

The background of the cover is a painting of a forest path. The path is a wide, light brown dirt road that leads from the foreground into the distance. On either side of the path are tall, slender trees with dark trunks. The foliage is in various stages of autumn, with some trees showing vibrant orange and red leaves, while others are still green. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a soft, atmospheric quality.

Spark to Flame

A Journal of Collaborative Poetry
June 2025

MARIA TAIBO

Spark to Flame: A Journal of Collaborative Poetry

Published June 2025

Issue Five

www.s2fjournal.com

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

I live in Washington, D.C. Right now, in Washington, D.C. at an art museum called the Phillips Collection, there is an exhibit on Essex Hemphill, an American poet and activist. So much of the exhibit moved me—Essex’s commentary on race, identity, sexuality; his collaboration with other artists; his impact on Washington, D.C. Among the room and a half of exhibition space, there is a glass display case. Inside the display case there are many things: pamphlets, chapbooks, and letters. One of the letters is the letter he wrote to Audre Lorde, American writer, professor, poet, and civil rights activist, on January 11, 1993—after her passing. Essex wrote:

“..You gave us words to bridge our differences and point us to collective power instead of a singular, selfish glory. You gave us words to teach us how to define ourselves and love the persons we defined. Words cast like life ropes, like spells, like mirrors for all to face and name what we see reflected back.”

Words are magic. They are power. They matter. This art that we make, these songs that we sing, these poems that we write—it all matters.

In this issue you will find ten poems. One was accepted as a completed, collaborative piece, where the authors worked together directly. The other nine were created through Spark to Flame’s anonymous “spark” to “flame” process. For this process, contributors submit fragments (sparks) and sign up to write a final poem (flame) from another person’s spark. Spark writers wrote one thing; the flame writer made it their own.

Welcome to Spark to Flame’s fifth issue.

Kindly,
Katherine Schmidt
Editor-in-Chief

Outside the Garden

Allison Burris (Flame) and Elizabeth Wing (Spark)

I could hear the coyotes from the reservoir
the insects flickering their wings

night sings in my veins like cherry wine

howls of muddy glitter
instant insatiable innocent

you were raised on leviticus and
the sanctity of the second amendment

raised from tadpole and hemlock

can we pretend it doesn't matter
what your mama thinks of me?

no one told you how to ask
for what you want, only how to martyr yourself

I have plucked every arrow from saint sebastian

and found the hole is not the shape of the body
only the shape of an arrow

the hole is never really empty
in spite of appearances

this love you're looking for
is like giving butterfly kisses

you have to be so, so gentle to feel it
like a stream burbling for a valentine

soften like you've been left out in the rain
to flower

The Truth About Mushrooms

Michael Kellichner (Flame) and Van Rung (Spark)

Mushrooms hide in metaphors
and innocent sounding names:

pink bonnet, vermillion waxcap,
the rainbow of elf cups

hinting at silly fey folly
beyond round forest doorways.

Obscuring truth, presenting as
shelved and button capped

innocuous spongy decorations
on stumps and tree trunks.

Amethyst deceiver begins to hint
at the truth, but the ghoul fungus,

those sickly tan domes,
finally honest about it all:

that decay blooms this vibrancy.
These are the devouring mouths

of death's finality. No hidden
meaning—just life's disappearing.

Grief, then, the hidden mycelium
linking us all together.

How dare these colorful caps
create such hues from loss,

take an end and suggest
it might be a beginning?

fire

nat raum and D.W. Baker

forty-hour sunb-
urns, thousand-year
floods—paywalls
over rainbows; fire
sale on guns.

& the world churns & the world burns & the burning swells inside me, forever disappointing, never surprising, lick of flames on weary lungs & heart whooshing in the center of my mass no matter the dose of water or foam or dry powder & maybe there is a world that doesn't rotate at the pace of mass death but somehow we saw the mountains, the hazy blanket of sky and clouds as a valley recedes into merely horizon—somehow, all of this & we still chose profit margins & forty-hour work weeks & i'll admit, i can be a misanthrope, but there are just some things that are still beyond my understanding—how cruelty can rip through community faster than a bolt of lightning would devour plywood; how we wake up each day and continue to choose it.

Threshold

Elizabeth Wing (Flame) and Karina Lin Jones (Spark)

I found you & I found you there again
on the rocks that clung to the last of the sun
stretched beneath a rainbow sherbert sky: raspberry pink and yellow and lime.

Your body thrown before me like a flare,
barefoot and bronze in god-given muscle.
Listen. I have one last thing to tell you before you climb out the window

Steam ghost, bloom heat. Vacant, uncatchable.
Stripped off my snow-soaked coat and stepped
through the door with the sweep of sleet. Smell of cut fir, wet wool.
Sat with my legs crossed. On the floor, the wooden chair, the cushioned chair.

For ten days in the hackles of January no one spoke. Purple and dawn blurred with dusk.
Wind in the spruce our only gossip.
Darling, Darkling: all so incidental. The detail blurred to midnight.
The doors had no locks. I could feel my pulse in my fingertips.

Your pink blanket across the back seat of my car as I white knuckled that icy curve
above the lake. Lichens shagged chartreuse from the dying pines.

Startle mirrored startle. Porcupine shivered across the sand.
The radio songs all distilled the same sweetsick shit about the shaky meatblood heart.

Slow blink, wise fool. Who paints the horizon.
From this I pull puppet strings. One more time.
Dance for me I beg
& one more time you dance.

Pour one out for my unreliable narrator

D.W. Baker (Flame) and Angela Gonzalez (Spark)

Eyes
gloss over//laugh//
space out// take a drink//
respond//mhmm//that's crazy//laugh
// I see// space out//use your skin as a puppet//
where are you if not here//what did she say// okay//
now laugh//now drink//now perform//your skin is not
your own// eye contact//reassure them you're here
//but i'm not// reassure them anyway//where
are you// if not here//laugh//laugh//laugh//
will i ever learn how to be here//probably
not //your eyes are glossy//I'm just tired
//that's it//yeah i am just tired
//so tired// laugh//
drink//
drop
-ping
the me
-ager ex
-cuse for
-getting
myself
all over
again
-st the object
-tions of my will
-ful ignorance, breaking

Adultery Pantoum

Alex Carrigan (Flame) and Mahailey Oliver (Spark)

Irony how he will end up with all the perks—
happy wife, happy life. Happy mistress, happy business.
No stray marks on sodden sheets,
only the scent of her perfume will linger.

Happy wife, happy life. Happy mistress, happy business.
It's easy to get lost in the rumpled bedding where
only the scent of her perfume will linger
when he has to leave the motel and go home.

It's easy to get lost in the rumpled bedding where
his wife tosses and turns so frequently in the night.
When he has to leave the motel and go home,
he remembers he'll have to deal with her hysterics again.

His wife tosses and turns so frequently in the night,
her pain contorts her spine and limbs.
He remembers he'll have to deal with her hysterics again
each time her foot kicks him awake.

Her pain contorts her spine and limbs,
but he's long since lost sympathy for her.
Each time her foot kicks him awake,
he dreams of the peace in his lover's bed.

He's long since lost sympathy for her.
Irony how he will end up with all the perks—
He dreams of the peace in his lover's bed,
no stray marks on sodden sheets.

Fleeting

Mahailey Oliver (Flame) and Angela Heiser (Spark)

We know what occurs
to a dream

deferred

but what about
a love led

awry?

Does its ghost *thwap!* you
like a marble expelled from a hair dryer?

Does it shatter like a
glass bottle
when it has run dry?

Does it cry?

Did it even try?

Maybe it just dies.

Mother Memory

Jaydn Hayes (Flame) and Giada Pesce (Spark)

Our joints snare, tangled in hair
as we trip and wobble among bodies—
tepid bodies of women entwined on our path.

Losing our balance, we grasp for their hair.
Indivisible, we were all and none.
No one, no self—only conduit.
Haunted overshadowers,
the words they exhale are bones;
hallowed within, hollowed without.

Finite in the infinitesimal,
we (a drop of girl) in a matrilineal sea,
our inherited epigenetic garden
is poppies sown in sinew:
transgenerational perennials
photosynthesizing florescent light
in soil saturated by tear ducts.

Birds will scatter us
where hair and memory comingle
and hold no fear of shovels or shears,
bound braided
end to end.

Draught

Giada Pesce (Flame) and Jake Williams (Spark)

My voice is a vertical,
Graceless slumbering giant.
A swarm of bees in the summer twilight.
The kid who slapped my father.

It is a vast, vibrating land
Of scorching red
Ascending and descending
A ribcage of memories.

A swelling open sea
That day, when she was combing my hair,
Thirty-three years later,
While I kept us in that mirror forever.

It was the smell of burning sun over the car seats,
His bare feet above the pedals,
Our '80s cardboard sunshade.
Carrying home the sea inside my hair.

A silent surface

That only keeps and looks,
and sometimes breathes.

Little Sapling

Karina Lin Jones (Flame) and Michael Kellichner (Spark)

I have grand plans for you.
I chose you for your flowers,
Two benefits in one tree.
To help with the diminishing of the bees,
And pull our ruin from the air.

I almost chose a sapling with fruit:
Three benefits in one tree,
But your breathing has already become a sort of labor
Not simply a means to sustain your own life.
The fruit would have been for me
And I take enough already.

I hope you live to a time
In which your breathing is not work.
Perhaps your roots will reach into this home,
Cracking the floorboards,
But not destroying us as we destroy your kin.

There will be no choosing of saplings.
You will spread your offspring as you see fit,
Sharing space with my offspring
And the offspring of the bees.
None will labor for the benefit of any other.
We will simply live, simply breathe.

Contributor Bios

D.W. Baker is a poet from St. Petersburg, Florida. His small poems in ballast, Modern Haiku, The Ekphrastic Review, and others. See more of his work at www.dwbakerpoetry.com

Allison Burris lives in Oakland, California, and received her MLIS from SJSU. Her publications include Muleskinner, Passionfruit and The Marbled Sigh.

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, VA. He is the author of Now Let's Get Brunch (Querencia Press, 2023).

Angela Gonzalez is a queer emerging artist residing in South Florida. She is also a published freelance journalist.

From an early age, **Jaydn Hayes** has been fascinated with language as a medium for meaning and storytelling. As such, she has recently graduated the University of Kansas with a BA in English and minors in Linguistics and Classical Antiquity.

Angela Heiser lives near Raleigh. Her work appears in County Lines. She is an alum of Writers in Paradise and reads for Abode Press and Libre Lit.

Karina Lin Jones is pursuing an MFA in Fiction at the University of Washington in Seattle. She believes there is real magic in the world, and much of it is accessed through literature.

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.

Mahailey Oliver holds an MA in English and Advanced Pedagogy from Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Her work has recently appeared in The Solitude Diaries, The Raven Review, and Blue Daisy Journal.

Writing poetry since the age of 11, **Giada Pesce** is an Italian writer based in Hamburg, Germany. She hosted a series of poetry performances "The Dip of Salt into Water" in Hamburg (2019/2020) and won the Tint Journal Public Choice Award in 2023.

nat raum is the poet laureate of the void; their corporeal form lives in Baltimore. They're the author of this book will not save you and many others. Find them online at natraum.com.

Van Rung is a writer, poet, and enigma based in the Chicago-Milwaukee area. She holds a degree in History from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Her work has appeared in PULP and House of Long Shadows.

Jake Williams was born in deepest rural Dorset when Marvin Gaye asked what's going on, in a cottage with Owls in the attic. Basically, he was Feral Kid from Mad Max 2 if he'd been a character in a Thomas Hardy novel.

Elizabeth Wing is a writer based in Portland, Oregon. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in ALOCASIA, 7x7, The Washington Square Review, and Rebis Magazine.

Cover Artist Bio

Maria Taibo is a painter who lives in New Jersey. She is from the Canary Islands and enjoys painting still lifes, nature scenes, and working with oil paint and watercolor.