Katrin Ree '19

wading through every word
my mother said
and didn’t say to me

i tell myself:
i’ve outgrown girlhood

but there’s a little girl,
folded in on herself,
folded into me,
silent and fleshy
in tepid blood, stirring.

grief is sticky to the touch,
odorless, hanging
on every breath.

wading through everything
my parents said
and didn’t say to me

i hold ripe-melon memories
in my hands, crack them open,
scoop out the rotting flesh.

i tell myself:
i’ve outgrown girlhood
but i’ve grown through,
around, within it.

i devour doubt,
pencil and paper in hand,
gazing at the taxidermied bird with outstretched wings,
perched on a branch in a glass box—

life’s container is cold and dry.
my knuckles crack and bleed.

i’ve outgrown girlhood

but i am cold, insecure,
a miscellaneous drawer
of giddy excitement, crippling fear, and repressed desire.

i am girlhood and personhood,
unfolding memories sealed
and stamped with wax,
holding years of silence
in my hands, pressing
them to my chest,
warm, unkempt, glowing.

i am my greatest dreams
enveloped in stars.

i am death
and new beginnings,
blood and bones
expanding

10
“Each of the squares represents a different phase of emotion and while they all co-exist within each other, it is all a part of me and I’ve come to accept that.”
Acceptance is a word I don’t like
Created to encompass emotions that were once scorned
Cautioning a person of the possibility of repercussions
Expect consequences when something needs to be accepted
Prepare for what was once unconditional to become conditional
Tame your thoughts and steal your heart
Acceptance, however, is necessary for growth
Nothing would be unacceptable without it nor can one’s esteem blossom
Certain evils in this world would never be stopped without it
Evils that bring the need for acceptance

"I realized that words like tolerance and acceptance in regards to one's identities seem contradictory. What is there to accept? I'm just me."
The Transformation(s)
Arianna Varela '21

My name is Arianna and I am a....

I’ve seen the classic reenactment of an AA meeting on TV. I’ve made that “joke”. “The first step of recovery is admitting you have a problem.“ It was simple to add mindless humor to an unweighted statement. It slid right out, with no resistance. Shame adds stiffness to the tongue, making the words more difficult to say out loud.

The TV also “jokes” about the stages of grief. They end with acceptance. Or maybe radical acceptance? That’s what they taught me in the treatment center. (Pain - acceptance = suffering). I was suffering. I have grieved many parts of my identity and I am still working on it. 2020, for me, had to be the ultimate year of acceptance (and not fully by choice). The biggest heartbreak. The rock-bottom.

I was 15 the first time I was called mentally ill or clinically depressed. The missing brain chemicals necessary for normal functioning were compactly served in a little white oval. Swallowing the pills felt guilty, my tongue was burdened as I drank water to try to ease its push against the lump in my throat. By 2020, I had accepted my fate. However, the solace I had found in the acceptance and sometimes the embrace of this label quickly became irrelevant.
Something shifted in me while I was abroad. A disturbance in my melancholic equilibrium. It wasn’t the pseudo-enlightened “studying abroad changed my life” type of shift. It wasn’t intellectual; it was visceral, felt all over my body. Studying abroad didn’t change my life. I transformed. I became her, someone who looked and acted nothing like her previous selves. Her body was thinner, her skin was tanner, and both her worry and smile lines had deepened. It was winter 2020, and Arianna was back at Carleton, in her January reincarnation. She was more exciting. She was an upperclassman. She was skinnier. Cuba looked good on her, they said.

The people she hung out with in Cuba also told “November Arianna,” the version of her that left Cuba, that the motherland “looked good” on her. Everyone noticed the weight loss, but nobody cared how or why it happened. The newly-formed acquaintanceships that began out of necessity for a community within her study abroad group didn’t understand September Arianna, the version that arrived in Cuba, but they loved November Arianna. They actually renamed her with that nickname— the contrast was officially named and reinforced. November Arianna was fun, confident, unpredictable, and reckless.
She had a reputation. November Arianna loved to drink rum and spend the night at the club with strangers, dancing along the Malecón until the morning heat crept in. She never needed time to recharge, and wanted to go out and drink every day. On the other hand, September Arianna was terrified, sad, overwhelmed, and tried not to leave her room. All September Arianna could think about was December 14, 2019, at 12:20 pm. That was when her flight would leave Havana. November Arianna did not want to leave, for she feared the end of her destructive cycle. She got drunk on the Malecón the night before she left, overslept, and almost missed her flight.

_How was Cuba?_ It was ...good I guess. After taking into account the extreme agony and the extreme excitement of this experience, it was mathematically neutral.

That was 2019. Shortly after coming back to Minnesota, a new version of the melancholic and anxious September Arianna came back. She looked like November Arianna still but failed to feel the euphoria that characterized her essence. She continued to drink like November Arianna. The impulsivity went away, but she still felt the cravings for Cuban rum.

January Arianna was panicking every day at Carleton, taking her prescribed benzos multiple times a day to stop the panic attacks. She used alcohol to feel better. It brought her closer to the dangerous allure she had exuded in Cuba in a way the benzos couldn’t. When mixed together, they were
a lethal, yet comforting cocktail. A new white pill was prescribed to her. This one was supposed to make January Arianna feel better. Instead, it summoned February Arianna, who was the more chaotic and less utopic and glamorous evil cousin of November Arianna.

February Arianna was a different kind of reckless—she fearlessly danced with death. Her psychiatrist noted this rapid shift after a series of suicidal near-death experiences. She learned a new label for herself and for the former versions of herself, who always seemed to cycle through each other, without creating one, cohesive identity. November Arianna had another name, a more clinical nickname—mania. Between the drinking, the suicidal ideation, and the other addictive behaviors, February Arianna was defined by her chaotic path of destruction. A path so visible that her close friendships and other relationships started to revolve around a genuine concern for her health.

February Arianna was not alone. The auditory hallucinations were all-consuming. She sat in class trying to cover her ears, hoping they wouldn’t be able to haunt her there. She was wrong. February Arianna was only one-half of her newly given clinical nickname. She was the most severe part of the manic side of her recently diagnosed bipolar disorder. February Arianna was hospitalized
for almost two weeks and was forced to take time off from school, which infuriated her because it did not fit the plan that High school Arianna had drawn out for herself. Deep down she knew that it wasn’t her time to return.

February Arianna began attending a treatment center. But, right when she began, the world flipped upside down-- a global paradigm shift. People’s way of understanding their histories had changed with newly emerging time-stamp labels of Pre-Covid and Covid worlds, distinctly different entities. Well, February Arianna knew what that was like. Pre-Bipolar and Bipolar. Suddenly, everyone around her was falling apart too. Long before she had seen the lived (and fatal) consequences of Covid as the months progressed, she thought about how satisfying it felt to know she had taken the world down with her. In a way, it was easier to cope with an abrupt change in her life’s course knowing that the world as she knew it would also never be the same, and the customary and compulsory life timelines that had worried her, would begin to matter less.

It took a long time for her to admit that she was bipolar. January Arianna couldn’t accept the decay of her predecessors. She was given a new identity and was forced to accept it. But how do you accept the identity that has shown you the most blissful peak of joy, yet has sunk you lower than the bottom of the worst trenches imaginable? The heaviness of the label was hard to say, knowing that it was a lifetime weight on her tongue.
Flash-forward almost a year and Recovery Arianna is who I have been now. I am in recovery and I accept that. “I strive for the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.” I am bipolar. I am living with an alcohol dependency disorder. I am fat. I am a lesbian. I am living in an imperfect and unpredictable world. All of these identities are ones I have been ashamed of at some point. Every day of sobriety feels like grief and love at the same time, knowing that the thirst that pools on my tongue weakens as time goes on. I accept that things may never be the same. I am hopeful that the pre-covid and covid dichotomy expands to form a post-covid life. Although I accept that there will not be a post-bipolar life. I am going to be a college graduate soon, heading into an uncertain situation. I accept this uncertainty and I am learning to embrace the perpetual heartbreak of life, where new identities will be left for me to grieve. This grief will present new opportunities. I know that, with time, the acceptance of these new identities will ease the stiffness of my tongue, opening a space for me to speak on my experiences, using the strength I have to help others in their grieving processes as the world begins to imagine a path to recovery and acceptance.
"I've always loved flowers. As I scrolled through four years of photos on my phone, hoping to find the point in time where I was hit with a moment of acceptance (perhaps a selfie after my first t shot? A post-op smile? A posed kiss with my partner?), I flipped through pictures of roses from studying abroad, bluebonnets from summers at home, and strawberries from the Northfield farm share. I searched for an enlightened look in my eyes, or a time I looked wholly content with my body and life. After a few rough sketches and failed attempts at dramatic self-portraits, I realized that, while I love my body, partner, and life, I haven't experienced one specific moment of complete acceptance. It has come in bits and pieces, definitions and community, dysphoria and euphoria. So, here is a bouquet of flowers from my phone, each with a little bit or piece I've picked up along the way."
seeds. cacti. succulents.
Octavia Washington '22

At ten, I am just starting to blossom. I don’t have memories of Before; what I am is just these seeds in the Now. I begin (finally) to form and by 12, I am the prickly cactus leaf — no one can harm me. But then I hit high school; global warming picks up in speed. I ebb and flow, no one can quite predict me, I don’t even know myself. It’s lonely to be so sharp. Just when I feel my petals beginning to teethe, winter comes. I go to college and lose all my leaves. I didn’t know I had so many! My mommy always said that you can’t fix a tree (hence why you shouldn’t pluck things that don’t belong to you). You can just replant. So I do. I replant. I regrow. What you’re looking at now is the highest feature of biodiversity. I am the Succulent Queen.
I bow to me.
How
Maya Rogers '22

I am my own, acceptance
When I accept me, I radiate an energy that penetrates the world around me

I am my own, radical, acceptance
Why I share my struggles, so hurdles there for me can diminish, slowly

I am my own, radical, communal, acceptance
What the voices around me, merging with mine, say: our combined power is palpable

I am my own, radical, communal, tenuous, acceptance
Whose self-love wanes, whose pain rises up, but is pushed down again

I am my own, radical, communal, tenuous, powerful, acceptance
Where I can say, wholeheartedly, that I love:

Who I am

Where I am

That I am

And that I am more
"This piece focuses on representing "the Ramble" in New York City, a site popular for queer cruising practices through the 1980s and 90s and continuing onto today. Through watercolor and guache paints, I abstracted the figures within this piece so they are anonymous yet retain their cunning and alluring depictions, attempting to invite the viewer into "the bush" and this space of cruising and public sexual freedom. This piece speaks to both a public/private divide and the importance of sexual empowerment and freedom, two topics that I have come to learn, accept, and love more greatly through my time at Carleton. Furthermore, it depicts a place chock-full of queer history and cultural importance, which is meant as an homage to my appreciation and love of queer history that has come as I have grown and learned about myself and our history while at Carleton."
The Most Beautiful Sunrise I Have Ever Driven Into
Maya Keshin '24

"You've never even been with a girl"
Is what my mom said when I came out to her
On an impulse in August heat
Maybe I hadn't, but how do I explain
How much I wanted to make that girl in my math class laugh
Just to hear that electrifying sound
Back in ninth grade
Or why my breath paused every time the new girl walked by me
Junior year of high school
When I am already on the verge of panic rooted in shame
Because I did this on an impulse in August heat

Then came the whispers of "you have to choose"
From the depths of my mind
Some days they turn into
Screams before my eyes
And I see no signs of them stopping anytime soon
I once read that our colonized culture doesn't like to reconcile opposites
Even though there are no opposites here I guess our colonized culture doesn't like nuance, either

But on the rare occasion when I feel like one whole, not fragments of a whole somehow strewn together
The pink, purple, and blue make the most beautiful sunrise I have ever driven into.
today we took a walk and we both forgot to wear layers we were very cold and the nerves didn't help and the hit i took beforehand didn't help. it scared me to see you vulnerable and gripping so fiercely to the past and to those men who flirted with you and batted their eyelashes at you meanwhile i sat in silence relegated to the couch on the edge of the room situated firmly between light summer time jackets that were slinked off in a rush to get inside.

they flirted with you and with the others who you had invited to join us but they looked at me as if i was an alien as if i blended into the couch with its light summer time jackets and i think that happened because

in some way i saw through their veneer and in so doing i asked them to justify their allure which is a question that not too many gollys like me would ask to such handsome boys.
i used to think you were the most beautiful person i knew
and i used to be so content lying down next to you
in an empty field dreaming about clubs in Taiwan
and days less monotonous and beaches or
mountains or forests and places i'd never been

i used to be so content when you'd come over for
dinner or for wine or to kiss or to just sit around
and laugh about the irony of our secret mutual fondness.

so i think i might be at a loss and i wish that i knew
how to proceed and i'm not entirely certain but i
think i found catharsis today and i think that kissing
you was joyful and beautiful and intimate like lips
on soft skin however i'm not sure that the words
we said to each other can be taken back so quickly
during a walk on an dismal grey day in january.
"This piece was a big moment during my time in high school where I finally accepted myself for who I am after I came out to my mom. She did not take my coming out so well, and that really impacted my mental health, and I had moments where I wish that I was "normal" so I don't disappoint my mother. I understand that she loves me, but she does not love me in a way that I can understand. It feels more as if she loves me for what I could be instead of who I actually was at that moment. As time passes during junior year of high school, my mom would always be in denial of my sexuality, but I gradually learn that her opinion of me won't matter years from now, and although it hurts for a family member to reject you for who you are, I am glad to have some supportive people by my side who helped me come to term with my own acceptance as a gay Asian immigrant."

Love me for me
An Vong '23
written for my younger self
Asha Penprase '21

The dialogues you heard about body dysphoria were so different from what you had experienced you had no clue that you were trans until your senior year of college.

because self expression was not something you could do in your house it was frivolous it was shallow what you should do is get good grades and respect your parents and get along with your siblings and do your chores and act like your sexuality and your gender did not mean anything more than the contract you had with your parents and the people around you in school who often would ask you if you liked this boy or that boy when you didn't even know what it meant to like someone and you knew that you sometimes felt enamored by one of your friends but she was a girl and you did not know to identify that as love because she wore dresses and you wore dresses too but they were whatever your mom had picked out because you never liked any clothes ever in the girl's section but you had to leave the store with something so you would end up finding one outfit that became your second skin
like that pink frog tank top and those cargo shorts or that red sweatshirt and those light-wash low rise jeans and you would wear those religiously and you did not question why so few clothes felt like they fit and you did not question why it was so hard to get your appearance to "click" like it so easily seemed to for your friends or your sister and you did not know what it meant to feel like a real person because who you knew yourself to be was so blurry and so vague and ultimately so fogged up by the many opinions that everyone seemed to have about what people are like and you weren't encouraged to have opinions about those sort of things because clearly things are that way for a reason and the whole world would not accept something unless it was legitimate.

but then you went to college and you saw people from cities like new york or san francisco who wore clothes you had never seen and who walked around with such self assurance you would think they were middle aged but they were eighteen and they had figured so much out and they so easily told you they were queer and they were out to everyone and so free to experiment with their appearance and they'd say fuck a dress if they didn't want to wear a dress and sometimes they'd ask you "are you queer" and a flicker of fear would course through your veins
can't they change the subject and mind their business please you're barely a person you've had less than a month on your own and you're new to this whole self expression thing and you're still wearing skinny jeans and a black tank top everyday and your hair is very beautiful and long you would always hear and you should wear a low cut top you would always hear aren't you a pretty girl you would always hear. the good news is that eventually you took off the skinny jeans and maybe you did something dramatic like shaved your head or got a tattoo or pierced your septum and then you felt even weirder like your performance of who you thought you were no longer passed and you felt so lost because you knew things were off but had no idea which direction they were headed.

and that was hard and wouldn't it have been nice to know that things would work out and wouldn't it have been nice to know that you're not the only person feeling like that but you didn't know those things you were so confused and that's okay you can't blame yourself you didn't grow up in a place where you were a real person it was all out of your control and now you're done with feeling lost and you're brave and you'll try on that outfit and you'll stop flirting with boys and you'll start kissing girls and you'll throw out your skinny jeans and you'll fill your drawers with whatever you want and you'll realize that you can be a person and you deserve to be free and you deserve to be a person and you can and will be free.
Write/Draw Your Story

Feeling inspired to reflect on your own relationship to the theme of Acceptance?

Use the following pages to create your own self-authored piece!

1. Think about how these authors related to their piece. When you are writing, think about the relationship you want with your piece.

2. These authors all had varying interpretations of the theme, Acceptance. Reflect on what your view of this theme is and how that will shape your piece.
and now...

Think about what vulnerabilities you are and are not willing to share. How can you continue to heal yourself, and to appreciate your stories. What makes you, you?

Now think about how we can foster discussion as a wider Carleton community using this healing and the ability to share our stories to show up for others.

...exhale
Special Thanks

Thank you to everyone who helped get the word out about Exhale!

Office of Intercultural and International Life
College Communications
Latin American Student Organization
Career Center
Department of English
Sociology & Anthropology Department
Gender, Women’s & Sexuality Studies
Cinema and Media Studies
Perlman Teaching Museum
Art and Art History Department
Peer Leader Committee
Out After Carleton Alumni Network
Student Activities Office
Moments of Acceptance:

"I'm a big fan of queer ecology and find it helpful in figuring out myself. I’ve had to learn and unlearn and learn again how to accept myself and body; how to navigate harm and be a little better than what I was thirty seconds ago."
- Octavia Washington (she/her) ’22

“This piece is about going through a long (and somewhat involuntary) process of recovery and learning how to mourn and accept a new label I was given, and the different versions of myself that came along with it. This piece is also about dealing with a crisis right before the pandemic started and learning how to accept myself and heal when it felt like the world was ending."
- Arianna Varela (she/her) ’21

"This piece is about learning self-love beyond sex and romance, and about the fear of being known and knowing yourself. I want to accept the fear of not fulfilling expectations and being imperfect, while also accepting the feeling of not knowing what the future looks like and who I will become."
- Joe Radinsky (they/he) ’23

"[The] last stanza is about glimmers of self-acceptance, the rare moments when I realize how beautiful my bisexuality is and that it contributes to telling the full story of the whole person that I am, rather than it being an identity comprised of pieces messily thrown together, which is how I often see it."
- Maya Khesin (she/her) ’24